# A Comparative Visual Analysis Between the Sheng Character of Shadow Puppets of the Central Plains of China and Sri Rama of Wayang Kulit Kelantan, Malaysia

**Dong Ming Hui & Sarena Abdullah**
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 USM Penang, Malaysia
Email: dongminghui@htu.cn
sarena.abdullah@usm.my

## Abstract

Although research on cross-cultural influences between Asian nations has been widely published in the field of fine arts, there is a near absence of studies that directly analyse the connection of visual characteristics between the People's Republic of China and Malaysian shadow puppets, or the visual design elements that are unique to China's Central Plains Sheng shadow puppet. Using the classic shadow puppets Sheng and Sri Rama, this paper investigates the connections between China's and Malaysian shadow puppets with regard to visual elements of colour, shape, and cultural connotations.

Analyses for this research utilize Iconography and Iconology, particularly Panofsky's methodology. Data was collected through comprehensive literature reviews and prepared questions applied during eight in-person interviews with master puppeteers, four of which were conducted in the People's Republic of China and four of which were conducted in Malaysia.

It concludes that similarities between Sheng and Sri Rama include their facial orientation; hats that determine their identities, same engraving techniques; sparing facial carving; single painted skins; the same five-colour system; narrow, almond-shaped eyes; and well-defined facial structures. Their differences include disparate roles ranging from divine ruler to scholar; hat design adorned with non-identical motifs; and Sri Rama's absence of blue and always appearing in green in accordance with Hinduism and Islam. Notably, analyses reveal that Sri Rama's modelling is closer to Chinese shadow puppet design than other shadow puppets from India, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Wayang Kulit, Shadow Puppet, Visual Art, Sheng, Sri Rama, Iconography, Iconology.

## Introduction

The term culture refers to a way of life within a given country based on the beliefs, arts, and social practices rooted in tradition. Such traditions may be indigenous or originally introduced from outside nations. Within a county's culture is a composite of regional cultures that may be a resultant blend of indigenous beliefs and practices combined with those of foreign influences, brought historically as far back as centuries ago. For over two thousand years, Malaysia and China have shared a rich tapestry of historical and cultural exchanges. From early A.D. era interactions to the harmonious Ming Dynasty and the Sultanate of Malacca period, these nations have fostered a dynamic relationship marked by mutual respect and collaboration. (Yingying, 2015). This study aims to expand the breadth and depth of cultural exchange between the two countries to promote mutual understanding and cultural blend.

Shadow puppetry is one of the world's oldest art forms, but its geographic origins are unclear (Nechvatal, 2015). Shadow puppetry from the People's Republic of China (China) was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity (2011), while shadow puppetry of Southeast Asia has often been understood as a reflection of local cultural patterns. (Vandergeest and Chalermpow-Koanantakool, 1993) Shadow puppets provide historical specimens for (1) analyzing cross-cultural influences between China and Malaysia; and (2) analyzing independent development of these art forms as shaped by respective regional cultures. To investigate the similarities in shadow puppets due to cross-cultural influences between China and Malaysia, and the dissimilarities due to regional cultures operating within China and Malaysia, this paper provides an analytical comparison of visual characteristics between China Central Plains Sheng shadow puppet (Sheng) and Malaysian Sri Rama Wayang Kulit Kelantan (Sri Rama)—two of the most important traditional characters in China and Malay shadow puppetry—and their respective artistic styles in shape, colour, design, composition, and artistic symbolism.

The comparison aims to explore and highlight how these characters, while emerging from different cultural backgrounds, may share thematic parallels or exhibit unique differences in their artistic portrayal, reflecting the diverse cultural narratives of China and Malaysia.

## Theoretical framework

Laufer sees increasing value in studying Chinese shadow puppetry, as he believes this may be the origin of shadow puppetry in the world (Laufer, 1923). Many researchers regard shadow puppetry as a part of studying the spread and development of drama and have produced a series of influential research results in China. Most of them focused on the study of folklore and opera repertoire (Sun Kaidi, 1953; Gu Jiegang, 1983; Dong Meikan, 1999; Wei Liqun, 1995; Kang Baocheng, 2011; Li Yuezhong, 2010, Jiang YuXiang, 1997; Jiang YuXiang, 2015), but these researchers do not focus on the visual artistic characteristics of shadow puppets. Among the studies on shadow puppets, Wei Liqun's research (2015) gradually transitioned from the study of shadow puppets as a comprehensive art to research focusing only on visual arts. Wei (2015) published a series of monographs, including a monograph on shadow puppet modelling, but this research was limited to descriptions, not deep analyses of cultural connotations (Wei Liqun, 2015). Much research exists on Chinese shadow puppetry, but studies, for example those by Wang (2016) and Tang (2016), providing in-depth analyses of their visual characteristics, shapes, colours, or cultural connotations are very rare. More in-depth studies of shadow puppets' visual characteristics and cultural connotations are needed. The study by Wang (2016) focuses exclusively on China shadow puppet clown roles (Wang Kan, 2009), whereas the study by Tang (2016) focuses on Asian shadow puppets from India, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and China (Tang Rui, 2018), but not the specific character Sheng.

A shadow puppet is defined as a two-dimensional puppet handheld by sticks, crafted from cow, goat, or donkey skin, with articulating arms (Sheng includes articulating legs). Shadow puppetry encompasses the performance of storytelling or entertaining, before private or public audiences, by trained artists through the use of shadow puppets set against a backlit

screen made of white diaphanous cloth (Lopezy, 2004). Using sticks to move the puppets and their articulating limbs, master puppeteers (or "dalang" in Bahasa Malaysia) enact storytelling and entertainment performances through dialogue, commentary, narration, or songs based on traditional legends, myths, novels, dramas, or historical events (Yousof, 2004b). Shadow puppetry repertoire includes music, acting, singing, narratives, and lighting effects (Yousof, 2004b).

The Central Plains of China are comprised of the geographic expanse covering modern-day Henan Province, the southern parts of Hebei and Shanxi Provinces, and the western part of Shandong Province (Wikipedia contributors,2023). Sheng is a character role in Chinese opera depicting respectful dignified males that may include heads of households, nobles, or Confucian scholars (Bonds, 2019). In this study, Sheng is one of the categories of characters in Chinese Central Plains shadow puppetry entailing a male role (Wei Liqun, 1998). Correspondingly, shadow play is one of the oldest traditional art forms in Malaysia (Yousof, 2004b); it is known as Wayang Kulit in Bahasa Malaysia and can mean either "shadow puppet" or "shadow puppetry." Wayang Kulit Kelantan refers to the shadow puppets or shadow puppetry unique to the Malaysian state of Kelantan.

## Review of literature

A comprehensive review of existing research shows a paucity of literature focusing directly on: (1) the visual characteristics of Sheng; and (2) comparisons of visual characteristics between Sheng and Sri Rama. Literature specifically on Sheng, such as the studies by Wu (1999) and Shao (2013), pertains to the stage performances by human actors portraying Sheng and not Sheng's specific shadow puppet form. The closest relevant studies that provide visual analyses of shadow puppets are limited to single Wayang Kulit characters, namely Seri (a variation of Sri) Rama (Khor, 2014; Ghani, 2016; Wong, 2019; Dayana & Mohd Kipli, 2019).

However, it should be noted that the studies by Khor (2014) and Ghani (2016) were conducted for the purposes of digitizing Sri Rama as an animated art form, and not for preserving Sri Rama as a shadow puppet folk art tradition. Research on the digitization of Wayang Kulit Kelantan has also been conducted (Ghani, 2011; 2016b; 2012a, 2018, 2015). Ghani (2012a) has examined the value of engravings and symbols of Wayang Kulit Kelantan (Ghani, 2012b) and sound (Ghani, 2016a).

Studies by Dayana and Mohd Kipli (2019) provide analyses of visual characteristics for studying the feminine attributes and movements of Seri Rama as produced by puppeteers during performances (Jufry and Rahman, 2019). The study by Wong (2019) focuses on two Wayang Kulit characters, Seri Rama (as a hero) and Maharaja Wana (as a villain) and provides an analysis of the visual characteristics of Seri Rama (Fiona E Chiong, 2019). Wong (2019) cautions readers that additional studies such as those by Sweeny (1972) (Sweeney, 1972b), Kingham (2006), and Rahimidin (2013) provide only superficial descriptions of certain Wayang Kulit Kelantan characters, rather than deep analyses from a visual art perspective. Wong's (2019) analyses of the visual characteristics of Wayang Kulit Kelantan are performed as a study of puppet design motifs being influenced by animism, Hinduism, Javanese traditional beliefs, and Islam (Fiona E Chiong Wong, 2019).

However, absent in articles are attributions to China being related to Wayang Kulit Kelantan. For example, Wong (2019) attributes the dragon motif below Sri Rama's feet to Southeast Asia or Asian origins, and not China specifically. In fact, the dragon originated in China between 4500 and 3000 B.C. (Meccarelli,2018). According to Khalidah (2020), cross-cultural interactions between China and Malaysia date between 2000 B.C. and 1500 B.C. in the form of plant cultivation and animal domestication (Ali, 2022). On regional culture influences, the presence of multi-cultural elements (Thai, Javanese, and local Kelantan culture) have shaped the Ramayana (a classic epic from India) narrative (Sri Rama's storyline) as interpreted and presented by Kelantan puppeteers and many other aspects of Wayang Kulit Kelantan as an art form (Yousof and Khor, 2017).

Scholarly research on Wayang Kulit has focused on the art form's history, literary and linguistic elements, origins of performance, or the training of its puppeteers. Discourses on their

craftsmanship are generally limited to either a few pages or a few paragraphs within larger studies. Extant studies on Wayang Kulit craftsmanship focus on the documentation of the puppets themselves as images in photographic collections or on the idea that craftsmanship has declined—due to issues such as economic hardships and globalisation—without a focused examination of the carvers themselves or the extensive history of the craft and its techniques (Tannenbaum, 2018).

Other studies on China shadow puppets, including classical literature (Sun, 1953; Sun, 1965; Gu, 1983; Dong, 1999; Wei, 1995; Kang, 2004; Li, 2010; Jiang, 2011), focus on folklore and opera repertoire, not visual characteristics of China shadow puppets. The remaining studies focus on shadow play with characters that are classified by identity or character traits such as personality, status, or occupation (Zhang, 2009), or provide comparative accounts of shadow plays between China and Europe (Lin, 2004).

A comprehensive review of the existing research shows relatively few comparative studies on shadow puppetry in different regions and even fewer studies on the relationship and comparative study between China and Malaysia. Thus, this study will fill the current research gap in exploring the relationship between China and Malaysian shadow puppetry from the visual arts perspective. The most researched areas relate to single character analyses of Wayang Kulit Kelantan, and its visual characteristics, whereas the least researched areas are those centred on the visual elements characteristic of Sheng and those providing analytical comparisons of visual characteristics between Sheng and Sri Rama.

## Research Methodology

This study is based on two of the most traditional characters in China's and Malaysia's shadow puppetry: Sheng and Sri Rama. Data collected for this study was obtained through comprehensive library literature reviews, which included articles, papers, and research reports to obtain data from written sources, combined with first-hand interviews with master puppeteers of Sheng and Sri Rama in China and Malaysia, respectively. Additional data analysis was deployed using Panofsky iconological method to compare and analyse the shadow puppets for similarity. Explored were the cultural connotations of the shadow puppets in terms of shape, colour, pattern, and other aspects. The author strived to thoroughly record and analyse the perspectives of different shadow puppet artists as well as synthesise and refine their artistic experiences and suggestions to gain a deeper understanding of Sheng and Sri Rama and their cultural significance and tradition in these regions.

Following the approval from the Office of Human Research Ethics at University Sains Malaysia, first-hand interviews with eight master puppeteers (Table 1) were conducted in the geographic regions of Xinyang City, Henan Province, People's Republic of China, and the Malaysian capital city of Kuala Lumpur and rural area of Pasir Mas in the state of Kelantan, Malaysia. The number of Wayang Kulit Kelantan puppeteers in Malaysia has been declining, with only a total of five being counted in 2017(Mahmoud, 2017)[1] and ten in 2019.[2] Master puppeteers were selected on the basis that the artists themselves actually carved the puppets they performed with; those excluded were non-puppeteer members of a performing art group who had never carved any shadow puppet. China's puppeteers were found through a Henan provincial government directory and subsequently contacted by phone and WeChat. Malaysia puppeteers were found by the introduction provided by the Asian Cultural Heritage Hub located in Penang, Malaysia. Although the master puppeteer population is tiny, four individuals were identified in China and Malaysia, respectively, who agreed to be interviewed independently. Communications with expert puppeteers in China were conducted in *pu tong hua* or standard Mandarin, the author's native language, whereas communication with native-Malaysian puppeteers was conducted in English.

---

[1] Pak Dain, a *dalang* in Kelantan, has a *wanyang kulit* puppet collection and workshop in Kelantan.
[2] An interview with Dr. Ghulam Sarwar Yousof in October 2019 in Cultural Centre University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

**Table 1:** List of interviewees
Source: Author

| Region | interviewee |
|---|---|
| China | Puppeteer A |
| | Puppeteer B |
| | Puppeteer C |
| | Puppeteer D |
| Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur & Pasir Mas, Kelantan | Dalang E |
| | Dalang F |
| | Dalang G |
| | Dalang H |

Expert puppeteers were asked 9 interview questions (Table 2) on the visual characteristics of the shadow puppets compared. During the interviews, a Sri Rama puppet was first shown to China puppeteers while a Sheng puppet was first shown to a Malay dalang. The tools used to document the interviewee responses included electronic devices in the form of a digital camera and an MP4 file format digital voice recorder.

**Table 2**: Research interview questions
Source: Author

| Question category | Specific interview questions |
|---|---|
| Relationship between Sheng and Sri Rama | Puppeteers A–D (China)<br>1. From a puppeteer's point of view, what do you think of Sri Rama? (showed the physical specimen to the artist)<br>2. Are there any elements you are familiar with, and what are they? Where do you use these elements in Sheng?<br><br>Dalang E–F (Malaysia)<br>1. From a dalang perspective, what do you think of Sheng? (showed the physical specimen to the artist)<br>2. Are there any elements you are familiar with, and what are they? Where do you use these elements in Sri Rama? |
| Cultural connotation of shape of Sheng and Sri Rama | Puppeteers A–D (China)<br>3. How do you design Sheng?<br>4. Could you please explain the cultural background behind the shapes of details on Sheng?<br><br>Dalang E–F (Malaysia)<br>3. How do you design Sri Rama?<br>4. Could you please explain the cultural background behind the shapes of details on Sri Rama? |
| Colours and their cultural connotation for Sheng and Sri Rama | Puppeteers A–D (China)<br>5. What is the main colour used for Sheng?<br>6. Where are these colours used on Sheng?<br>7. Why use this colour used for Sheng?<br>8. Is there any relationship between the colours and any religious beliefs?<br>9. How do Chinese customs influence you when you are painting the colours on Sheng?<br><br>Dalang E–F (Malaysia)<br>5. What is the main colour used for Sri Rama?<br>6. Where are these colours used on Sri Rama?<br>7. Why use this colour for Sri Rama?<br>8. Is there any relationship between the colours and any religious beliefs?<br>9. How do Malay customs influence you when you are painting the colours on Sri Rama? |

This study follows the interpretation framework of artistic works proposed by Panofsky[3] by exploring shadow puppetry's cultural and symbolic dimensions in China and Malaysia, mainly through iconographic analysis. This is to gain a deeper understanding of the visual elements of these art forms. The analysis included examining the design, colour, pattern, and other visual symbols of the Chinese character "Sheng"（生）and the Sri Rama character in the shadow puppetry of Kelantan, Malaysia. The research aims to decipher the meaning of cultural narratives, social values , and historical context conveyed by these visual elements using the three stages in studying the meaning of works of art, including pre-iconography, Iconography, and Iconology (Panofsky, 1939).

Based on iconographic analysis, the study further explores these shadow figures' cultural and historical significance by interpreting the identified symbols and themes within the broader cultural and historical context to understand their traditional narrative role and significance in Chinese and Malaysian societies.

M. Baca has described iconology as the description, classification, or analysis of meaning or symbolism in the visual arts that considers the tradition of pictorial motifs and their historical, cultural, and social meaning (Baca, 2002). As a broader methodology, iconography interprets visual images as historical documents, connects artworks to their cultural and historical context, and explores their possible meanings and underlying intentions (Maria Cristina Carile, 2016). In short, iconography is the study and interpretation of a piece of art's subject matter and visual themes. This includes the inferred meanings and symbolism used to portray the group's common experience, history, and well-known myths and tales. Iconography refers to the symbols employed in a piece of art and what they signify or represent. For example, in several cultures, a snake may represent, among other things, evil, temptation, wisdom, rebirth, and the cycle of life. A portrayal of a snake in a scenario with Adam and Eve has unique meanings for Christians and others who recognise that the snake represents temptation in the context of that subject or story. In Chinese culture, however, a snake symbolizes the power of nature and is believed to bring good fortune to people who emulate the serpent's restraint and grace (LeMieux & Tekippe, 2021).

In the context of shadow puppets, Pandu Pramudita has used the iconographic method to analyse Kayon, a shadow puppet character in *purwa shadow puppets.* In the first stage, Kayon Blumbangan and Kayon Gapuran will be dissected based on shape and ornament. In the second stage, the meaning of each symbol that has been dissected will be identified. In this case, it will focus on the ornament motifs. In the final stage, the meaning of the relation between the motifs in the two traditional Kayons will be drawn (Pramudita et al, 2019).

In another study, Cheng Xiaochun and Musdi bin Hj Shanat focus on shadow puppets in the Southwest and employ a qualitative descriptive method based on iconography theory. They use iconography theory to analyse the characteristics of the visual elements of shadow puppets in Southwest China (Xiaochun and Shanat, 2021). However, his research only discusses the beginning level and does not discuss the next level extensively. Irving has also used iconographic reading Malayan puppets at the Asian Civilisations Museum in the colonial museum's ethnological goal and cross-cultural encounters in British Malaya (Johnson & Lim, 2022).

The highlights above demonstrate the application of iconography research in the deep analysis of Asian artworks, especially in the study of shadow puppets. Iconography approaches include extensive primary data research, starting from observing the object in question, from the outside to the inside, and gradually analyzing its connotation and cultural background to

---

[3] Iconology is a methodology of uncovering the cultural, social, and historical context of themes and subjects throughout the visual arts that are developed by Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), and their supporters to interpret historical development and the historical background of the visual arts. Iconography is the historical inquiry, interpretative study, and contextual significance of symbols or images; it encompasses the description and classification of visual material (subjects, compositions, motifs, and details) and the study of the historical evolution of visual traditions and the associated image formulas.

deepen the understanding of the artwork's cultural background and historical significance(Munsterberg, 2013).

Overall, these studies highlight the value of iconography as a powerful tool for art historical analysis and cultural exploration. In addition, in this study, as for the data obtained, the researchers interviewed shadow puppet artists and puppet makers in Kelantan, Malaysia, and Henan Province, China. Since the dissemination of knowledge and information about shadow puppetry is limited and is passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition and apprenticeship, the views and opinions of different informants on these topics may vary.

## Findings
## The Classification Methods of Both Shadow Puppets

Shadow puppetry can be found on all continents of the world. It was first discovered in ancient China and ancient India, two places with earlier records of human civilization (Osnes, 2010). Japan, Turkey, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Iran, and many other countries and regions have shadow puppet art with different styles (Zahari et al, 2013). Meanwhile, shadow puppets are widely popular in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, and other Southeast Asian countries. Parallel to China's millennia-old legacy of shadow puppetry, India, Indonesia, and Malaysia have all developed extensive traditions of shadow puppetry as narrative art.

### Categories of Wayang Kulit Malaysia

Puppets of traditional *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* are different in size; the shorter ones are about six to nine inches, while the taller ones can be over 24 inches (Yousof, 2004a). A basic *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* set consists of between 65 and 120 puppets comprising principal characters (Ghani, 2012c). The main repertoire of traditional *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* is *Hikayat Maharaja Wana* (Yousof, 2006). It is a Malay adaptation of the Hindu epic Ramayana (Yousof, 1997a).

There are various versions of characters according to each dalang, so it is evident that standardization and coherence in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* puppets do not exist in any study in this area (Kia and Chan, 2009). Previous attempts have been limited to classifying the Ramayana characters as they appear in *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* or studying the puppets in significant detail (Yousof and Khor, 2017). For instance, Amin Sweeny (1972) classified puppets into eight categories, while Ramli and Ibrahim (1996) divided them into 10 categories, and Nasuruddin (2009) did it in only three categories: main characters, traditional characters, and modern characters. However, there is no particular or significant classification that all researchers agree on. While Sweeney's (1972b) preliminary observations provide general terms, there has been no comprehensive attempt to categorize the characters until recently (Sweeney, 1972a). Notably, Yousof divided the characters into six broad categories: gods, supernatural beings, human figures, comic figures, monkeys, and hybrid figures (Yousof & Khor, 2017). Khor, however, classified major puppets into different categories, namely refined princes and princesses, warriors, sages, commoners, clowns, ogres, and demigods (Khor, 2014).

Lastly, according to a general classification, Wayang Kulit comprises a vast array of character types, including hero, heroine, warrior, clown, ogre, and magician. This classification method is relatively easy for he audiences to understand. While watching the drama, the protagonist and heroine can be clearly understood by understanding the plot. Therefore, this is a straightforward classification method that is used in this study.

The last categorization method involves dividing Wayang Kulit characters into four main groups, a method that simplifies the categorization process and makes it easier to compare the characters across the different versions of the Ramayana story. While Ghulam's method provides more scientific details, it may be overly complex for comparative study purposes. Therefore, this study adopts the more straightforward approach of the last categorization method to understand the characters in Wayang Kulit Kelantan better. Hence, the main character in this study is Sri Rama, the hero in the last categorization.

**Classification of the Central Plains Shadow Puppet Figure**

Chinese shadow theatre is a unique style of performance art that incorporates fine carving, painting, music, singing, performance, and literature. Already popular for over a thousand years, Chinese shadow theatre has amused both the young and old, affluent and impoverished, prior to the assault of television and other forms of technological entertainment in the modern day (Chen 2007). The puppet show originated from the Central Plains of China, where it used to be a shadow puppet play with two-dimensional figurines made from dried leather strips and controlled by three iron rods connected to the hands and torso of the puppet ("Puppets to Entertain the Gods. - Free Online Library," n.d.).

This study focuses on the style of the Central Plains shadow puppets in Henan[4], known as Tongbai and Luoshan shadow puppets. The shape of Lingbao shadow puppets belongs to the Shaanxi style, while Tongbai and Luoshan shadow puppets are the legacies of ancient Central Plains shadow puppets (Wei Liqun, 2015). The Classification of the Central Plains Shadow Puppet Figure follows the classification of China's Beijing opera. Beijing Opera originates in China and includes acrobatic combat, dancing, and singing in a highly stylized performance. There are four basic types of character roles: Sheng (生) (male), Dan (旦) (female), Jing (净) (painted face), and Chou (丑) (clown). (Stanelle, 2012; Zhu Fayuan, 2010). In China, the shadow puppet is the cut-out figure made of animal skins or cardboard and operated in shadow puppetry. The shadow figures may appear as characters such as the main male roles (Sheng), female roles (Dan), painted-face male roles (Jing), and male clown roles (Chou) as demanded by the script. The number of shadow figures in a troupe of Shadow Plays may depend on how many scripts it has. Except for those special characters in each play, most shadow figures can be used in various plays (TongYun, 2016).

Sheng (生), Dan (旦), Jing (净), and Chou (丑) represent different characters' styles and are merely words for four distinct types of figures in the drama. "Sheng" represents the positive male role, "dan" represents the positive female role, "jing" represents the supportive male position with a distinctive character, and "chou" represents the clown. Every personality type can be identified by distinguishing its facial makeup and or ornamentation (Zhu Fayuan, 2010).

Dan is a term that refers to various female roles. Historically, Dan referred to an actor portraying a woman. Jing is a term that refers to the roles that are typically played by men and involve the use of painted faces and a loud, booming voice. Sometimes, they are harsh or sneaky in their roles. Chou is a term for clowns, easily recognizable by the white patch they wear on their noses. Their purpose is to keep audiences laughing and improvise quips at the right moments to ease tension in some serious plays.

Focusing on Sheng, Sheng is the leading male actor and is further subdivided into Lao Sheng (老生) (aged and bearded male characters, who are typically positive characters), Xiao Sheng (小生) (young male characters with a very high artificial voice and falsetto singing and recitation), Wu Sheng (武生) (male characters skilled in acrobatic fighting and military action), and Wa wa sheng (娃娃生), who takes on the role of children. Another type of Sheng, known as Hong sheng (红生), has faces painted crimson and is mostly used to play the Guanyu (关羽), a famous military general during China's Three Kingdoms period, and Zhao Kuangyin (赵匡胤), the founder of the Song dynasty.

The stylistic features of various "Sheng" are very similar, except that when expressing different roles, some prominent features of the role are accentuated to distinguish their different types. Hence, in this study, the author chose "Xiaosheng" to represent iconography analysis to conduct an in-depth analysis.

**Character Reflecting Diverse Cultural Narratives**

---

[4] Henan is the main part of the Central Plains of China. Lingbao shadow puppets in western Henan mainly represent Henan shadow puppets, whereas Tongbai and Luoshan shadow puppets are in southern Henan.

The choice to compare the characters Sri Rama from Malaysian Wayang Kulit Kelantan and Sheng from Chinese Central Plains shadow puppetry stems from their significance and representativeness in their respective cultures. Both characters are central figures in their traditional shadow puppetry forms and embody essential cultural, artistic, and moral values.

## The Incarnation of Handsome and Righteous: Sheng and Hero

The previous section's classification of Central Plains shadow puppets and Malay Wayang Kulit sets the stage for a comparative analysis, employing iconology to analyse their similar roles. This approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of their diverse regional cultural backgrounds, examining how these backgrounds influence the formation of shadow puppet figure design, with a focus on their different meanings and cultural connotations.

The story's different character roles are illustrated through visuals, where clean faces are often used to convey a sense of purity and handsomeness. An example of this classical role can be observed in both Wayang Kulit Kelantan and the Central Plains shadow puppetry, as depicted in the figure below:
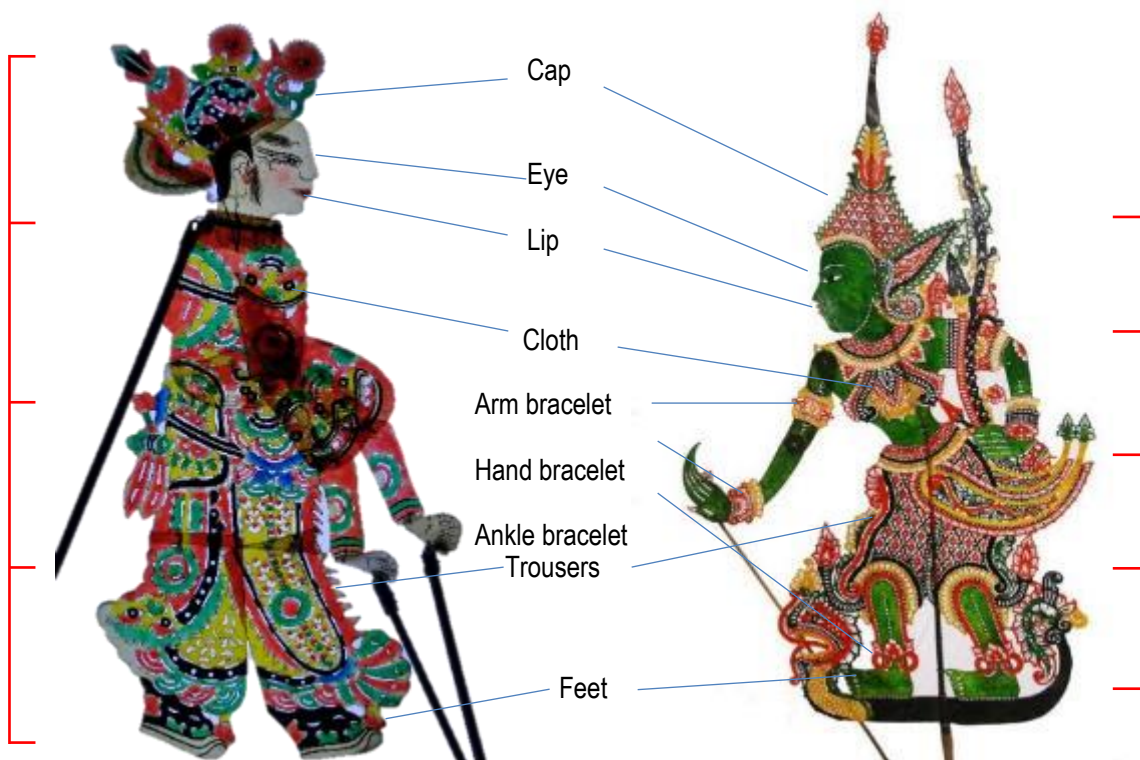


Cap

Eye

Lip

Cloth

Arm bracelet

Hand bracelet

Ankle bracelet
Trousers

Feet

**Fig. 1:** Sheng Xian Xing Guan and Sri Rama

Xian Xing Guan represents the many young Shengs in the Central Plains shadow puppets, often with a clean and handsome appearance, and the other Shengs' roles are also based on their stylized variations. Sri Rama, which is often a central figure in Southeast Asian shadow plays such as Wayang Kulit, is traditionally depicted with attire and accessories with significant cultural and symbolic meanings.

### Analytical basis for comparison

Before analysing this pair of shadow puppets, the near-geographical influence factors of the Wayang Kulit Kelantan, Malaysia, i.e., the Indonesian origin theory has to be ruled out. A number of puppet figures in the Wayang Kulit Kelantan clearly reflect influences of concepts, aesthetics, symbolism, and iconography from India, Thailand, and Indonesia (Java), as well as

indigenous Malay elements from Kelantan (Yousof, 1997b). While puppet designs vary across different countries, some underlying aesthetic principles remain consistent, reflecting each country's national aesthetic. To the trained eye, these similarities become apparent in the design of puppets from the various regions. One particular aspect of the design that holds is the portrayal of refined and rough characters, inspired by the Javanese visual ideals of "halus" (refinement) and "kasar" (roughness) (Osnes, 2010). Although some researchers analyse the Wayang Kulit puppet figures using the Halus-Kasar theory (Yousof and Khor, 2017), it is essential to note the differences between Javanese Wayang Kulit figures and Malaysian Wayang Kulit figures.



**Fig. 2:** Indonesia Shadow puppet. Photograph by the author.

Despite both Indonesia and Malaysia being Muslim, Malaysian Wayang Kulit does not adhere to the same rules as Javanese Wayang Kulit. For example, highly stylized puppets with elongated limbs characterize the Javanese form of Wayang Kulit (Fig. 2). This unique puppet characterization results from Islamic influence. The Javanese believed that the Muslim Sultan of Demak, who deeply loved Wayang Kulit, had ordered the puppets to be cut non-realistically to circumvent the religious prohibition on depicting the human form (Osnes, 1992). Although Malaysia is a Muslim nations like Indonesia, Malaysian shadow puppets follow the design rules of what they see and try to use realistic expression techniques to create shadow puppet characters. Therefore, the visual characteristics of Malaysian shadow puppets are more similar to traditional Chinese shadow puppets, especially Central Plains shadow puppets. Sheng and Sri Rama all reflect the natural, more figuratively realistic human shape.

Malaysian puppets exhibit a slightly rougher appearance compared to their Javanese counterparts, featuring less intricate carving and somewhat simpler designs. However, they possess an undeniable vitality that resonates with the essence of village life (Osnes, 2010). Similarly, Sheng and Sri Rama share a somewhat coarser aesthetic. The figures use facial carving sparingly and instead consist of a single painted skin with black lines delineating the facial features. The intricate carving is predominantly visible on their bodies, highlighting the distinct characteristics of each role. Both heights of Sheng and Sri Rama measure four head lengths in total (Fig. 1).

**Iconology Analysis of Sheng and Seri Rama**

Many shadow puppeteers admit that the puppets they carve and draw are the same as those handed down from the older generation, and most of the puppeteers are only good at copying ancient puppets. This point was confirmed in the interview with Puppeteer C the puppeteer, Chen Yulun (陈雨伦). Only a few clever artists can incorporate the influence of temple art and theatrical costumes based on the traditional genealogy, thus forming a new

genealogy (Wei Liqun, 1998). Most shadow puppeteers repair and copy the puppet when needed; therefore, the Central Plains puppet is an old type that has not changed much.

The Central Plains' shadow puppet design is mainly reflected in the different elements and parts, consisting of overall coordination of the head portraits and well-depicted facial features. The positions of the eyes, nose, and mouth are not disorderly. Different forms of eyebrows, eyes, beards, and crowns are used to show the personality and characteristics of the different characters. As shown in Fig. 3, 'Sheng' is one type of puppet. Depending on the age, 'Sheng' has different features. In this article, the author chose a young character for analysis. It is the basic role of Sheng.



**Fig. 3:** Sheng Xian Xing Guan collected by Digital Museum of Shadow China Academy of Art, Hang Zhou, China

The "Sheng" character in the Central Plains shadow plays an important role, and the basic design of this character is the core of the "Sheng" character, in which other roles such as the "Xiao Sheng" "Lao Sheng" and "Wu Sheng" are distinguished by adding age and skill characteristics to distinguish the different forms. Fig. 3 is a "Xiao Sheng" that is named Xian Xing Guan in specific storytelling. Through iconography, analyses of the shadow character's motifs, patterns, and other elements reveal its cultural symbols and connotations and thus explore the deeper meanings and origins of the shadow play on the visual and cultural levels. Within the realm of the Central Plains shadow puppetry, the figure under examination is significant as a primary representative of shadow puppet characters. Employing the principles of iconology, this figure's intricate details and symbolic elements can be deciphered to uncover deeper meanings and cultural associations.
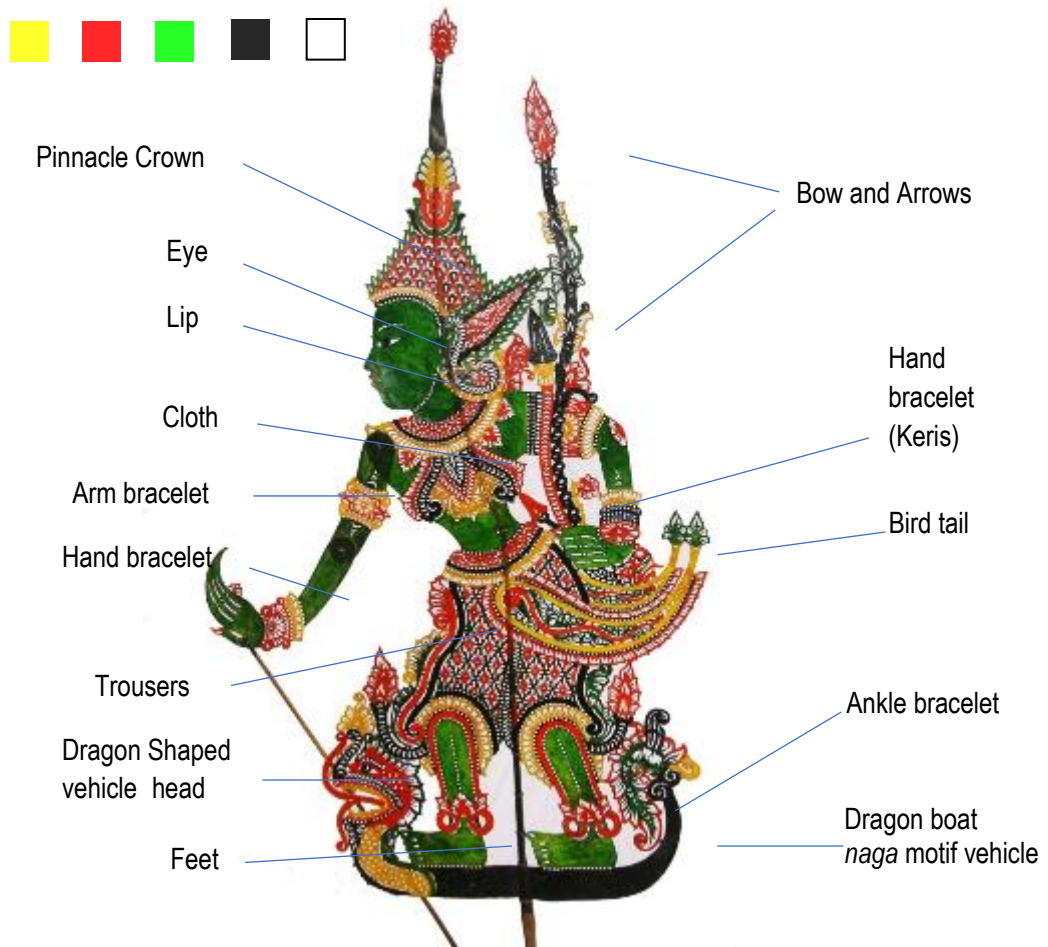
**Fig. 4:** Seri Rama Photograph by Author

Similar to Chinese Central Plains puppetry, Wayang Siam puppeteers often acquired their puppets from artisans who had inherited their skills from their families or learned through observations and imitations.[5] This process allowed for the preservation of the original aesthetic traditions, ensuring that Wayang Kulit's iconographic expression remained largely unchanged. Meanwhile, Wayang Kulit Kelantan puppet sets often comprise a blend of patterns borrowed from various sources, making it challenging to define the precise aesthetic "styles" such as those seen in Java and Bali. Malay Kelantanese artisans had the ability to develop new puppet design methods, leading to the emergence of favoured 'forms' in specific districts (Johnson and Lim, 2022).

Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 demonstrate a similar approach in depicting the face, with minimal carving and emphasis on outlining, both presenting the profile of the characters. Both styles utilize subtle carving techniques to portray facial features. The hats worn by the characters hold symbolic meanings, while the body ornaments showcase a decorative style that reflects the influence of their respective regional cultures. Primary colours that are employed include red, green, yellow, black, and white. Symbolism is evident in the representation of the characters' weapons, with Sheng's sword depicted by a cloud head tattoo behind him and Sri Rama's sword held behind him. Both shadow puppet styles predominantly employ the Yin carving method[6].

---

[5] According to an interview with Puppeteer Eyo Hok Cheng（杨福成）in June 2023 in Wayang Kulit private museum Kelantan, Malaysia.

[6] In ancient Chinese philosophy, Yin and Yang signify the primordial balance between positive and negative in black and white. Positive and negative space vis a vis black and white are also fundamentals in printing.

Iconographic analyses provide insights into the visual characteristics of the figures and their cultural connotations. Both Sheng and Sri Rama puppets feature a single articulated arm jointed at the shoulder, elbow, and wrist, while one hand holds a bow and a hand bracelet (*keris*). The body is always painted green, in accordance with Hindu symbolism, symbolizing Sri Rama's divine origins. Green, a traditional colour associated with Islam, holds significance in the Qur'an, which represents paradise. The holy text states that the people of paradise wear green and sit upon green cushions. Green is also believed to be the favourite colour of the Prophet Muhammad and the colour in which he was buried.

**Equally symbolic hats**

In making shadow puppet characters, hats are one of the features that best express a character's identity. Obvious character traits can be seen in both Sheng's and Sri Rama's puppet figures. The design of the hat highlights their identity and status.
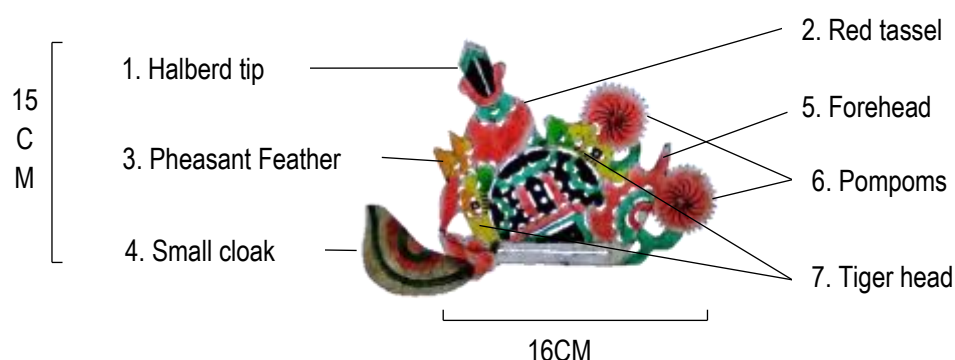


**Fig. 5:** The hat of the figure collected by the Digital Museum of Shadow China Academy of Art, Hang Zhou, China

The particular hat and its decoration play a key role in portraying Sheng's identity, and Chinese shadow puppetry contains a variety of headdress styles to portray different character roles. The headgear worn by Xian Xing Guan is called "Kui" (盔, helmet), a cap typically worn by guards during battle to protect their heads. The variant of "Kui" (helmet) here is known as "Shuai Kui" (帅盔, handsome helmet), which is a bell-shaped hat with rich decoration. The specific helmet is adorned with a halberd tip (part 1 in Fig. 5) and a red tassel (part 2 in Fig. 5) at its apex. The two yellow spikes on the back of the hat are "Chao Tian Chi" (朝天翅, skyward wings) (part 3 in Fig. 5), and there is also a tiny cloak-style neck protector (part 4 in Figure 5) underneath. [7] Positioned atop the hat is a tiger's head (part 7 in Figure 5), symbolizing the character's military power.

Furthermore, a forehead (额子， E zi ) (part 5 in Fig. 5) decorations in front of the helmet, and two pompoms adorn the headgear (part 6 in Fig. 5). The two pompoms represent "hero courage" or "hero gallbladder." The presence of the hat signifies the character's bravery, indicating a younger military general.

The halberd[8] tip and the red tassel at the top of the hat symbolizes a weapon. The halberd was an ancient weapon equipped with a gun tip made of bronze or iron at one end of the long handle, with a crescent-shaped blade beside it. Some figures show the shaped blade, and some show the tassel instead, depending on the puppeteer who carved it and the version

---

Woodblock printing was first invented in China. Yang are delineated only in black linear outline, in contrary, yin are delineated only in white linear outline, means remove the line.

[7] According to an interview with Puppeteer Cai ZhengXian (蔡正祥) in June 2021 in Xin Yang, He Nan, China.

[8] Halberd, an ancient weapon, is equipped with a gun tip made of bronze or iron at one end of the long handle, with a crescent shaped blade beside it.

handed down. The visual appearances of Sheng differ based on the carver's interpretation and the lineage of the puppetry tradition.

The red gradient pompom on the head of Sheng symbolizes the character's courage. According to the Chinese concept, the gallbladder has a judgmental function in the body to resolve and make decisions, and when individuals are upset, it ascends or increases. According to Williams (2012), the gallbladder symbolizes courage and boldness (Williams, 2012). When the puppet figure wears the hat, it becomes a brave character. Therefore, a hat with such elements indicates that the character is a young general in the army.

The tiger head pattern on the hat is another important symbol to depict Sheng's characteristics. In Chinese culture, the "tiger" symbolizes strength and courage. Also, the tiger represents military prowess. In ancient times, the "tiger talisman" was used as part of a system for deploying troops and generals, representing military power; there are also allusions to the "Five Tiger Generals" in the Three Kingdoms period. The tiger symbolizes the power of an army, and ancient Chinese soldiers have sometimes worn imitations of full tiger skins with tails. In like manner, they shouted to attack, hoping their cries would scare off the enemy, such as that of the roar of a tiger (Williams, 2012). Under the influence of the Chinese traditional culture, Sheng is decorated with a tiger.

In comparison with Sheng, the Sri Rama puppet represents a refined prince who is handsome, slim, and tall. Sri Rama also wears a cap. The cap is shaped in a Thai-style pinnacle crown (*kecopong*).



**Fig. 6:** Sri Rama's crown

**Fig. 7:** Rama I's Crown of Victory

It can be observed from Figure 7 that the identity characteristics of Sri Rama are highlighted by the crown ornaments such as the "pre-cursor," which also reflects the influence of the social and cultural environment when the shadow puppet characters were created. The early name of Kelantan shadow puppets was "Wayang Kulit Siam", which means that shadow puppets were widely popular and passed down during the Siamese period in Thailand. In the epic Ramayana, Sri Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, is depicted as an ideal hero and legitimate prince whose journey and trials represent Buddhism's ethical and moral principles. During the popularity of the Indian epic "Ramayana" in Southeast Asia, every adaptation has incorporated local cultural elements while retaining the core story, thus making Rama's crown a cross-cultural symbol of kingship and moral justice. The localization of shadow puppet stories is also one of the manifestations of cross-cultural integration, reflecting the important role of regional culture in the development of art. The visuals, symbolism and design style of Sri Rama's crown reflect a unique blend of local traditional cultural, religious and epic narrative influences.

The shape of the crown worn by Sri Rama is consistent with the Thai pointed crown. It is finely carved on cowhide material. The design of the crown is unique to Thailand. It is a multi-layered conical crown and, finally, a conical spire. The bottom layer of the crown is carved into orderly "buttons" like flower buds, which reflect Buddha's coiled hair that was represented in the early crown design. Unlike the real gold crown, the shadow puppet crown is carved into the shape of flowers common in Malaysian folk patterns, and the colour design consists of natural green leaves, yellow flowers or red flowers. The black flower stems stand tall and upward, and a budding lotus is at the top of the tapered spire. On either side of the ears are wing-like decorations decorated with floral patterns similar to those around the crown.

Siamese Menora influences the Royal Crown or Kecopong Mahkota which is worn by Sri Rama.[9] The accessories were used as part of the clothing to portray Sri Rama's status as a king. Apart from that, the kecopong is the innovation of Sri Rama's first kecopong, which is similar to Destar[10] is a headgear like tengkolokestar. The kecopong worn by Seri Rama is the most beautifully crafted kecopong that has been designed, as compared with other kecopongs in a Wayang Kulit. This reflects on his character as a king who is frequently on the forefront and needs to be presentable and compelling (Jufry and Rahman, 2018).

The design of the entire crown is a symbol of Mount Meru, where the god Indra from Hindu mythology rules. Moreover, the crown's weight represents the burden a king must bear. The colours of the crown are rich, brilliant, and vibrant, and the neatly arranged geometric patterns convey a feeling of strength and unity. The decoration of the crown forms points or layers extending upward, symbolizing ascension, divinity, and the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Overall, looking at the design of the crown of Sri Rama and the hat of Sheng, both of them are trying to restore the identity features of the characters based on realism and try their best to embody the design shape realistically. At the same time, both of them show unique identity features under the influence of their respective regional cultures and do not display exaggerated or abstract artistic expression, embodying a strong influence of the regional cultures on folk art.

**Semblance Facial Design Features**
Looking at the facial representations will reveal that the two shadow puppets use almost the same pattern of depicting the facial features in their representations.

Sheng's face exhibits a simplistic portrayal, with only the outer contours that have been carved and fine ink lines used to depict facial features. Notably, the eyes are rendered with soft, smooth lines, accentuating their narrowness. The character 'Sheng' is consistently depicted in a half-face profile, similar to the figures in Wayang Kulit's performances. The high, elongated forehead aligns almost seamlessly with the bridge of the nose, while the nose itself appears straight and rounded. The eyes are rendered with greater realism, featuring double-lined eyelids that slant upwards at the corners. In a style reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting, the eyebrows are outlined with bold, heroic strokes. Wrinkles are present at the corners of the eyes, and the temple area displays natural, cascading facial hair. The lips are outlined with precise lines depicting the shape, while dashes of red dot the lips. Although the face is presented in profile, the lips are not shown in full sideways view; instead, a central structure of the lips is subtly indicated. This observation reveals the meticulous and straightforward way folk artisans express Sheng's features. This facial representation is a self-contained body section utilized in various characters, acquiring uniqueness only when it is coupled with the appropriate headgear and body attire, for instance, in the case of the character Xian Xing Guan, an officer in the

---

[9] Menora is seen only in Kelantan. This dance drama is believed to have developed in Thailand about 2,000 years ago, was introduced to Kelantan during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a dance drama portraying Buddhist Jaataka stories, is characteristically Thai but has been accultured into the Malaysian milieu. It is performed by an all-male cast that also assumes female roles. Adventures dating from ancient folklore are enacted by slow rhythmic movements of legs, arms and fingers.
[10] Destar is a headgear like tengkolok.

advance guard, who is occasionally referred to as a 'general' during shadow puppetry performances. Due to the flexible nature of folk storytelling, the specific character portrayed may vary at the discretion of the puppeteer.[11]

When the gaze is turned to Sri Rama, it can be noticed that the puppet also has the same side view angle, with the shadow puppet's face having a small nose and mouth and almond-shaped eyes. The face is oval in shape with delicate eyes, mouth, and nose, and it is ideal for the nose and forehead to be in a straight line. The slight brow also indicates it is delicate. Noble characteristic defines the shapes in Sri Rama's figure, such as slit or almond-shaped eyes, bowed head, long pointed nose, no facial hair, tiny finery, and no teeth showing. Sri Rama is always painted in green. The face and the treatment of its features are the character-determinant. Throughout Wayang Kulit Kelantan, there is a basic structural continuity. Here, one cannot escape the impression that the Malay wayang-maker-designer portrays his noble characters facially very much in his physical likeness.

Sri Rama's eyes are often elongated and almond-shaped, representing his wisdom and noble character. The eyes are usually quite expressive and are a focal point in the puppet's face. Also, Sri Rama's facial features are typically delicate and well-proportioned, reflecting his status as a hero and a royal figure. There is often a serene and composed expression on his face, which portrays his virtuous nature. The overall expression of Seri Rama's face is calm, dignified, and composed, befitting his character as a righteous prince and a mighty warrior. Even in the face of adversity, his depiction remains noble and steadfast.

In conclusion, both Sheng and Sri Rama demonstrate a sophisticated yet distinct approach to facial representation that embodies cultural narratives and artistic traditions. Despite their differing cultural contexts, both share a similarity in the use of side profiles and certain facial features, such as narrow, almond-shaped eyes and well-defined facial structures. These depictions are not merely artistic choices but are deeply rooted in the respective cultural identities and storytelling traditions, where every line, contour, and colour have a specific symbolic meaning.

Sheng, with its simplistic yet detailed portrayal, and Sri Rama, with his regal and divine features, both utilize facial expressions as a powerful tool to convey character, emotion, and status. This comparative analysis reveals the depth and diversity of character portrayal in traditional puppetry, highlighting the role of facial features in bringing these iconic characters to life and maintaining a narrative and cultural continuity across performances.

**Realistic and symbolic torso design techniques**

Sheng's torso is entirely obscured by his garments, known as "Kao Zi" (靠子), which are typical of a military commander. The general's armour exhibits a variety of patterns. Notably, a tiger head pattern adorns the front of his chest, which is believed to protect the heart. This same design recurs on the arms and back of the garment. Below the tiger head on the chest, a "Long" (dragon) head appears, followed by scales which are used to decorate the garment, hence the name "Yu Lin Jia" (鱼鳞甲, Fish-scale Armor or Scale Armor). The scales, representing the body of the "Long" (dragon), serve to protect the general's torso. At the back of the character's waist, a cloud-headed sword hilt is decorated with what appears to be a cloud-patterned spike, suggesting that the character possesses a sword, a metaphorical symbol conveying readiness for battle akin to Siri Rama's overt weaponry.

The end of the sword is shaped like clouds, an ancient Chinese pattern known as Ru Yi (Fig. 3). Though the sword itself is not fully depicted, its characteristic decoration symbolizes the weapon's nature, as articulated by the puppet carver. The Scale Armor, adorned with Perlage (a fish-scale pattern), is called "fish scale armour" due to its curved shape resembling fish scales. The development of this armour began in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE) as a result of China's pursuit of more protective power and refinement in casting

---

technology, leading to the creation of each small piece of armour resembling a dragon's scale, a symbol of power (Laufer, 1914).

Given the emphasis on realistic expression in ancient Chinese Central Plains shadow puppets, puppet carvers not only focused on facial portraits but also on the realistic depiction of the characters' clothing and decorations. They aimed to closely replicate real-life objects, creating realistic depictions that also reflected the primitiveness of the Central Plains' shadow puppets.[12]

The Sri Rama puppet features a single articulated arm jointed at the shoulder, elbow, and wrist, while one hand holds a bow and a *keris*. The body is always painted green, in accordance with Hindu symbolism, symbolizing Seri Rama's divine origins. The Seri Rama puppet wears a highly ornate pair of pants with bird's tail or wing designs (*sayap sandang*), but remains shirtless, following classical artistic conventions as seen in most Indian Iconography. Adornments include a Thai-style pinnacle crown (*kecopong*), a chest collar/neckpiece (*la*), a ring (*cincin*), armbands (*dokok*), and hand bracelets (*gelang tangan*). One of Seri Rama's shoulders also features a mystical flower called *bunga captik-capta gelibat jawa*, which acts as an antidote against poison. Seri Rama wields a bow (*batang busar panah*), two arrows (*anak panah*), and a *keris* (*keris rela sakti*) as his weapons. The figure stands atop an elaborate dragon-shaped vehicle (*naga*), a characteristic that has also been observed in other Wayang Kulit Kelantan puppets (Yousof & Khor, 2017)

Sri Rama's posture, with a thrust-forward chest and swivelling upper body between the hip bones, demonstrates his noble and dynamic nature. The fixed left arm holding a weapon shows a flexed pose behind the body. Sri Rama stands on a boat-or-dragon-shaped "vehicle" with a narrow stance, reflecting his regal bearing (Ghani, 2012b). The steps characterize Sri Rama's foot posture, standing upfront and relaxed as if about to step forward. This posture is typical of Wayang Kulit Kelantan's *gambalan*, which is designed to be viewed from the side and carved to reveal a more visible portrayal of Sri Rama, especially when the character is walking. The carving of the puppet aims to make Sri Rama's slow motion appear more realistic, depicting his character as an emperor. His attire is regal and ornate, fitting his royal status. Jewellery and accessories such as armlets, necklaces, and a sash or belt are richly detailed, signifying his royal lineage and divine favour. The motifs on his clothing, including floral designs and dragon or naga figures, are chosen to reflect his character as a righteous and noble hero.

In summary, the character's regalia, a profound blend of historical significance and artistic expression, illustrates a compelling contrast between the protective and symbolic facets of the attire. The "Kao Zi" armour, replete with tiger and dragon motifs, not only serves as protective gear but also embodies the character's martial prowess and mythological significance, symbolizing strength and imperial authority. The intricate fish-scale pattern reflects both a practical pursuit of refined protection in historical armour-making and a deeper, symbolic representation of power through the dragon imagery.

Comparatively, Sri Rama's portrayal in Wayang Kulit Kelantan, with his ornate green body, pinnacle crown, and detailed accessories, represents a convergence of divine symbolism and royal dignity. His costume and posture are a testament to his noble stature, embodying both the protective aspects of warrior attire and the divine attributes of a mythological hero. The bird tail or wing designs, alongside the array of regal adornments, contrast with the martial symbolism of the general's armour, highlighting Sri Rama's dual nature as a divine ruler and a warrior.

Both depictions are steeped in cultural narratives. Through these elaborate costumes and symbolic elements, the figures of Sheng and Sri Rama stand as testaments to traditional storytelling's rich cultural heritage and artistic excellence, each reflecting distinct aspects of authority, divinity, and protection in their respective narratives (Table 3).

---

[12] According to an interview with Puppeteer Chen Yu Lun (陈雨伦) in June 2021 in Xin Yang, He Nan, China.

**Table 3**: Iconological analysis of Sheng and Sri Rama
Source: Author

| Iconological analysis | Presentation of Form of Symbol | Pre-iconographical description | Narrow iconographical analysis | Deeper iconographical interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sri Rama | Hat | A multi-tiered conical diadem, terminating in a tapering spire. | Thai-style pinnacle crown | A noble heir |
| | Weapon | Flower pattern keris | A bow, Two arrows A keris | The power of battle |
| | Vehicle | An elaborate vehicle | A dragon-shape boat | Symbol of noble identity |
| Sheng | Hat | Halberd tip Two pompoms Tiger's head | A tip of a kind of weapon Represents bravery The king of animal | Symbol of a general Symbol of Courage Military power |
| | weapon | The cloud tattoo (RUYI) | A sword | The power of battle |
| | Scale Armor | Dragon/Fish-scale | The general's robe | Symbol of power |

## Discussion

This segment analyses the symbolic and aesthetic significance of the Sheng character portrayals of Xian Xing Guan in China Central Plains shadow puppetry and Sri Rama in Malaysian Wayang Kulit. This work presents a comparative examination of the cultural and artistic subtleties that delineate these characters, emphasizing their costume design, physical characteristics, and the cultural milieus that influence their personas. This investigation aims to clarify the unique artistic methodologies and cultural principles intrinsic to these conventional shadow puppetry styles.

### Xian Xing Guan in Central Plains Shadow Puppetry

Xian Xing Guan is a unique character in Central Plains shadow puppetry and a representative figure of "Sheng". When depicting young martial students and generals, its character possesses thick eyebrows and big, sharp eyes, and is mostly beardless. On the other hand, when depicting civil servants the characters' eyebrows are slender and soft. The eyes reveal wisdom and maturity. In addition to wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, the beards are naturally drooping and slender, reflecting the literati's elegance. The overall height of the figure is about 50 cm, and the size of the head with decoration is about 8 to 15 cm, forming a harmonious ratio of one to four or one to five. Although this is different from the perfect ratio of seven standing, five squatting, and three and a half in traditional Western and Chinese paintings, it meets the aesthetic requirements of folk art: the objective needs of shadow puppet artists to manipulate shadow puppet performance, and makes the overall dynamic of shadow puppet performance more compact, more rhythmic, and more closely combined with the artists' lyrics.

To create more characters in the plays, the unique feature of Sheng is that it separates the head and body of the character role. Similar characters use the same face but different hats and bodies. For example, the military general's robe and the official's uniform require different types of clothing. The classification of roles is based on the head. Different head styles distinguish roles and ages, forming unique characters. However, when Malay shadow puppets perform their roles, each character is unique, which is the main difference regarding figure design because they originate from different cultures.

### Sri Rama in Malaysia Wayang Kulit

Seri Rama in Wayang Kulit represents a similar character type as the "Sheng" in Chinese shadow puppetry—a handsome and righteous figure in performances. Sri Rama's appearance varies across the different versions of the Indian epic, Ramayana. He is depicted as a divine or semi-divine hero in Hindu mythology, while in folk and regional adaptations of the story, he may possess human attributes or have his divinity diminished. In Valmiki's Ramayana, he is portrayed as a heroic human character, an embodiment of the "ideal" prince and later the king of the "ideal kingdom of Ayodhya". Seri Rama is also depicted as a "perfect husband" to Siti Dewi, the story's heroine (Yousof, 1994).

The face of Seri Rama adheres to the ideal beauty standards of Malay culture (Ghani, 2012a). As noted by Irving, Wayang Kulit Kelantan had likely evolved into two distinct iconographic forms by the mid-1930s. Puppet makers from Kota Bharu and the adjacent villages, many of whom were puppeteers themselves, were heavily influenced by the rural style of puppet construction. Artists from the Tumpat district across the Kelantan River from Kota Bharu developed a slightly different aesthetic perspective (Johnson and Lim, 2022).

In contrast, the refined characters always exude composure. Even though Rama possesses a dual nature as a noble heir to the throne and a mighty warrior, he is almost always portrayed in a composed, noble state. His square and strong shoulders appear gentle and dignified rather than aggressive, often slightly bent forward at the waist to convey concern or interest. He stands tall, befitting his role as a respected leader. His head is slightly lowered to reflect humility and spiritual purity. The refined male character exhibits features that may appear feminine to the Western eye, with small and delicate facial features, perfectly curved lips, and beautiful, wise-looking eyes. This tendency reflects the Southeast Asian cultural ideal of male beauty, which emphasizes understated refinement compared to the rugged ideals often favoured in the West (Osnes, 2010).

The feminine attributes of Sri Rama strongly resonate with Malay culture. As a highly civilized community, the Malays hold a deep respect for females. The shape of Rama's hand reveals sharp fingertips that curve outward, resembling the hand gestures seen in Mak Yung, which are traditional Malaysian dance performances. The hand shape indicates Sri Rama's feminine character. According to the analysis by Jufry and Rahman, Sri Rama's identity and characteristics are formed through a process influenced by the surrounding communities. These characteristics are perceivable to other individuals through various aspects, including the movements during performances. Among the feminine attributes identified in Sri Rama's movements are affection, childlikeness, femininity, and gentleness. Conversely, in China, where introversion holds importance, the form of the orchid finger is often used in theatrical performances. Similarly, the hand gestures in Malaysian shadow puppetry are influenced by Mak Yung, featuring palm-facing-outward and raised fingertips—a characteristic gesture that is frequently observed in the depiction of Rama (Jufry and Rahman, 2019).

Johnson and Lim have pressed the same opinion: a significant iconographic transformation observed in Wayang Kulit Kelantan figures emerged in the early twentieth century, possibly coinciding with the court's focus on the arts during the 1930s. This transformation involved the construction of refined male figures. These royal characters, including Sri Rama's brother Laksamana and their father Sirat Maharaja, are often depicted similarly. From the mid to late 1930s, images of Sri Rama, Laksamana, and Sirat Mahraja frequently feature curved 'wings' (*sayap sandang*) that are attached at or just below the figure's waist (see Fig. 4 the part of bird tails) (Johnson and Lim, 2022).

## Conclusion

It concludes that similarities between Sheng and Sri Rama include: half-face profiles, and not frontal perspectives as with Indian shadow puppets; hats that determine their identities (whether divine, royal, military, or civil servant); share the same engraving techniques (both use Yin carving method); sparingly use facial carving; possess single painted skins with black lines delineating facial features; use the same five colour system with red, green, yellow, black, and white; and have narrow, almond-shaped eyes and well-defined facial structures. Their differences include: Sri Rama may be portrayed as a divine ruler, prince, semi-divine hero,

warrior, or a perfect husband, whereas Sheng is either a military general or civil servant; Sri Rama wears a pinnacle crown, more than twice the height of his head, tipped with a flower, whereas Sheng wears a short broad hat adorned with cloak, pompoms, pheasant feather, and halberd tip; unlike Sheng, Sri Rama does not contain any blue colour and is always painted in green in accordance with Hindu symbolism for divine origins and because green is a traditional colour associated with Islam and The Qur'an. Analyses reveal that Sri Rama's modelling is closer to Chinese shadow puppet design than other Asian shadow puppets, namely those from India, Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

Interviews with native artists of shadow puppetry in China and Malaysia that provided the most authentic of answers, combined with the amount of literature reviewed and the chosen methodologies, produced as complete information and analyses possible within the constraints of pandemic research conditions and travel restrictions. Accordingly, the limitations of this study include the fact that as part of a cultural heritage, much of the practitioners' knowledge of the folk art of shadow puppetry and puppets have been obtained by word-of-mouth oral tradition, hence, responses are based on the puppeteers' experiences and recollections. Also, due to the scarcity of master shadow puppeteers in China and Malaysia, it was not possible to canvas a larger sample group to gain a broad consensus of opinions.

## Foundation

## References

Ali, K. K. (2022) A Discourse on the Malay Cultural Identity within the Malaysian Society *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 40(1), pp. 1-17.

Baca, M. (2002) Introduction to Art Image Access: Issues, Tools, Standards, and Strategies. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

Baocheng, K. (2011) Research on the Origin and Regional Culture of Chinese Shadow Play. Zhengzhou: DaXiang Press.

Bonds, A. B. (2019) Beijing Opera Costumes: The Visual Communication of Character and Culture. New York: Routledge.

Chen, F. P. L. (2007) Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion, and Women Warriors. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.

Dong Meikan, 董每戡. (1999) Discussion of "Shadow Play" 说 "影戏". Guangzhou: Guangdong Higher Education Press.

Fiona E Chiong, Wong. (2019) "Seri Rama and Maharaja Wana in Wayang Kulit Kelantan: Visual Analysis of Their Puppets." e-Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Linguistics, Literature and Culture (ICLLIC 2019), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

Fiona E Chiong Wong & G.-S. Yousof. (2019) "A Visual Analysis of the Hanuman Kera Putih Puppet in Wayang Kulit Kelantan" *Malaysian Journal of Performing and Visual Arts*, 5, pp. 29-43.

Ghani, D. A. (2012a) "Dissemination of "Seri Rama" Shadow Play Puppet as a Cultural Heritage through Capcom's Street Fighter IV" *6th International Conference on Ubiquitous Information Management and Communication, ICUIMC'12*, Kuala Lumpur.

Ghani, D. A. (2011) "A Study of Visualization Elements of Shadow Play Technique Movement and Computer Graphic Imagery (CGI) in Wayang Kulit Kelantan" *International Journal of Computer Graphics & Animation (IJCGA)*, 1(1), pp. 11.

Ghani, D. A. (2012b) "The Study of Semiotics Wayang Kulit Theatre in Malay Culture Society" *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 18.

Ghani, D. A. (2015) "The Art of Shadow Play: Key Frame Animation for Wayang Kulit Kelantan" University of Malaya (Malaysia).

Ghani, D. A. (2016a) "The Art of Noise: Understanding Digital Sound Effects in Wayang Kulit (Shadow Puppets)" *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 47, pp. 137-149.

Ghani, D. A. (2016b) "P. Ramlee's Laksamana Do Re Mi: The Study of Comic Visual Art Expression" *2016 International Conference on Information and Communication Technology (ICICTM)*.

Ghani, D. A. (2018) "Digital Puppetry: Comparative Visual Studies between Javanese & Malaysian Art" *International Journal of Applied Engineering Research*, 13(6), pp. 3579-3589.

Ghani, D. A. (2012c) "Wayang Kulit Kelantan: The Challenges between Traditional and Digital Media in Puppetry Theatre" *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, 24(1), pp. 135-146.

Gu Jiegang, 顾颉刚. (1983) "A Brief History of Chinese Shadow Puppetry and Its Current Situation 中国影戏略史及其现状" *Literature and History*, 19, pp. 109-136.

Jiang YuXiang, 江玉祥. (1997) "On the Modeling Characteristics of Shadow Puppets 略谈皮影的造型特征" *Journal of Literature and History*, (02), pp. 62-64.

Johnson, I. C. & D. Lim. (2022) "Curating Shadows: Malayan Shadow Puppets in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum" *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 95(1), pp. 51-88.

Jufry, F. D. & M. K. A. Rahman. (2019) "Feminine Movements of Seri Rama in Wayang Kulit Kelantan" *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(2), pp. 1-10.

Jufry, F. D. M. & M. K. A. Rahman. (2018) "Archetypal Characters in Wayang Kulit Kelantan" *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(5), pp. 87-101.

Kan, W. (2009) The Aesthetic Study of The Clown Sculpt Design for Shadow Play, XiAn Art College.

Khor, K. K. (2014) "Digital Puppetry of Wayang Kulit Kelantan: A Study of Its Visual Aesthetics" *Pusat Kebudayaan, Universiti Malaya*.

Kia, K. K. & Y. M. Chan. (2009) "A Study on the Visual Styles of Wayang Kulit Kelantan and Its Capturing Methods" *2009 Sixth International Conference on Computer Graphics, Imaging and Visualization*.

Laufer, B. (1914) Chinese Clay Figures: Part I: Prolegomena on the History of Defensive Armor.

Laufer, B. (1923) Oriental Theatricals: Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

LeMieux, P. S. P. B. J. & R. Tekippe. (2021) Symbolism and Iconography.

Lopezy, A. (2004) Wayang Kulit. In Ooi K. G. Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East, California: ABC-CLIO, pp. 1419-1420.

Mahmoud, D. (2017) "Pak Dogol and Wak Long in Wayang Kulit Kelantan" University of Malaya.

Maria Cristina Carile, I. Cornelius & E. Nagelsmit. (2016) *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. Edited by Ho Tsun Shen – Insult.

Munsterberg, M. (2013) "Iconographic Analysis" *Saylor Foundation*.

Nechvatal, J. (2015) *The Magic of Light and Shadow in Asian Puppet Theater*. Hyperallergic.

Osnes, B. (2010) The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Malaysia: A Study of Wayang Kulit with Performance Scripts and Puppet Designs. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland.

Osnes, M. B. (1992) "A Survey of Shadow Play in the Malaysian Traditional Shadow Puppet Theatre" Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Theatre and Dance, University of Colorado.

Panofsky, E. (1939) Studies in Iconology—Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. London: Oxford University Press.

Pramudita, P., S. Sarwanto, S. Soetarno & D. Pratama. (2019) "Jagad Ageng and Jagad Alit in Traditional Kayons" *Dewa Ruci: Jurnal Pengkajian dan Penciptaan Seni*, 14(2), pp. 13-26.

Rui, T. (2018) The Heritage of Wang Piying Troupe: Shadow Puppetry in North Sichuan *Asian Theatre Journal*, 35(1), pp. 53-69.

Sarwar, G., G.-S. Yousof & Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. (1994) Dictionary of Traditional South-East Asian Theatre. Oxford University Press.

Stanelle, R. (2012) *China: In My Eyes*. AuthorHouse.

Sun Kaidi, 孫楷第. (1953) *Puppet* Theater Take an Exam 傀儡戲攷原 傀儡戏考源. Shanghai: Shang Za Publisher.

Sweeney, A. (1972a) Malay Shadow Puppets: The Wayang Siam of Kelantan. Trustees of the British Museum.

Sweeney, A. (1972b) The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow-Play. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Tannenbaum, K. L. (2018) "Carving Out a New Future: Wayang Kulit Craftsmanship in Central Java, Indonesia"

TongYun. (2016) Shadow Play. Hefei, Anhui: HuangShanShuShe.

Vandergeest, P. & P. Chalermpow-Koanantakool. (1993) "The Southern Thai Shadowplay Tradition in Historical Context" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24(2), pp. 307-329.

Wei Liqun, 魏力群. (1995) "Research on the Origin of Chinese Shadow Puppetry 中国影戏源流考" *Journal of Hebei Teachers College*, 1(1), pp. 57-62.

Wei Liqun, 魏力群. (1998) "Research on the Modeling of Chinese Folk Shadow Play 中国民间皮影造型考略" *Journal of Hebei Normal University (Social Science)*, 21(3), pp. 117-122.

Wei Liqun, 魏力群. (2015) *Complete Collection of Chinese Shadow Puppetry: Modeling*. Cultural Relics Publishing House.

Williams, C. A. S. (2012) *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs Fourth Revised Edition: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*. Tuttle Publishing.

Xiaochun, C. & M. H. Shanat. (2021) "A Study on the Visual Elements of Shadow Puppets in Southwest China" *NVEO-NATURAL VOLATILES & ESSENTIAL OILS Journal/ NVEO*, 8(4), pp. 10300-10318.

Yingying, S. 苏莹莹, S. (2015) "The Spread and Inheritance of Chinese Culture in Malaysia 中国文化在马来西亚的传播与传承" *Social Sciences in Chinese Universities*, 6, pp. 96-102.

Yousof, G. S. & K. K. Khor. (2017) "Wayang Kulit Kelantan: A Study of Characterization and Puppets" *Asian Theatre Journal*, 34(1), pp. 1-25.

Yousof, G. S. (2004a) Panggung Inu: Essays on Traditional Malay Theatre. UniPress, Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore.

Yousof, G. S. (1997a) The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction. Penang, Malaysia: The Asian Centre.

Yousof, G. S. (1997b) The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction: Asian Centre with the co-operation of the National Academy of Arts, Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Malaysia. Original edition, the University of Michigan.

Yousof, G. S. (2004b) Panggung inu: Essays on traditional Malay theatre. Singapore: UniPress, Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore.

Yousof, G. S. (2006) "The Shadow Plays of Southeast Asia: Relationships between the Various Forms" *SPAFA Journal*, 16(2), pp. 5-16.

Yuezhong, L. (2010) Chinese Shadow Play and Folklore. Zhengzhou: Elephant Publisher.

YuXiang, J. (2015) Chinese Shadow Play and Folklore (Revised Edition) 中国影戏与民俗(修订版). Sichuan: Sichuan People Publisher.

Zahari, R., S. H. M. Yusof, S. M. Said & S. Ishak. (2013) Shadow Play. Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia.

Zhu Fayuan, W. Qixing & X. Hanning. (2010) Fundamentals of Chinese Culture. Nanchang, Jiangxi: Jiangxi People's Publishing House.