

FOLK CRAFT HERITAGE OF CHINA



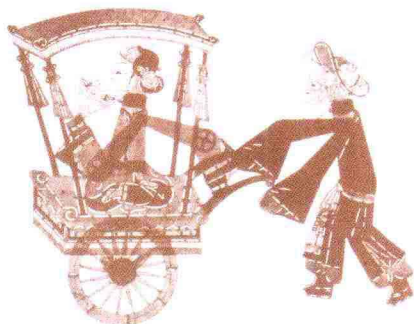
FOLK SHADOW PLAY



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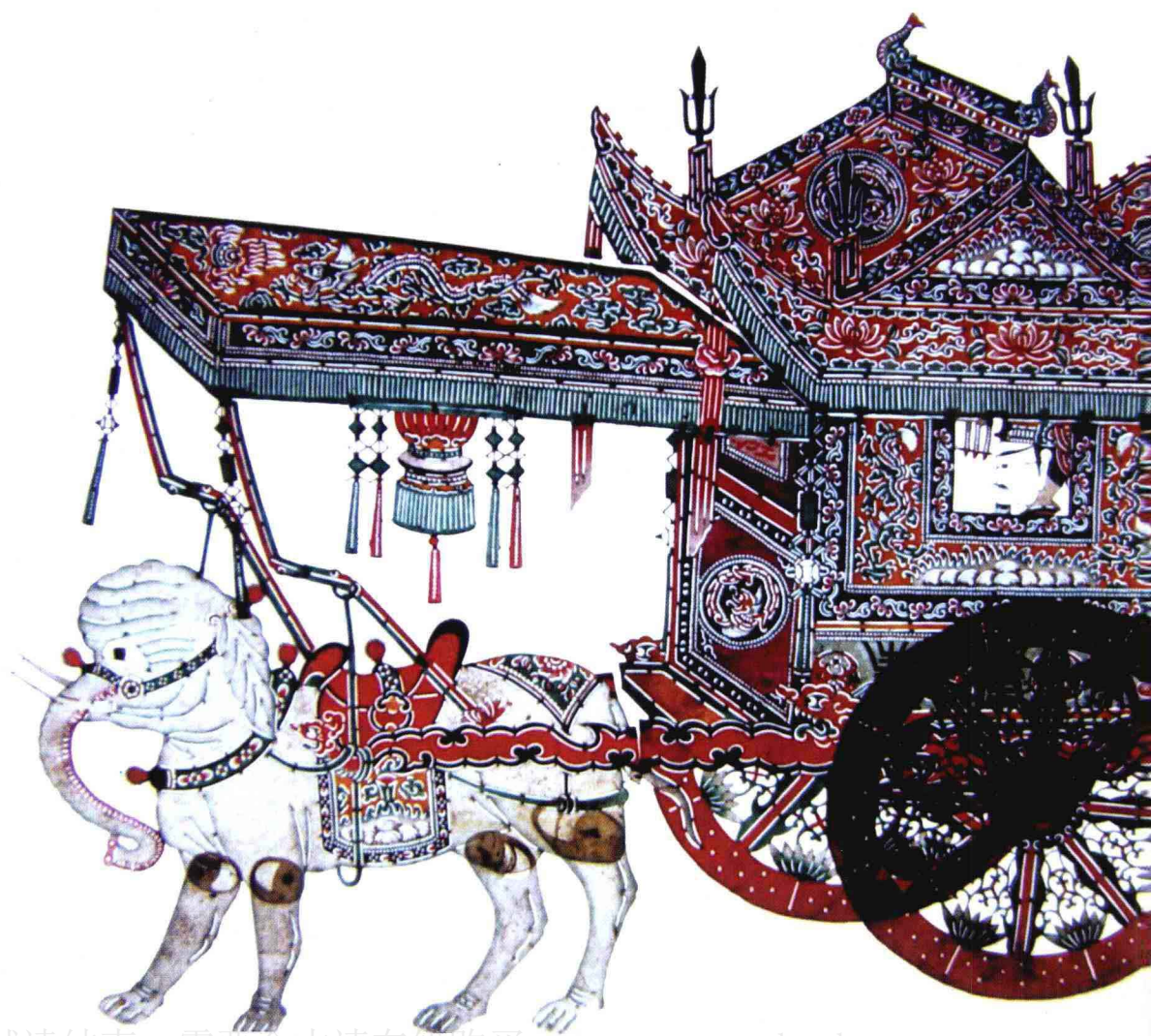
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INTRODUCTION



Origin of the Shadow Play

The shadow play is a traditional folk dramatic art that is widespread in China. Its origin is said to date back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), but it was not until the Song Dynasty (960-1279) that the art form had its earliest appearance in the records of historians.

Legend has it that Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (r. 140-88 BC) missed his deceased concubine, Lady Li, very much. A man claimed he could summon her ghost. At night, he moved a puppet in front of some lit candles to cast its shadows on a cloth curtain. From a distance, the emperor did indeed seem to see the shadow of Lady Li. This is said to be the earliest appearance of the shadow play.



Daoist, whose soft cap designs show his magic power: Republic of China (1912-1949), Huaxian County, Shaanxi



Rich young man: Republic of China, Lulong County, Hebei



General: Republic of China, Huaxian County, Shaanxi



Family guardian:
Republic of China, Huaxian
County, Shaanxi



Martial role: Republic of China,
Fengrun County, Hebei



Elderly: Republic of China,
Qinglong County, Hebei



The Chinese shadow play has its origins in the magic, shadow games and puppet shows during the Han and Tang (618-907) dynasties, as well as the storytelling of the Song Dynasty. In his *Sequel to the Notes for Understanding the Way*, Zhang Lei (1052-1112), a native of Huaiyin of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), recorded: "There is a man from a rich family in the Capital... who loves watching shadow plays. Every time Guan Yu [a famous general of the Three Kingdoms period] is killed in the play, he weeps for him, and asks the puppeteer to hold the scene for a while." This is the earliest record concerning a shadow play.

Some historical books also mention the types of Song shadow plays and the designs of their puppets, as well as the structure of the industry. They tell that the earliest peak of the shadow play was from the 10th to the 13th century.

Genres of Chinese Shadow Play and Their Spread

After the shadow play took shape in the Central Plains area along the valley of the Yellow River, Bianjing (today's Kaifeng, Henan), capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, became the earliest center of the shadow play from where all genres of shadow play spread all over China.

In the later years of the dynasty, Jin troops conquered this city. They captured a number of shadow-play artisans, and later took them north. Some artisans fled westward out through the Tongguan Pass, to escape wars. Most others followed the Song court, moving to the south of China. As shadow-play artisans put down roots and developed the art in various areas, three shadow-play genres gradually formed in the northern, western, and central and southern regions.

The northern shadow play largely spread through east Hebei, northeast China, east Inner Mongolia, east Beijing and suburban Tianjin. The western shadow play became popular in areas like Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, south Shanxi, east Henan, west Hubei, central Hebei and west Beijing. Whereas from Zhejiang, the central and southern shadow play also developed into south Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Hubei, Hunan, Fujian and Taiwan.

Many countries have shadow plays; yet its birthplace remains in China. It is widely recognized that Chinese shadow play was the earliest and most representative, among the many genres around the world. The shadow plays of India, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia and Japan were all developed later than that of China. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and other European countries all acknowledge their shadow plays come from the East. In the 13th century, the Chinese shadow play spread to Persia and Turkey with China's expeditionary troops. In 1767, a French missionary took all types of Chinese shadow plays and the techniques of making puppets to France, giving public performances in Paris and Marseilles. In recent years, Chinese shadow-play troupes of different genres have visited Germany, France, the US, Holland and Japan.





Dragon King: Republic of China,
Fengrun County, Hebei



Tortoise spirit: Republic of
China, Fengrun County, Hebei



Carp spirit: Republic of China,
Fengrun County, Hebei



Shrimp spirit: Republic of China,
Fengrun County, Hebei

Throughout its long period of development, the Chinese shadow play has formed a complete system with obvious national features and high aesthetic value. When the shadow play spread to a region, it would absorb the elements of local dialect, opera and folk customs, and thereby develop a local style. The differences in the shadow plays of various regions are mainly manifested in the melodies. Since the puppet designs were not limited by dialect or local opera, they evolved very little in the process of wide spreading. In the early stages of the shadow play, puppets of different regions looked relatively uniform. It was not until the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that puppet designs took on regional features. Studies on the evolution process of the designs will help us understand the continuation of the plastic arts, as well as the interaction of shadow play art with local paintings, operas and customs.





Frog spirit:
Republic of China, Fengrun
County, Hebei



Mussel spirit:
Republic of China, Fengrun
County, Hebei



Crab spirit:
Republic of China, Fengrun
County, Hebei

Shadow Play and Folk Customs

There are many customs in the shadow-play performances of various regions. In Hunan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Fujian, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, a type of shadow play for divine veneration is very popular. Called "votive shadow play," it involves a ceremony of sacrifice and vows. Shadow plays are also performed on birthday parties, weddings or funerals. Such performances, intended for the amusement of both deities and people, are widespread all over China.

Just as peasants worship Shennong (legendary god of farming) and plasterers and carpenters worship Lu Ban (legendary master of woodcraft), shadow-play troupes have their own ancestors who they venerate. But as customs vary in different regions, the ancestor worship also differs. Troupes in Shaanxi and central Shanxi

worship Li Longji, Emperor Xuanzong (r.712-756) of the Tang Dynasty (618-907); troupes in south Shanxi and Gansu worship Li Cunxu, Emperor Zhuangzong (r.923-26) of the Later Tang Dynasty (923-936); while those in Hebei and northeast China honor Bodhisattva Guanyin.

The troupes also have many rules and taboos. For example, with troupes of Hebei's Luanzhou (Luanxian County today), the drama scripts on their desks could not be touched by hand, as they believe this would tarnish these divine scriptures. Instead, they use bamboo flakes to leaf them. The troupes of Huaxian County, Shaanxi, never allow the jumbling of puppet heads and bodies of male and female characters, or putting puppets face to face because they believe this would cause quarrels and splits in the troupes. They also prohibit any sitting on the scripts, believing this would ruin their performances. Among the troupes in south Shanxi there are three taboos that could bring misfortune to the troupes: women are not allowed onstage; none others are allowed to touch the scripts except the performers; and no one is allowed to sit on the trunks containing stage props.

In east Hebei, Shanxi and Shaanxi, where shadow plays are popular, there's a custom – the shadow-play troupes are exempt from paying any ferry fees, but would perform shadow plays on the ferry in exchange. This is based on a tale.



Longevity design in a votive shadow play: Luanzhou, Hebei



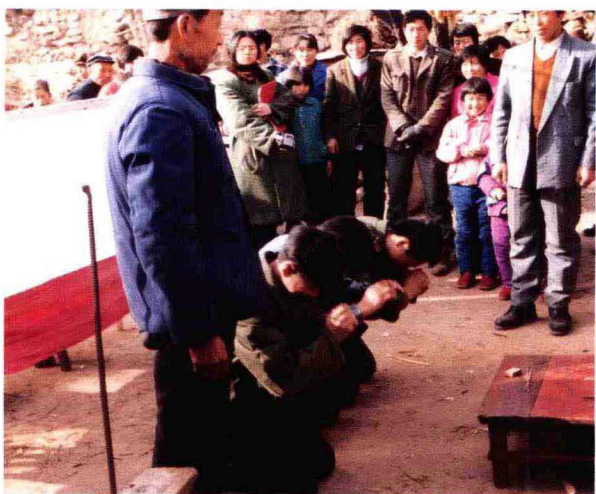
A design wishing promotion and salary increase: Luanzhou, Hebei



Happiness design in a votive shadow play: Luanzhou, Hebei

A long, long time ago, a shadow-play troupe was crossing a river by ferry. When the boat was sailing mid-river, it suddenly sprung a leak. In the midst of the calamity, an artisan quickly used a castanet to block the hole. When the boat got to the bank, the troupe placed a plank by the ferry for its gangway. After that, all shadow-play artisans and ferrymen became good friends. Even to this day, the stage at a shadow play always lacks one plank, and a troupe only has three castanets. When ferrymen make new boats, they always lay a castanet-like wooden plug at the bottom of the boat. And still, shadow-play artisans never have to pay the fare on ferries.

There are two special puppets in the shadow-play performances of Luanzhou. The two "brothers" both have a big fan-like open hand and a small claw-like palm. They do not have specific roles in any play, but may appear onstage at any time. Legend says these two poor boys were abandoned in a temple and brought up by a monk. Later, when the monk became seriously ill, they went out to beg alms for him. They passed through villages and towns, gesturing and singing of the monk's merits and kindness, using a paper figure to represent him. Some senior artists recall this as the origin of the shadow play in Luanzhou.



Ceremonial worship in a votive shadow play: Qinglong County, Hebei



Memorial tablet worshipped
in a votive shadow play:
Qinglong County, Hebei

To venerate them, two puppets were made. During the intermission, they will appear on stage and act like clowns, making the audience laugh with their jokes. Sometimes they play as extras.

When the performance is over, all puppet heads are removed from their bodies and packed in rows by their categories. But these two puppet heads are never removed from their bodies, which implies they will never die. They are always placed on the top layer in the trunk of props. Instead of using donkey hide, these two are made of dog hide, since tradition claims that dog hide can repel evil spirits.

