

Tradition Unveiled: A Comparative Exploration of Kelantan and Shaanxi Shadow Puppet Craftsmanship

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Abstract

This study intricately examines the craftsmanship of Kelantan, Malaysia, and Shaanxi, China's shadow puppets, highlighting how their unique making processes contribute to distinct visual characteristics. Kelantan artisans meticulously treat cattle hide, emphasizing sunlight exposure for drying, intricate chiselling techniques, and vibrant coloration. In contrast, Shaanxi craftsmen employ a moist carving process, with detailed motifs influenced by traditional Chinese mural paintings. The comparative analysis exposes fundamental disparities: Kelantan emphasizes dry leather, producing flat colours and detailed chiselling, while Shaanxi relies on moist leather for vibrant, translucent hues. The study further explores variations in carving techniques and movable parts, providing insight into the rich cultural tapestry woven into the artistry of Kelantan and Shaanxi shadow puppet craftsmanship.

Keywords: shadow puppet craftsmanship, comparative analysis, Kelantan, Shaanxi

1. Introduction

Shadow play, a venerable form of performing art, resonates deeply within the cultural tapestries of Kelantan, Malaysia, and Shaanxi, China. In the heart of Kelantan. According to Rentse (1936), the Wayang Kulit Kelantan, known as Wayang Kulit Siam, has matured into a distinctive cultural expression influenced by the convergence of southern Thai shadow play. Simultaneously, Shaanxi, China, boasts a rich legacy of shadow puppet craftsmanship that traces its origins back to the Song Dynasty (Chen, 2003), delivering a captivating spectacle deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and artistic traditions.

The primary purpose of this study is to compare and analyse the production processes of Kelantan shadow play and Shaanxi shadow play and to unveil the relationship between unique processes and the visual style shaping these traditions. The research is scoped to unveil craftsmanship, cultural nuances, and cultural influences contributing to distinctiveness.

This study transcends regional investigation, situating itself within the broader field of traditional visual art forms. Sun (2005) states that the artistic style of Chinese shadow play coincides with ancient art forms such as paper cuttings, stone carvings, and mural paintings, while the artistic style of Kelantan shadow play is derived from Java and southern Thailand (Vandergeest & Chalernpow-Koanantakool, 1993), with narratives from the Indian epic *Ramayana* (Sweeney, 1970), sharing commonalities in visuals, narrative, and cultural symbolism. The interplay of these elements in shadow play contributes to broader discussions on preserving and evolving traditional visual arts across cultures.

As we embark on this comparative journey, the aim is to unravel the intricate craftsmanship of Kelantan and Shaanxi shadow puppets, contributing insights to broader discussions on preserving and understanding

traditional visual art forms. In doing so, we peel back layers of history, tradition, and creativity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the cultural nuances encapsulated in these time-honoured shadow play traditions.

In order to obtain firsthand data concerning Kelantan and Shaanxi shadow play, researchers conducted field works in Kelantan and Langzhong. Identifying suitable interviewees posed a challenge for this study, given that shadow play performance, as a vanishing traditional art form, has few practitioners remaining. This investigation interviewed three shadow masters and observed the puppet-making process. They are Eyo Hock Seng, Mohd Jufry Yusoff, and Wang Biao. Eyo resides in a rural village in Kelantan, while Jufry runs an art centre in Penang. Wang owns a shadow puppet museum in Langzhong, a historical city in Sichuan, near Shaanxi. The shadow play in this region has preserved and evolved in the typical Shaanxi style. All three masters are prominent figures in the local shadow play performance community and bear the responsibility of promoting and preserving traditional folk arts.

2. Craftsmanship of Kelantan Shadow Puppets

Craftsmanship is at the heart of Wayang Kulit Kelantan, shaping a unique and fascinating figure in the field of folk art. Delving into the process of this craft, the intricate art of Kelantan shadow play is revealed.

The first step is to handle the hide. Kelantan shadow puppets are typically constructed from cattle hide. It is essential to note that the chosen hide should not come from animals used in agricultural labour to avoid whip marks. According to Jufry (Mohd Jufry Yusoff, personal communication, Aug 20, 2023), there are two types of hide used in modern shadow puppet making: one is native to Kelantan, and the other is from Thailand (Figure 1). Kelantan is thicker, which needs to be treated by the maker, and harder than Thailand, while Thai hide has a smooth surface and is of higher quality which is ready-made. Once the raw hide is obtained, the puppet maker nails it onto a wooden frame and exposes it to intense sunlight for 3 to 5 days to ensure thorough drying (Figure 2). Subsequently, a paring knife (*pisau raut*) (Figure 3) is used to scrape off the fur, followed by repeated brushing and rubbing with a hard, coarse brush on the leather surface to make it soft and smooth. Finally, the leather is cleaned and subjected to further drying.



Figure 1. Two types of hide

Source: Photograph taken by author at Jufry's studio.



Figure 2. Drying of raw hide

Source: Photograph taken by author at Eyo's Backyard.



2007.82

Figure 3. *Pisau raut*

Source: Horniman Museum & Gardens (<https://www.horniman.ac.uk/object/2007.82>).

The second step is to chisel⁸ of the shadow puppet shape. Firstly, the outline of the shadow puppet is drawn on white wax paper (*kertas wau*) (Figure 4). After that, the outlined image is cut out from wax paper with scissors, and it is glued onto the previously processed leather using homemade rice glue. Subsequently, the shadow puppet maker uses a thin knife to roughly cut out the shape of the puppet based on the outlined paper. Then, the leather is finely chiselled with a steady hand, using simple tools such as chisels and hammers of various sizes to punch holes and carve chisel patterns inside the shadow puppet (Figure 5). The most typical motif is “locust teeth” (Yousof & Khor 2017). A series of tiny dotted lines that are often used in the outlines and folds of garments, as well as in hairstyles, facial outlines and necklines (Figure 6).

⁸ Chisel is made of metal and comes in various shapes and sizes. Chiseling is a technique used in the creation of intricate designs or patterns on a surface by striking with a hammer to remove or shape the material, compared to engraving, which involves removing material by striking and cutting rather than incising.



Figure 4. Line-drawn draft

Source: Photograph taken by author at Jufry's studio.



Figure 5. Eyo was chiseling a pattern

Source: Image via Maxis Berhad.



Figure 6. The "Locust Teeth" motif of *Siti Dewi*

Source: *Siti Dewi*, Accession No.: XXXX-05379, Asian Civilisations Museum.

The third step is colouring. The movable parts of the Kelantan shadow puppet are the arms and the jaw, these must be painted in the traditional colours before they are fixed to the body of the puppet. The colours are chosen according to the different characters. There are several shadow puppets that have fixed colours, such as Seri Rama (green) and Lakshmana (red) (Figure 7), whose colours come from the description of the Indian epic Ramayana.



Figure 7. *Seri Rama* (green, left) and *Lakshmana* (red, right), Shadow puppets created by Eyo Hock Seng
Source: Photograph taken by author.

From talking to the masters (*Tok Dalang*) Eyo (Eyo Hock Seng, personal communication, Aug 23, 2023) (Figure 8) and Jufry (Figure 9), in recent years, puppet makers have increasingly used ink markers to colour the puppets, making them translucent. When projected onto a screen (*kelir*), the characters appear as translucent colours that transmit light. While the traditional classic characters had a solid black silhouette, the use of coloured characters began in the 1970s in order to compete with television entertainment.



Figure 8. Interview with Eyo at his gallery



Figure 9. Interview with Jufry at Wak Long Music & Art Centre

The final step in the puppet-making process is to connect the puppet to the manipulating rod and the central pole, and then to attach the moveable parts with strings for precise manipulation during the performance (Figure 10). The shadow puppet maker sharpens the ends of a thin bamboo, splitting it at one end and making a split up to the lower part of the thin bamboo, leaving the other end attached. The finished shadow is sandwiched in the middle of the split bamboo, and then the bamboo rod is tied to the puppet with a string to create a central pole that serves as a handle (Figure 11). Moving parts such as elbows, shoulders, etc. are tied to the body with strings (Figure 18), and for puppets with movable jaws, such as (*Maharisi Burung*, *Jejerit*, *Pak Dogol*, and *Wak Long*), a spring will be sewn to the puppet's face. A string is tied from the top of the spring to the jaws to hold them in place, and another string is attached to the bottom of the jaws that allows the mouth to be pulled apart. A ring at the end of the string allows the puppet performer to manipulate the mouth by moving the fingers holding the figure's central pole.



Figure 10. Connecting puppet to manipulating rod with strings

Source: Photograph taken by author at Jufry's studio.



Figure 11. The Assembly of Kelantan Shadow Puppet

Source: *Seri Rama*, Accession No.: IS.177-1965, Victoria and Albert Museum.

3. Craftsmanship of Shaanxi Shadow Puppets

Rooted in the ancient traditions of China, Shaanxi's shadow puppets showcase a nuanced approach to craftsmanship. Unlike their counterparts in other regions, the materials used in Shaanxi shadow puppets contribute to their unique texture and aesthetic appeal. The choice of material plays a pivotal role in defining the visual and tactile qualities of Shaanxi shadow puppets.

The first step is to prepare the leather. According to Wang (Wang Biao, personal communication, Oct 4, 2023), the material used to process the shadow puppets is 2-year-old cattle hide because of its good softness and transparency. The puppet maker soaks the selected leather in a tank with clean water and adds some grass ash and lime to the water to make the raw hide soften, and the water should be changed every day. Usually, soak for 2 to 3 days. Summer and autumn are the best seasons to soak the hide because of the suitable temperature. After soaking, the maker uses a special knife to repeatedly scrape to remove the fur. The hide is then placed on a wooden frame to air-dry in the shade. It is forbidden to dry it in the sun or heat it over a fire to prevent cracking. The carver then polishes the hide with fine sandpaper, washes it with water, and leaves it to dry in the shade. This process is called "polishing" (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Polished hide

Source: Photograph taken by author at Wang's workshop.

The second step is to carve the motif. The hide needs to be kept moist throughout the entire carving process, as moist hide softens, and softening hide makes it easier to carve. The shadow puppet maker puts the pre-designed drawings of the head, body, and limbs under the transparent hide for carving. There are special sketches for making shadow puppets, known as “sample sketches”, and these designs are passed down from generation to generation. The maker first uses a steel needle to carve the outer contours of the hide, carving with more than two dozen tools of different sizes. Shaanxi shadow puppet carving is distinguished by the fact that “the knife stays still and pushes the hide”. The maker places the leather on a custom-made wax pad (Figure 13), which is soft for easy carving and also to be flexibly rotated, then stabilises the knife with the right hand and pushes the hide with the left hand to move the hide in the direction of the drawn line (Figure 14). This method of carving is similar to the way a modern sewing machine works for sewing clothes. There are two ways to carving the face. One is to hollow out the entire face of the shadow, preserving the contour lines of the image. The other is that the maker retains the entire face of the shadow and hollows out the contour lines of the image, choosing a fixed carving technique for different characters. For smaller shapes, a chisel is used to hollow out the figure (Figure 15).



Figure 13. A custom-made wax pad

Source: Photograph taken by author at Wang’s workshop.



Figure 14. Shaanxi shadow puppet’s distinctive carving technique

Source: Photograph taken by author at Wang’s workshop.



Figure 15. A typical shadow puppet's Figure created by Wang Biao

Source: Photograph taken by author.

The third step is colouring. Shaanxi shadow puppets use pigments made of natural materials, mainly red, green, yellow, and black (Figure 16). Experienced makers are good at mixing the colours in proper proportions and mastering the shades of colours. The shadow puppets they paint are even more colourful under light transmission.



Figure 16. Natural mineral pigments

Source: Photograph taken by author.

After the colouring is completed, the fourth step is dehydration and drying. This is because the hide shadow needs to be kept wet all the time during the previous process of carving and colouring. The purpose of dehydration and drying is to make the pigment penetrate into the hide so that the colour of the shadow will look brighter and never fade. There is also the possibility of fixing the shape of the hide shadow so that it will not be warped. Traditionally, all parts of the hide shadow are placed between two wooden boards. It is slowly baked at a temperature of 50°C. Too high or too low a temperature is harmful to the hide.

The fifth step is assembly. Assembly is the last process in the puppet-making process. Shaanxi shadow puppets, like those in other regions of China, consist of 1 head, 1 chest, 1 hip, 2 legs, 2 upper arms, 2 lower arms, and 2 hands, for a total of 11 parts. The 11 parts are connected one by one to form a complete figure. Each part can be moved flexibly, except the head. Finally, the shadow maker attaches three bamboo rods to each puppet. One stick is attached to the neck, and the other two sticks are attached to each hand (Figure 17). During the

performance, the actor manipulates the shadow through the three rods.

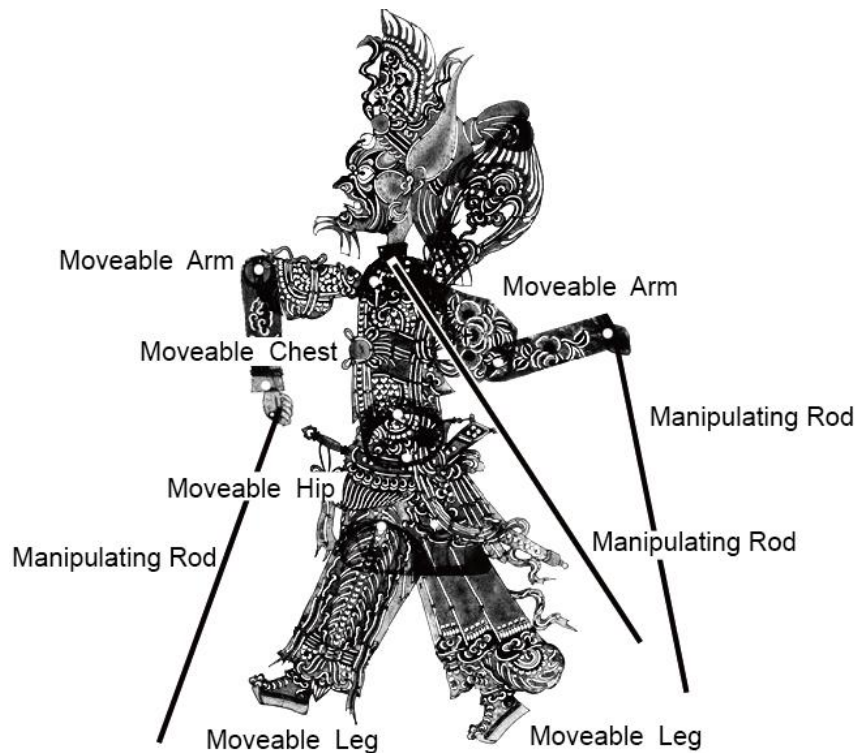


Figure 17. The Assembly of Shaanxi Shadow Puppet

Source: Deity of Heaven, Xi'an Shadow Puppet Art Museum.

4. Comparative Analysis of Kelantan and Shaanxi Shadow Puppet Craftsmanship

The craftsmanship of Kelantan and Shaanxi shadow puppets reveals distinctive approaches deeply rooted in their respective cultural traditions. This comparative study unveils the unique techniques, materials, and cultural nuances that shape the artistry of these traditional visual forms.

Table 1. Comparison of Craftsmanship

	Kelantan Shadow Puppet	Shaanxi shadow puppet
Material	Kelantan shadow puppets primarily use cattle hide, chosen meticulously to avoid whip marks from agricultural labour.	Shaanxi shadow puppets use 2-year-old cattle hide, selected for its softness and transparency.
Drying Process	The hide undergoes meticulous drying under intense sunlight for 3 to 5 days, ensuring thorough drying and quality.	The hide soaks the selected hide into a tank with clean water and adds some grass ash and lime into the water to make the raw hide soften, then is placed on a wooden frame to air dry in the shade.
Shape Cutting	Sample sketches are passed down from generation to generation. The puppet shape is cut from outlined wax paper and glued onto the prepared leather.	Sample sketches are passed down from generation to generation. The maker first uses a steel needle to carve the outer contours of the hide. The hide is then placed on a hardwood board and carved.
Crafting	Patterns are chiselled on the dry hide by using simple tools like chisels and hammers. the intricate	Carving involves keeping the hide moist with a distinctive technique

	patterns like the “locust teeth” motif, representing a notable Kelantanese characteristic.	called “the knife stays still and pushes the hide”, similar to a sewing machine.
Colouring	Traditional colouring involves the use of specific colours for different characters, with recent trends incorporating translucent ink markers. All parts are painted before attachment.	Natural pigments are used, creating vibrant colours that are transparent when the puppet is backlit. All parts are painted before attachment.
Assembly and Articulation	The puppet’s body is connected to a central pole, and a moveable arm is connected to a manipulating rod. Moving parts such as arms, elbows, shoulders are tied to the body with strings (Figure 18)	Shaanxi puppets consist of 11 parts, each movable, and are connected to form a complete figure (Figure 3, Figure 4).
Manipulation	One moved arm is controlled by a manipulating rod, the central pole serves as move the puppet’s body.	Three bamboo rods are attached to each puppet for flexible movement during performances.

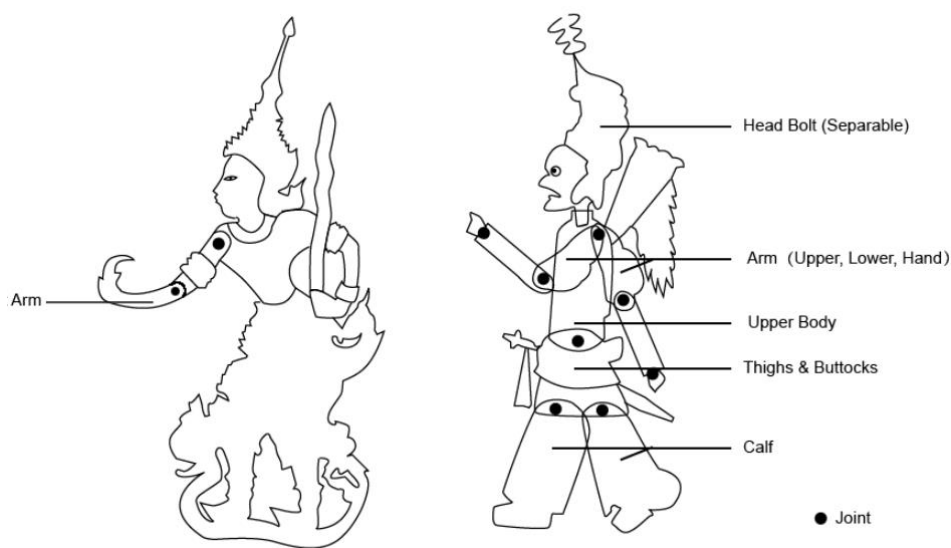


Figure 18. The joints of Kelantan (left) and Shaanxi (right) Shadow Puppet

Source: Illustrated by author.

The utilization of cattle hide in shadow puppet production is a shared foundation between Kelantan and Shaanxi. However, their unique production methods unveil distinct artistic processes, enriching the traditional visual art form in their own ways.

In Kelantan, puppet-making emphasises chiselling techniques on dry hide to create visually distinctive patterns that are characterised by dots. The region’s commitment to precision cutting and traditional colouring, and the growing trend towards the use of translucent inks, demonstrates a renewal of cultural elements.

On the other hand, Shaanxi adopts a different approach, employing moist animal skins and specialized carving techniques. The inherent softness of the leather during carving allows for the creation of smooth, elongated lines. The region’s distinct colour palette, derived from natural pigments, undergoes a layering process during colouring, producing variations in intensity.

Both regions share a commonality in the use of bamboo rods for puppet manipulation, yet the specific applications differ. In Kelantan, a bamboo rod manipulates the arms, while a central pole holds the shadow in position. In Shaanxi, three bamboo rods then come into play after assembly. Two hands and the body are manipulated separately.

5. Conclusion

In the rich tapestry of shadow play, the craftsmanship of Kelantan and Shaanxi shadow puppets stands as a testament to the profound cultural intricacies that shape traditional visual art forms. Through a comparative analysis, this study has unravelled the distinctive techniques, materials, and cultural nuances embedded in the shadow play traditions of these two regions.

Kelantan's emphasis intricate chiselling on the dry hide results in visually distinctive dot patterns, exemplified by the notable "locust teeth" motif. In contrast, Shaanxi's focus on moist hide carving to form continuous and smooth lines and a unique gradient colour palette from natural pigments.

The comparative study sheds light on the profound influence of shadow puppet craftsmanship on respective visual style. The crafting process is not merely a technical endeavour but a reflection of historical, religious, and cultural contexts. Kelantan and Shaanxi stand as living repositories of cultural heritage, and their shadow play traditions are integral to the broader discussions on the preservation of traditional visual art forms. We encourage the appreciation of different artistic charms in their respective cultural contexts. This process serves as a bridge connecting the past to the present and actively contributes to shaping the future of traditional visual art forms.

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