

From “Short Shadow Plays” to “Shadow Puppet Shows”: The Triple Media Forms and Narrative Transformation of Balinzuo Banner Shadow Puppetry

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Abstract:

Balinzuo Banner shadow puppetry is an important part of China’s intangible cultural heritage. In the era of rapid digital development, with the development and changes in the dissemination methods of intangible cultural heritage, the dissemination methods of Balinzuo Banner shadow puppetry also urgently need to be updated. Past research on Balinzuo Banner shadow puppetry has been limited to summarizing its history and general overview, with relatively little research on its dissemination dilemmas and channels from a media perspective. This article aims to explore the shadow puppetry of Bairin Left Banner from multiple dimensions through case analysis, deeply analyzing its narrative content and characteristics during the periods of “liukouying” (a type of shadow puppetry), “fanjuanying” (another type of shadow puppetry), and short shadow puppet plays, revealing the role of different media in shaping the themes, plots, and characters of Bairin Left Banner shadow puppetry during its media evolution.

Keywords:

Bairin Left Banner Shadow Puppetry, Cross-media, Narrative

1. Introduction

Shadow puppetry, also known as “shadow play” or “lantern shadow play,” originated in India. Indian shadow puppetry influenced Southeast Asian shadow puppetry. Chinese and Indian shadow puppetry are likely interconnected through religious transmission, and Chinese shadow puppetry may have been influenced by it. [1] Shadow puppetry is a combination of various art forms. In terms of performance, it includes singing, recitation, acting, and fighting; in terms of music, it encompasses various vocal styles, rhythmic patterns, and musical instruments; and in terms of art, it is a holistic fusion of folk patterns, symbols, and even concepts. [2] The shadow puppetry of *Bairin Left Banner*, a style of shadow puppetry with distinctive local characteristics, originated in Bairin Left Banner after the region was opened up for cultivation. With the large influx of Han Chinese, the art of shadow puppetry, beloved by the Han people, was introduced along with other art forms and gradually developed. Initially, there were the Shao and Pang family troupes, known for their

rhythmic shadow plays. Later, the “rolling shadow” style emerged, and scripts began to appear. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, a number of short shadow puppet plays were adapted or newly created to meet the needs of the times.

The medium has brought new possibilities and changes to society, and has also created new possibilities for the development of intangible cultural heritage. Henry Jenkins argues that “a transmedia story is presented across multiple media platforms, where each new text makes a unique and valuable contribution to the overall story. The ideal form of transmedia narrative is when each medium performs its role admirably and fulfills its responsibilities.” [3]

2. Oral Shadow Play

Telling Thematic Stories with Smooth Smooth Shadow Play When shadow puppetry was first introduced to Balinzuo Banner, the Shao Family Troupe and other shadow puppet troupes performed in the form of “smooth-smooth shadow play.” There were no shadow puppets, the troupes were small, the number of puppeteers was limited, the accompanying instruments were monotonous, and the melodies were not fixed. The songs were sung according to the 13 major rhyme schemes, as long as the rhythm was correct. The source material for shadow puppetry is very flexible; the themes of the stories come from various aspects such as life, history, folk tales, and myths. Shadow puppeteers also praise or criticize characters or express emotions based on the environment.

2.1. Unwavering Heroic Spirit

“The top scholar returns in glory, his attendants hurry on their way. I, Cao Zhen, have achieved this day. My name is inscribed on the Dragon and Tiger List.” This line from the play *The Five Peaks Gathering* praises Cao Kerang, who, despite being framed, perseveres in his fight against the rebels, never giving up. It also acknowledges the later additions to the resistance, such as Cao Zhen, Cao Bao, Bao Caiwen, and the Taoist priest, who never easily gave up in the face of adversity and never regretted joining the cause. Creating heroic figures was a key theme in the early days of shadow puppetry, and unwavering courage and determination are common traits in the characterization of these heroes. In the early days of shadow puppetry, when cultural knowledge was limited, resources were scarce, and awareness of preservation was weak, language was the primary means for puppeteers to communicate themes and stories to the audience. The oral tradition of passing down knowledge is also a crucial reason why shadow puppetry in Bairin Left Banner has survived to this day.

2.2. Gratitude and National Spirit

Gratitude and gratitude are traditional virtues of the Chinese nation. In *The Five Peaks Gathering*, Cao Bao rescues a commoner girl, Cheng Yuqing, and her father, Cheng Youyi, on his way to Bao’an City while protecting his mother. The father and daughter, in gratitude, offer to serve Cao Bao. Later, when Cao Bao is framed, Cheng Yuqing swaps clothes with him and goes to the execution ground in his place. In the newly adapted play *The Twin Stars of Liao*, the spirit of gratitude is reflected through the characters of ordinary people. When the commoner Wang Shuyu is forced into marriage by Yelü Shou, her younger sister, Wang Jianyu, to repay the kindness of Wang Shuyu’s family, volunteers to marry in place of her sister at the Song Prince’s mansion, allowing her sister and her childhood sweetheart, Liu Zhongyi, to escape to

Youzhou for refuge. The story of “good deeds are rewarded” and the happy ending convey the spirit of gratitude to the audience. Shadow puppetry, as a product of its time, also reflects that gratitude and kindness are the spiritual sustenance of the local people and an important part of the treasure trove of Chinese national spirit.

2.3. Selflessness for the Nation In “The Five Peaks Gathering”, the Western Barbarians send troops to seize Bao’an City

Cao Kerang volunteers to fight, and Zhao Ying acts as his guarantor. Cao Kerang and Zhao Ying truly went to the battlefield for the country and the people. In “*The Twin Stars of Liao*,” Xiao Yanyan and Han Derang carried out reforms despite the pressure of “difficulty in communicating with the court.” Han Derang and Xiao Yanyan gave up their personal feelings for social stability, further demonstrating their belief in the great cause of national rejuvenation and the well-being of the people, and also highlighting the allegory of “*The Twin Stars of Liao*.” The love for family and country is conveyed to the audience through the storytelling of shadow puppeteers. Later generations of shadow puppeteers, through oral transmission, compilation, production and performance, reviewed and learned history, and also realized the importance of language, finding commonalities and differences in the times in drama.

3. Shadow Scroll Compilation: Laying Out Twisting Plots with Flip-Rolled Shadows

The “writing” of folk tale texts is the direct transformation of orally created and circulated folk tales into written texts. [4] Shadow puppetry also went through a process of “writing” like folk tales, only it was called “flip-rolled shadows” in shadow puppetry. At that time, with the emergence of paper media, shadow puppeteers found that influence was not enough through oral transmission alone. They recorded the content passed down orally by hand.

3.1. Romantic Bonds Bridge Psychological Distance

Traditional shadow puppet plays mostly focused on historical themes, but later evolved to focus on ordinary people’s lives. The performances were accompanied by plain language, allowing audiences to see their own lives reflected in the puppets, thus evoking new insights.

The emotions between characters can ease the pace of events. In *The Second Plum Blossom*, the story is based on love, depicting Mei Liangyu’s arduous journey after his family suffers persecution by treacherous officials, ultimately leading to revenge and a reunion with his wife. In the newly written play *The Twin Stars of Liao*, the love between Xiao Yanyan and Han Derang forms the basis for their shared ideals and the completion of their reform efforts. While understanding the difficulties of the reform process, the audience also worries about their safety, contemplates the outcome of the reform, and anticipates the result of their relationship.

In conclusion, whether in traditional or newly written shadow puppet plays, emotions drive the plot. As the scripts become more refined, the plots become more logical, and the proportion of emotion increases.

3.2. Divine Rescue Reveals Commonalities of the Era In the early stages of the development of shadow puppetry in Bairin Left Banner, information barriers were significant, and shadow puppetry, as a ritual, was highly regarded by the people

Therefore, surreal methods were used to help the characters overcome difficulties and achieve their desired ideal outcomes. Consequently, “divine rescues” were very common in traditional shadow puppet plays.

In *The Sword of Qingyun*, Xu Jiang, seeking revenge for his wife, is threatened by the *Spider Demon Eight-Legged Fairy* and others, but receives help from the magical Princess Caiyun and others. In Wofeng Mountain, one of the villains, Princess Jade Face, suffers a defeat and seeks help from the Eight-Legged Holy Mother, but ultimately the *Golden Knife Holy Mother* intervenes to help Long Lizhen break the formation. In *The Sword of Qingyun*, Chen Qiaoyun ultimately uses the Kunlun Bodhisattva’s magic weapon to eliminate the Eight-Legged Fairy and Huang Zongdao. In *Iron Tree Blossoms*, “Ji Jinglong, having learned martial arts from the immortals, also comes to help.” In *Siping Mountain*, “Huo Lianying uses a magic weapon to capture Xue Hai.” The newly written script *The Twin Stars of Liao* also features “the divine flag and drum,” and other elements involving surrealism.

In summary, a comparative analysis of the divine elements in the scripts reveals that the “divine” characters appear multiple times and play crucial roles in major turning points. These divine beings are often portrayed as either positive or negative, and in some scripts, the divine characters and images are identical, such as the eight-legged fairy in *The Five Peaks Gathering* and *The Azure Cloud Sword*. These shadow puppet scripts use romantic techniques to supplement the narrative, reflecting the era’s imagination, expectations, and trust in supernatural abilities, expressing people’s reflections and love for “truth, goodness, and beauty,” and reflecting their yearning for beautiful things.

3.3. Reforms for the People Highlight Historical Characteristics

Throughout history, dynasties have consistently pursued reform, but reform inevitably means change. The arduous process of reform has given rise to many heroes of their time.

In the traditional script *The Five Peaks Gathering*, Cao Kerang, Cao Bao, Bao Caiwen, Cao Zhen, Zhao Ying, and others propose measures to reduce the burden on the people and crack down on powerful figures, which helped to address social ills. However, traditional shadow puppet plays feature relatively few plot points related to reforming the people, and the frequent use of divine intervention to reverse the course of events and the use of “we’ll see” to connect different parts of the plot feels stiff and illogical. According to the inheritors, limited creative resources at the time necessitated this approach to achieve a comedic effect, and the improvements in the newly written scripts are more evident.

The newly written script, *The Twin Stars of Liao*, focuses on the reforms of Empress Xiao and Han Derang. The protagonist, Han Derang, makes a rapid entrance at the beginning, creating a tense atmosphere in the opening act. Some scenes, such as the trial by the Jiangcheng magistrate, are not detailed, making key plot points more prominent and the transitions between plot points more natural.

In summary, the newly written shadow puppet scripts, due to the process of compilation, creation, and writing, have a more logical plot arrangement.

4. Video Production: Creating Supernatural Characters through Shadow Puppetry

Currently, most of the plays that have been transformed into filmed recordings of live performances. Through filming and recording using new media technologies, the audience's focus is mostly on the characters' appearance and movements. Therefore, this section will focus on the connection between the characters' appearance and personality. Traditional playwrights often use exaggeration to portray characters, depicting them in black-and-white terms. Following this style, the characters are divided into two categories: perfect characters and despicable characters.

4.1. Perfect Characters Expressing Inner Respect

The puppeteers' costumes reflect the creators' attitude towards the characters. In traditional puppetry, the stubble and headdress symbolize the character's identity. The stubble includes the face shape and headdress; realistic faces are natural faces, exaggerated faces have the artistic function of "implying praise and criticism, distinguishing good from evil," [5] and deformed faces possess the triple identities of humans, beasts, and supernatural demons. Headdresses include crowns, helmets, headdresses, hair buns, and divine or demonic heads. The headdress, also known as the "body ornament," is divided into dragon robes, python robes, and armor. Newly adapted historical play puppeteers also use stubble and headdresses, but with adjustments to the details.

4.1.1. Loyalty to the Emperor and Patriotism

Bairin Left Banner shadow puppetry has created many characters loyal to the emperor and devoted to their country. In classic plays, heroic figures are mostly depicted with realistic faces, wearing hats, helmets, or headscarves, with appropriate headdresses depending on the character's status. In the newly adapted shadow puppet play "*The Twin Stars of Liao*," Xiao Yanyan is the empress of Emperor Jingzong of Liao, wielding military and political power in the Liao Kingdom. Her face is realistic, and her headdress has three styles: one is casual attire, with a high bun adorned with a dragon motif and a male feather inserted in her hair, belonging to the "high bun" style; another is military attire, wearing a round helmet with a fur guard attached to the back, adorned with three pheasant feathers resembling the tips of a general's pheasant, and two fox tails hanging down the back of her head, belonging to the "general's helmet" style; and the third is dressed as a scholar on a private visit, wearing a scholar's headscarf. With the changes in her appearance, a multifaceted character is also created.

4.1.2. Unwavering Loyalty The word "loyalty" seems simple but is difficult to achieve, and it is mentioned many times in the plays

In the traditional shadow puppet play "*Qingyun Sword*," Xu Jiang avenges his wife and father-in-law's family, and also eliminates treacherous officials for the country. In the newly adapted shadow puppet play *The Twin Stars of Liao*, Xiao Yanyan and Han Derang tacitly understand each other, burying their feelings deep in their hearts to protect their home and people. Loyalty, whether in love, family, friendship, or patriotism, is evident in the genuine emotions expressed. These heroic figures are mostly depicted with realistic faces, which not only fits the character settings but also foreshadows their actions.

4.1.3. Loyalty, Trustworthiness, and Ease: Keeping promises is a traditional Chinese virtue

In *The Five Peaks Gathering*, Cao Kerang protects his country. His depiction features a realistic face with black outlines, simple and smooth lines. His headdress is a typical scholar's cap, while his brightly colored floral robe reflects his talent as the top scholar in the imperial examinations. His simpler blue robe reflects his elegance and detachment as a scholar, highlighting his loyalty to the country and his family and friends who fight alongside him. Besides the approachable and loyal "scholar" figures, there are also some "martial" figures. In *The Twin Stars of Liao*, Han Derang steadfastly remains at the forefront of defending his country and reforming for the people amidst a complex environment. His appearance is realistic, his clothing a combination of long and short jackets for ease of movement, and he wears a robe with a belt or a "kao" (a type of traditional Chinese garment) bearing a stamp. The "kao" usually features exquisite embroidery to highlight his character and status. These details are further emphasized through media technology.

4.2. Despicable Characters Venting Their Resentment

The appearance of despicable characters reflects the problems of the era and expresses the anger of the people. It also indirectly highlights the seemingly perfect figures. However, in both traditional and newly composed plays, villains only appear at plot points, with a relatively low frequency of appearance.

4.2.1. Treacherous and Rebellious Individuals

Just as there are righteous individuals who resist the enemy and save the country and its people from suffering, there are also those who stir up bloodshed. In the play, the bloodshed mainly stems from selfish individuals seeking to usurp power and colluding with enemy states. In the portrayal of villainous characters, the characters still adhere to the traditional style: oval or inverted triangle faces, thick eyebrows, often shaped like upward-sloping sword eyebrows or twisted eyebrows, large and protruding eyes with mostly white pupils, frequently appearing to be squinting or rolling their eyes, slightly upturned noses, and thin lips, presenting a sharp and sinister appearance. Traditional dramas such as *The Five Peaks Meeting*, featuring the rebel Shen Hengwei who colludes with foreign powers, and *The Twin Stars of Liao*, featuring Yelü Shou, who abuses his power and commits heinous crimes, exemplify this type of character; their bared teeth and raised eyebrows suggest they are not benevolent.

4.2.2. Using Public Office for Private Gain

In shadow puppetry, such characters often employ exaggerated and distorted faces to highlight their status and personality, expressing disgust for them. In the newly adapted script *The Twin Stars of Liao*, Yelü Shou, the son of the *Song King*, is a vividly portrayed character. In the play, he wears a leather hat with a fur brim, two tiger tails hanging down his back, and large earrings. He bares his teeth, has fierce eyebrows, and glares, making him a truly grotesque and ugly figure. The headdress reveals his noble status, but his overall red face suggests a flushed face, and his fierce expression highlights his villainous image of bullying the people. His appearance also implies that he uses his royal status to oppress the people and commit evil deeds, a character aligning with the actor's makeup.

4.2.3. Ingratitude

In the traditional play *The Five Peaks Gathering*, Prime Minister Shen Hengwei betrays the emperor's trust for personal gain, colluding with foreign powers to overthrow the Song Dynasty. The newly adapted script *The Twin Stars of Liao* also recounts how Gao Xun and Yelü Xi, disguised as trusted ministers, plot to harm the emperor. Both are villainous characters working from within and without; besides their ugly appearance, their expressions reveal their cunning and treachery.

Currently, shadow puppeteers in *Bairin Left Banner* have created newly adapted plays, some of which have been recorded and presented on screen. However, technological advancements and applications have also brought new challenges to the shadow puppet troupes.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, with the development of spoken language, written language, and electronic technology, the media for disseminating *Bairin Left Banner* shadow puppetry have also changed. However, although the shadow puppeteers of *Bairin Left Banner* have been continuously revitalizing this traditional culture using new media, and shadow puppetry and other cultural traditions have been preserved through their efforts, the cross-media narrative and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage remains a topic worthy of attention and reflection in the era of converged media and the impact of short videos. Cross-media narrative integrates the advantages of various media. For intangible cultural heritage like *Bairin Left Banner* shadow puppetry, which is characterized by its length and strong regional focus, cross-media narrative should be used, with modern texts at its core, rooted in Chinese contexts, to enhance its influence and revitalize it, thus ensuring its continued transmission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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