

# A Study on the Visual Elements of Shadow Puppets in Southwest China

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the shadow puppets in Southwest China, as one of the principal styles of Chinese shadow play and has been a popular local performing art and storytelling tradition. The Chinese shadow play is beautifully crafted, and the design follows traditional moral evaluation and aesthetics. Thus, the main objective of this study is to understand the visual elements and aesthetic characteristics of the shadow puppet characters, and how the socio-cultural background influences them. Scholars have less explored shadow puppets in the visual realms. The study employed a qualitative descriptive method based on iconography theory. The researcher had collected and studied samples and generalizes the cultural causes and visual characteristics. Therefore, this research will contribute to providing more insight into the aesthetic world of shadow puppets and give inspire towards modern art and design industry. It also delivers as a symbol of cultural identity and loyalty among the young generation.

**Keywords:** Chinese shadow puppet; Visual elements; Aesthetic characteristics; Cultural identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese shadow play, or shadow puppetry, is a kind of theatrical form with colourful puppets that are made of animal hide or paper. It performs with instrumental music and singing and storytelling. Georges Sadoul (1999), a French movie historian, indicates in his book *Histoire du cinéma mondial* that the shadow play is “the originator of sound movies”. A complete performance of shadow play includes stage, lighting, screen, music performance, shadow puppet characters, storytelling, among which the shadow puppets undoubtedly play the leading part in showing the highly visual features. Chinese shadow play in the early days was performed to pray for the blessing and worship the god. Then, with the secularization of belief, shadow play became one of the ways of entertainment for people (Jiang, 2015). Its visual elements are closely related to folk beliefs. As traditional entertainment, shadow play is on the verge of extinction due to the impact of modern culture, hence four types of shadow play performances have been listed in the world intangible heritage. They are Cambodian and Indonesian shadow play, Turkish