

Cross-border Integration: Interaction and Symbiosis between Traditional Shadow Theater and Modern Media

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of globalization and the rapid advancement of modern technology, traditional art forms face unprecedented challenges and pressures for transformation. Shadow puppetry, with its long history, finds its survival space severely compressed by digital media and modern entertainment forms. This article delves deeply into the historical evolution, current status, and cross-border integration practices of traditional shadow puppetry. Firstly, it reviews the origins, development, and challenges faced by shadow puppetry. Subsequently, through the lens of cultural heritage protection theory, it analyzes the positioning and functional transformation of shadow puppetry in contemporary society, providing multifaceted strategies and methods for its preservation and development. This study also illustrates the potential for traditional arts to seek innovation and revitalization in the modern world.

Keywords: Cross-border, Integration, Symbiosis, Shadow Theater

1. An Analysis of the Historical Evolution and Current Status of Shadow Puppetry

1.1. The Origins and Development of Shadow Puppetry

Shadow puppetry originated in China during the Han Dynasty, as recorded in Scheme of Things by Gao Cheng during the Northern Song Dynasty: *The old story goes that the shadow play is said to have originated, out of the death of Mrs. Li, the consort of the Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, a Qi magician named Shao Weng claimed that he was able to summon Mrs. Li's ghost back. Since Emperor Wu missed the dead Mrs. Li very much, he ordered Shao Weng to perform the spell. Shao Weng set up a curtain at night, lighted lamps and candles, and made Emperor Wu sit on the other side of the curtain, looking through the curtain, the shadow looked very much like Mrs. Li, but he could not get close enough to see it [1].*

Ancient Chinese shadow theater to the west of the oldest shadow theater, and then eastward into the Central Plains, in the Northern Song Dynasty flourished, continue to the east to the south of the flow, and finally become a great spectacle[2]. In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the prosperity of urban economy and culture promoted the development of shadow puppetry. Professional troupes and artists emerged, and the performance art became more mature. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, shadow puppetry became even more widespread, leading to a situation of divergent evolution across regions. Eventually, various schools of shadow puppetry emerged as it integrated with local operas and languages. In the early 20th century, due to the emergence of new entertainment forms such as cinema and the impact of wars, shadow puppetry gradually declined. However, in recent years, shadow puppetry has received protection and attention as a traditional cultural art form, and it continues to innovate by integrating with modern technology.

1.2. The Artistic Features of Shadow Puppetry

Intangible cultural heritage refers to practices, performances, expressions, knowledge systems and skills, as well as their related instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces, which are recognized as cultural heritage by communities, groups or individuals. As an outstanding traditional culture handed down from generation to generation by all peoples, intangible cultural heritage is regarded as a "living fossil" of national culture[3].

Intangible cultural heritage, as the value embodiment of folklore and folk art unique to a nation or region and collective memory, is the living manifestation of national individuality and aesthetic habits[4] Throughout its long development, shadow puppetry has incorporated various cultural elements and artistic forms. As a traditional folk art, it possesses rich artistic characteristics, reflecting the wisdom of the Chinese people. Through the inheritance and innovation of generations of artists, it has become one of the important symbols of Chinese culture. Its visual art is displayed through finely cut and painted leather figures, illuminated by light projection. The puppeteers use nimble fingers and wrist movements to animate the shadow figures with vivid motions. Accompanied by vocal techniques and local opera singing, along with traditional musical instruments, the puppets come to life on the white screen. The repertoire includes historical tales, myths, legends, and folk stories, rich in content and educational value, reflecting regional cultural characteristics. *Their modeling styles, manipulation techniques, musical voices and folkloric functions all have distinctive Chinese characteristics and local flavor, condensing the ideals and aesthetic pursuits of the Chinese nation, and becoming an important carrier of human imagination, creativity and cultural diversity[5]*

1.3. The Predicaments and Challenges Facing Shadow Puppetry

Entering the 21st century, in the face of the impact of multiple foreign cultures, especially the emergence of new communication media represented by the Internet, which has fundamentally changed the growth environment of vernacular culture, almost all traditional cultures are facing a serious survival crisis[6]. As a traditional Chinese folk art, shadow puppetry has faced severe predicaments and challenges in recent years. Firstly, the loss of audience and market contraction is a significant issue.

As China's intangible cultural heritage programs are concentrated in regions with rich historical and cultural heritage, frequent multi-ethnic exchanges, complete cultural and ecological space, and effective protection measures, they are characterized by non-equilibrium, self-sufficiency and conservatism, and collective mutual assistance[7]. With the acceleration of urbanization and rapid societal development, the appeal of traditional cultural entertainment forms has gradually diminished due to changes in modern lifestyles. The space and atmosphere for the inheritance of traditional culture have been compressed. Moreover, the values conveyed by traditional shadow puppetry do not align with modern values, leading to a significant decline in interest among the younger generation in traditional art forms like shadow puppetry.

Additionally, digital media has transformed people's entertainment consumption habits. Modern entertainment forms pose a significant challenge to the development of shadow puppetry, further exacerbating the loss of its audience. The audience base for shadow puppetry is dwindling, market demand is shrinking, and the survival and development of traditional shadow puppetry are under immense pressure.

2. Shadow Puppetry from the Perspective of Cultural Heritage Preservation Theory

Cultural heritage preservation aims to safeguard and promote humanity's cultural legacy through various means and methods. Its core principles encompass the protection of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

In 1950, Japan first introduced the concept of intangible cultural property [8]. Subsequently, through the practices of multiple countries, this concept has gradually been refined.

In China, The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized increasing efforts to protect cultural relics and cultural heritage as an important part of promoting the prosperity and development of the cultural industry, in order to advance cultural self-confidence and strength, and to create new brilliance on the road to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation [9].

2.1. An Overview of Cultural Heritage Preservation Theory

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) clearly defines the concept of intangible cultural heritage, which includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events, emphasizing the importance of their protection and transmission. This marks the first legal definition of intangible cultural heritage. In 2005, in accordance with the Convention and considering China's practice in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, the State Council defined intangible cultural heritage as various traditional cultural expressions inherited by the people of all

ethnic groups, closely related to people's lives, including folk activities, performing arts, traditional knowledge and skills, as well as related tools, objects, and handicrafts, along with cultural spaces. In 2011, the 11th National People's Congress officially promulgated the "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage," serving as China's first legislation for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Excellent traditional culture has accumulated the historical memory and unique spiritual symbols of the Chinese nation, and with its stable national connotation as well as continuous spiritual solace, it has gained more importance in the current race for cultural and material change.

2.2. The Value of Shadow Puppetry in Modern Society

Culture is the soul of a nation, and cultural identity is the root of national unity. Intangible cultural heritage carries the genes and bloodline of the Chinese nation. He elaborated on the significance of protecting intangible cultural heritage: Folk art is a precious treasure of the Chinese nation. Protecting, inheriting, and utilizing these treasures left by our ancestors is of great significance for continuing the historical context and building a socialist cultural power.

As an outstanding representative of traditional Chinese folk art, shadow puppetry continues to hold significant value and meaning in modern society. Firstly, as intangible cultural heritage, shadow puppetry carries rich historical, cultural, and artistic information. Protecting and inheriting it not only shows respect for and promotes the excellent traditional culture of China but also enhances national pride and cultural confidence. Secondly, in the context of globalization, shadow puppetry serves as an important window for showcasing Chinese culture through international exchanges and cooperation, facilitating cultural exchanges between China and other countries, and enhancing China's international cultural influence and soft power. Additionally, shadow puppetry plays a significant role in education. Through cultural courses and artistic practice, it helps students understand traditional culture, cultivate artistic interests and aesthetic abilities, and strengthen national cohesion and cultural identity. Protecting, inheriting, innovating, and promoting traditional art forms like shadow puppetry can ensure their continued brilliance in the new era, allowing them to exert greater social function and cultural influence.

2.3. Theoretical Reflections and Practical Requirements for the Protection of Shadow Puppetry

Intangible cultural heritage, centered around people, serves as a significant emblem of a nation's historical and cultural achievements [10]. Historical and cultural heritage are invaluable resources that are irreplaceable and non-renewable. It is imperative to prioritize their protection at all times. It is crucial to appropriately balance the relationship between the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and economic and social development.

The protection and inheritance of non-heritage is the inheritance of cultural genes and spiritual connotations. In implementing the protection of cultural heritage, comprehensive theoretical reflection and practical requirements are needed to ensure the effective inheritance and development of shadow puppetry. Theoretical reflection should first adhere to a holistic conservation perspective, encompassing performance skills, music, scripts, production techniques, and relevant folk culture. Secondly, it should emphasize authenticity and integrity, maintaining its historical authenticity and traditional appearance. Additionally, consideration should be given to sustainable development, exploring new forms and functions of shadow puppetry in modern society. Lastly, efforts should be made to strengthen the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, actively cultivate successors, and allow intangible cultural heritage to radiate even more enchanting brilliance.

In particular, the legacy of the movie theater can be incorporated into the education of the school, and continue to exercise its role in educating and entertaining the children. Children are the masters of the future, and if they are to pass on the theater to the next generation, it is important to cultivate their aesthetics of the theater during their childhood. In terms of practical requirements, firstly, it is essential to systematically and meticulously document all elements of shadow puppetry and establish a comprehensive database. Secondly, nurturing a new generation of artists by professional training and apprenticeship programs, alongside enhancing public awareness through school education and community activities is paramount. Moreover, reinforcing education and promotion of shadow puppetry culture to increase public, especially youth, awareness and interest not only addresses audience attrition but also lays a foundation for nurturing future puppetry inheritors. Ensuring effective inheritance through the establishment of regulations and financial support, utilizing modern technology

such as digitization and multimedia for high-quality documentation and dissemination to broaden influence and audience base, actively engaging in international cultural exchange activities to enhance international influence and drawing from advanced protection experiences, and increasing public interest and awareness through exhibitions, performances, and lectures, all contribute to fostering a societal atmosphere of collective protection. The integration of these theoretical and practical approaches comprehensively and effectively safeguards the inheritance of shadow puppetry, enabling it to radiate new vitality in modern society.

3. Innovative Transformation Strategies for Traditional Shadow Theater

Bennett, T. (2001) delves into the impact of globalization on cultural diversity and analyzes the challenges and opportunities of cultural heritage within the context of globalization in his work *Cultural Diversity and Globalization*. Respecting history while scientifically inheriting is the core philosophy of China's cultural heritage conservation theory. Enhancing the utilization and conservation of cultural relics, as well as the inheritance of cultural heritage, requires keeping pace with the times. It entails refining and expanding upon the content and forms of excellent traditional Chinese culture to enhance its appeal and inspirational power, ultimately achieving creative transformation and innovative development. Simultaneously, the core task of safeguarding and inheriting intangible cultural heritage is to steadily ensure systematic protection of intangible cultural heritage, better meet the increasingly growing spiritual and cultural needs of the people, and advance cultural confidence and self-improvement. It is essential to promote the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, continuously enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the cultural influence of Chinese culture, deepen exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, compellingly narrate the stories of outstanding traditional Chinese culture, and propel Chinese culture towards the world more effectively.

After extensive research by scholars, it has been discovered that despite facing numerous challenges, through interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative practices, shadow puppetry can not only preserve its cultural essence but also expand into new forms of expression and avenues of dissemination.

3.1. Technological innovation: Integrating modern technological methods

The development of modern technology has injected new vitality into shadow puppetry. While preserving the essence of traditional art, shadow puppetry needs to expand its forms of expression and avenues of dissemination through modern means such as multimedia technology and virtual reality. It should actively explore innovative paths that combine modern technology and new media. For example:

① Performers can utilize modern multimedia technologies, such as 3D scanning and holographic projection, to demonstrate the exquisite skills and performance process of shadow puppetry.

② Shadow puppet visual developers can use technology to combine shadow puppetry with virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies to develop VR/AR shadow puppetry experience programs that allow audiences to immerse themselves in shadow puppet performances through VR devices.

③ Shadow theater playwrights can innovate characters and stories that can be integrated into modern animation productions to show contemporary values.

④ Shadow puppetry communicators can use the Internet platform to expand the audience, and even integrate shadow puppetry elements into modern film and television works and interactive entertainment to enhance the modernization and internationalization of shadow puppetry.

3.2. Content update: Infusing modern values and narrative elements

In the process of innovating and transforming traditional shadow puppetry, the integration of modern values and narrative elements is crucial for updating content.

① Incorporating modern values:

Firstly, shadow play script writers should modernize the topic: choose themes closely related to modern society, modernize the values, incorporate values such as equality, freedom, environmental

protection, scientific and technological innovation into the storyline, convey the mainstream values of the contemporary society, and enhance the relevance of the content and educational function. Secondly, shadow play designers should modernize the characters: design new characters with a modern flavor, and create diversified character images reflecting the multiculturalism of society.

②Incorporating modern narrative elements:

Firstly, shadow theater creators should integrate modern elements into the story development process and introduce modern technology and lifestyle elements into the storyline to make it more contemporary and realistic. Second, shadow play creators should use modern narrative techniques and skills to enhance the coherence and appeal of the story, modernize the dialogue and language to match the contemporary audience's way of expression. Thirdly, shadow play creators should enhance the visual effect and utilize multimedia technology, digital projection, three-dimensional projection, virtual reality and other technologies to improve the visual expression and enhance the audience's visual experience. Fourth, shadow theater creators should design interactive elements and create interactive plots and scenes to involve the audience in the development of the story, so as to enhance the audience's sense of participation and immersion. Fifthly, shadow theater creators should enrich the expression of Shadow Theater through cross-disciplinary integration and diversified development, combining modern music, dance and modern theater forms. Finally, international vision and cultural exchanges should be introduced, and foreign literary classics or international popular culture should be integrated into the repertoire to expand the scope of themes and enhance international appeal.

3.3. Cases of cross-border cooperation and cultural integration

The scholar Qiu Yifeng from Taiwan Province commented, *While we feel saddened by the disappearance of traditional art, we must acknowledge this fact. If we are to survive, we must adapt to the trends of the times and make necessary changes to meet the demands of the modern environment. However, such outcomes often lead to significant alterations, losing the original pure flavor, and may no longer resemble their former selves. Nevertheless, regardless of the result, we believe that it will never truly vanish. Perhaps one day in the future, we may no longer witness traditional shadow puppet performances as we do now, but we believe that it will manifest in different forms or transform into another appearance, yet still operating on the same principles, continuing its existence, never to disappear [11].*

This indicates that in the face of the inevitable impact of the current era, the inheritance of shadow puppetry does not necessarily have to adhere strictly to its original patterns. The inheritance practices of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary times involve the integration of outstanding traditional Chinese culture with modern production and life, achieving creative transformation and innovative development. *Under the perspective of all-media communication, the communication structure, methods and paths of intangible cultural heritage culture have all undergone profound change..... Current research on the innovative communication of intangible cultural heritage mainly focuses on the scope of new media and integrated media..... [12]*

①Shadow puppetry integrated into movies

Chinese shadow puppetry has long been considered a precursor to filmmaking, with a direct lineage between the two art forms. Some films have seamlessly integrated live shadow puppetry performances into their scenes. For instance, in Zhang Yimou's film *To Live*, the protagonist Fugui is deeply fascinated by shadow puppetry, which becomes a means of livelihood and expression for him at different stages of his life, enhancing the artistic style of the film through this form of art.

②Shadow puppetry combined with animation

As early as the 1950s, pioneers in the Chinese animation industry utilized elements of shadow puppetry and paper cutting as artistic styles in producing animated films such as *The Golden Conch*, *Red Army Bridge*, *Ji Gong Fights Crickets* and *The Fisherboy*. These art films, blending education with entertainment, not only contributed to the recognition of Chinese animation education internationally but also showcased the rich cultural heritage of shadow puppetry on the global stage.

Abroad, the German woman director Lotte Reiniger, who was born in 1899, was inspired by Chinese shadow puppetry. In 1926, she created the first feature-length animated film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, using silhouette as an artistic form of expression, influenced by Chinese shadow puppetry. French animation director Michel Ocelot, utilizing paper-cutting techniques, created fantasy-style animated films such as *Princes and Princesses* and *Tales of the Night*. These films have not only

gained audience appreciation for their unique artistic style but have also earned recognition in international award competitions.

The American animated film series *Kung Fu Panda* rejuvenated shadow puppetry through digital technology. The directors utilized digital techniques to faithfully replicate the distinctive shapes and basic performance techniques of Shanxi shadow puppetry, providing audiences with a fresh visual experience incorporating richer lighting and texture effects.

③Shadow puppetry combined with video games

As an ancient art form, Chinese shadow puppetry has been revitalized through its incorporation into modern gaming. *Nezha Shaman*, a rhythm-based game, is adapted from the *legend of the Nezha Shaman*, from the northern ethnic minorities of China. Set against the backdrop of ancient legends, the game *White Mountain and Black Water* employs shadow puppetry style to present multiple levels, allowing players to explore the magnificent art of shadow puppetry while delving into Shaman culture.

④Shadow puppetry meets musical theater

In 1998, Taiwanese shadow puppet artist Lin Zhensen spent a year planning the fusion shadow puppetry play *Vivaldi's Four Seasons and Shadow Puppetry*. It was performed in various venues and cultural centers, receiving an enthusiastic reception. The play combined traditional and modern elements, attracting audiences of different age groups and expanding the audience base for shadow puppetry.

⑤Shadow puppetry meets virtual reality (VR)

Combining VR technology with traditional shadow puppetry can create more immersive, diverse, and innovative shadow puppet performances and experiences [13]. Allowing audiences to experience the process of shadow puppetry performances through VR devices, and even enabling them to participate interactively, enhances the immersion and involvement of the audience, providing new avenues for the inheritance and promotion of shadow puppetry.

In 2019, the China Arts and Technology Institute took the lead in completing an immersive interactive game called *The Race of Tian Ji*, which integrated intangible cultural heritage, VR technology, and traditional stories. This project was selected as an excellent case for the improvement of cultural and tourism equipment technology by the Department of Science, Technology, and Education of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in 2019.

⑥Shadow puppetry combined with multimedia art

In 2017, at the 57th Venice Biennale, the multimedia shadow puppet performance *Unbounded – Moving Mountains, Filling Seas* in the Chinese Pavilion immediately captured widespread attention. In 2023, the National Art Fund's major stage plays and works creation funding project, along with the 2021 Shaanxi Province major stage plays and works funding project, supported the original multimedia shadow puppet play *Nezha: Punishing Evil and Promoting Good*. This play combines the unique stage performance techniques of shadow puppetry with modern multimedia technology, allowing audiences to experience traditional shadow puppetry's fascinating evolution up close. The innovative exhibition format attracted a large number of young viewers, promoting the inheritance and development of shadow puppetry.

As evidenced by the above cases, these works have altered the external form of shadow puppetry without changing its intrinsic spirit. With the aid of modern technology and media, traditional shadow puppetry has found new forms of expression and avenues for dissemination. Whether it is being extracted as elements to be reincorporated into other art forms or standing on its own, shadow puppetry has enhanced its appeal among younger audiences and expanded its cultural influence, achieving a successful cross-disciplinary transformation of this ancient art form.

4. Conclusion

As a significant representative of traditional folk art in China originating from agrarian societies, shadow puppetry possesses rich historical and cultural connotations along with a unique charm and artistic appeal. *Firm cultural self-confidence, and do a good job of inheriting and promoting the excellent traditional Chinese culture in contemporary times is the new mission given to all Chinese children in the new era [14].* However, in the era of globalization and rapid technological advancement,

it has gradually become inadequate to adapt to the development pace of modern industrial societies. It is slowly declining and even showing signs of fading into obscurity, a trend brought about by irreversible changes of the times. The necessity of the protection and innovation of traditional shadow puppetry has become a crucial and unavoidable topic. In modern society, shadow puppetry faces both challenges and opportunities, and guidance from theoretical writings regarding cultural heritage protection is key to the revival and rejuvenation of shadow puppetry in contemporary society.

Through a combination of protection and innovation, as well as cross-disciplinary integration and diversified development, traditional shadow puppetry can guarantee its inheritance and further developed in the contemporary era. Promoting the modern transformation of traditional culture is an important way to enhance cultural confidence, bequeath outstanding Chinese traditional culture, and enhance national cohesion and cultural soft power. In the future, efforts should continue to strengthen the protection, inheritance, and innovation of shadow puppetry, ensuring its vitality in the process of globalization and revitalizing it with new vibrancy. And finally, the study of successful cross-media collaboration cases involving shadow puppetry can provide valuable insights for the innovation of other traditional art forms in the context of modernization.

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