

# *Study on the artistic characteristics and cultural inheritance of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show of You County*

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**Abstract:** The leather-silhouette show, also known as "shadow play," is a folk art that uses lighting to create a silhouette of characters made of cowhide or cardboard to tell a story. Its content is fairly complete, but its plot is convoluted. During the performance, the actors are hidden behind a curtain, operate the opera characters with both hands, sing popular tones while telling stories, and combine percussion and strings. You County, located in Hunan's east, is a little-known county town with a long history and rich cultural heritage. It is not only an ancient city that has passed down civilization, but it is also the birthplace of Hunan culture. This paper will start from reality by visiting Jiashan, experiencing the shock of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show, and analysing it based on its background, characteristics, current situation, and other factors.

## **1. Introduction**

Leather-silhouette, also known as "Lantern Opera" or "Shadow Opera Man", is an ancient and unique folk opera art widely spread in China [1]. The content and complete artistic effect of the opera are shown by lighting, screen (commonly known as "Liangzi"), single sound, singing and the performance of shadow people manipulated by actors [2]. The leather-silhouette show has a long history in China. There are different views on its origin, such as Western Han Dynasty, Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty. Due to the lack of literature and related objects, there is still no conclusion. Due to the regional differences and the different development of regional culture, the leather-silhouette show is pregnant with rich contents and forms, showing various styles and schools. Up to now, some small villages in Mei County, Hunan Province still retain the leather-silhouette show handed down from ancestors, which is performed at festivals, weddings and funerals, housewarming, etc. Among them, leather-silhouette show in Jiashan is the most famous.

## **2. The historical origin of the shadow puppet show in You County**

You County, which is located in the eastern portion of Hunan Province and has a long history and rich cultural heritage, is the ancient capital of inherited civilization and one of the cradles of Hunan culture. Due to its special and unique geographical topography, it is typically less affected by external

factors, so its folklore has been preserved [3]. Due to the diversity and popularity of these beliefs, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Catholicism, etc., the development of the leather-silhouette show plays a significant role in promoting the development of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show. People typically invite folk artists to perform on festive days or at funerals; through their skilled and adaptable techniques, they reveal their distinctive personalities. Consequently, it demonstrates the peasants' appreciation for art and expresses the people's beautiful yearning and desire for life. After nearly a century of transmission, the Jiashan leather-silhouette show has adapted to the local culture, forming a distinctive and original artistic style.

The transmission of Yoxian shadow puppets is not possible through one-on-one instruction or training courses, but rather in the traditional manner, typically through the parents or the master to the next generation. On the one hand, this method of transmission can ensure the quality of shadow puppetry and the preservation of its essence, as well as, to some extent, preserve the shadow puppetry's original flavour. On the other hand, it is unable to make the necessary adjustments to meet the needs of the market's development, has lost its vitality, and is at risk of extinction under the influence of the economic market.

### **3. The process and artistic characteristics of Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

#### **3.1 The process of Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

According to China's geographical location, the Jiashan leather-silhouette show belongs to the southern leather-silhouette show, and the characters have both elegance and flexibility in their coarse body shapes. Easily accessible and inexpensive paper and animal skins are the primary materials used to create shadow puppets. Typically, the process involves soaking, thinning, and smoothing animal skins, followed by cutting, dyeing, and stitching [4].

The image is primarily composed of two components: the head and the body. The head stubble refers to the head shape of the shadow puppet, including the face and hat ornaments, which are matched to the various opera roles of Sheng, Dan, Jing, and Jiao. Positive role, painted as a ring hook eyebrows, bright colours, showing the atmosphere, the timeless beauty; the opposite character, the eyebrows will be exaggerated, heavy colours, although the change between when very subtle, but the character of the character temperament in a thought, fierce role, face add a few facial lines as if to add the finishing touches, the character's personality traits are exquisitely expressed [5].

The hats are categorised as hats, helmets, etc. The hats are a small but essential component of the leather-silhouette show and one of the shadow puppet's most important decorations. The colouring of the body employs high-purity, high-brightness colour cloth, primarily in red, yellow, green, black, and white; the colour is thick and subdued, beautiful but not garish; and the light projection performance has a powerful visual impact. For example, black and dark colours are used to represent Lao Sheng and Lao Dan, while red, green, and white are used to represent Hua Dan, and bright yellow is used to represent the Emperor.

The majority of the materials used for the Jiashan leather-silhouette show are made of thick incense paper or cardboard, while only a few are made of thin, hard cowhide, reducing the cost relative to other materials. Typically, it takes about a week to complete a shadow puppet. As a result of the material's convenience, the artists' production time arrangement is highly arbitrary; shadow people made of cowhide or donkey skin have a relatively short preservation time.

## **3.2 The artistic characteristics of Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

### **3.2.1 The performance place and inheritance mode of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

The stage is usually made up of four square tables, first set up a rectangular bracket on the table, the white curtain support, the stage placed a bench for the three percussionists to sit, so that the composition of a three-sided surrounded by the performance space, a simple leather-silhouette show stage is complete [6]. The stage is finished.

There is no class teaching form in the transmission of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show, and the art of transmission is mostly inherited by blood, teachers, and apprentices. To some extent, this limits the horizontal development of the leather-silhouette show, and it has also resulted in a sharp decline in the number of actors who are at risk of losing their jobs.

### **3.2.2 The composition of the artist of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

As with ancient folk opera, the requirements for professional shadow puppets are extensive and stringent. Because each actor is likely to play a number of different roles in a performance, artists must be responsive and flexible hands in a leather-silhouette show. A shadow puppeteer with five bamboo sticks to manipulate, one person to manipulate the shadow and the main singer, the core of the play, the artists have flexible fingers and occasionally help to blow and pull other instruments. The main shadow manipulator fingers have a video manipulation rod, and the artists use their mouths to say, read, and sing in addition to their hands. The feet must also stop the gong and drum. According to the various scenes, the artists must also collaborate with various movements [7]. For example, in a martial arts drama, the feet step on the gongs and drums during the fight scene. To meet the needs of the situation, the crisp sound of gongs and drums is accompanied. At the show's climax, the entire body moves, hands and feet dance, the actors enter a state of complete forgetfulness, and the audience cheers and sometimes sighs in response to the plot's ups and downs. Each artist has a clear division of labour in the performance, will be their own and shadow people into one, with the tacit understanding, to the greatest extent into it, the unity of human drama.

### **3.2.3 Soundtrack and selection of materials the Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

The music of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show is primarily traditional flower drum opera from Changsha, Hunan Province, with a small amount of Hunan opera thrown in for good measure. Each artist must have solid singing and music literacy skills, as most shadow puppet plays are composed of male actors, who sometimes need to sing the role of Dan, so good singing and music literacy skills are an important foundation for each shadow puppet artist to play a good shadow puppet. The majority of shadow puppet theatre plays are oral, with dialogues mostly in the local dialect, sometimes mixed with dialects from other parts of Hunan. String instruments, wind instruments, and percussion instruments are commonly used in music [8].

The Jiashan leather-silhouette show's shadow puppet theatre uses the opera script, primarily with ancient Chinese mythology and history as the subject, and is divided into two types: "dynasty script" and "oral script." The story of the dynasty play inspired the title of the dynasty book. For example, the Zhou Dynasty's "The Romance of Gods," etc. The oral script is a story told by the master to the apprentice, or the dialogue and lyrics of the main characters, and it can be freely adapted by the artist according to his own ideas, but it cannot be divorced from the fundamental facts, and some of his own elements are added to the performance based on the fundamental facts. "Four Seasons of Fortune" and "The Woman with the Horse" are two examples.

## **4. The current situation of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

### **4.1 The influence of external factors on the leather-silhouette show**

We can elaborate on the current situation of the Jiashan leather-silhouette show by looking at the following two factors. First, we can look at external factors. The leather-silhouette show has always been a continuation of traditional development, which is good, but it lacks the modernity and innovation of contemporary society, and the value of commodities is low as the social economy develops. Folk art, such as the Jiashan leather-silhouette show, has often been unable to meet the needs and enthusiasm of contemporary people, which is one of the major reasons why shadow puppet shows have drifted away from human life. The twenty-first century is the age of information technology, and people can already enjoy various forms of art and culture via various modes of communication and media, which is convenient and diverse, and is a popular paradigm among the general public. And this mode of communication has infiltrated people's lives [9].

### **4.2 Influence of external factors on leather-silhouette show**

Second, we can examine the shortcomings of shadow puppet theatre as a whole. The Jiashan leather-silhouette show, the Jiashan leather-silhouette show, lost its original authenticity, which was the leather-silhouette show's biggest test. Many traditional cultures, such as the leather-silhouette show and other cultural products of artistic expression, are being commercialised as a result of the market economy. The influence of consumer consciousness, behaviour, and thought on the one hand, and market economy control on the other, has directly led to the distortion of some traditional cultures to meet market needs, as well as the distortion of the culture itself. The original national style has been changed in the packaging, and the essence of it has been lost. From the outside, it appears to be the second creation or innovation of the leather-silhouette show, but in reality, it not only destroys the reputation and value of the local traditional culture, but more importantly, it loses the "true" and eventually leads to the loss of traditional culture, stifles its development, and forces it into a retreating dilemma.

## **5. Effective measures for the inheritance and development of Jiashan leather-silhouette show**

### **5.1 Start from the external environment**

Inheritance of excellent traditional culture is the lifeblood of Chinese culture; therefore, especially in the current situation, we must urgently seek effective measures to protect and inherit traditional culture. We can protect it by taking the following steps.

To begin with, we can promote traditional culture in a big way, especially in rural areas, by establishing a local cultural group with the government's strong support, specifically to solve the problem of preserving traditional culture that will be lost. We can also host cultural ancestral halls and further develop the old ancestral halls as a performance venue, allowing people to effectively use the ancestral halls and feel the instillation of traditional culture, as well as invite some skilled old generation artists to teach their skills and enliven people's lives. On the one hand, it is a strong guarantee for the preservation and transmission of traditional culture; on the other hand, it can gradually expand the influence of traditional culture so that more people know and learn about it, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Second, with today's rapid advancement of high technology, we can use multimedia technology to protect shadow puppets, then digitise them and finally realise network management. This method of protection has its own advantages: first, it is simple to use and efficient; second, it can realise resource

sharing and expand the influence of shadow puppets; and finally, it is stable and will not be affected by any external factors. Finally, it is stable and will not change due to outside influences.

## 5.2 Starting from internal factors

One of the many folk arts is the You County leather-silhouette show, which has gone through three stages of development, prosperity, and decline. Shadow puppet theatre is faced with the dilemma of changing its own limitations and injecting new blood to make it more contemporary and innovative in today's society.

To begin with, an examination of the shadow puppet production process reveals that each vivid shadow puppet is a synthesis of the exquisite production techniques of the older generation of artists, and many artists are overwhelmed by the elaborate and ingenious colour modelling of the shadow. However, this has become a significant barrier to the transmission of shadow puppets, as the production of a shadow puppet involves more than ten processes, including material selection, cutting, carving, colouring, and dyeing [10]. A finely crafted shadow puppet takes at least a month to create. The intricate process not only necessitates the artists' skill and attention to detail, but it is also a great test of patience. Because shadow puppets require a high level of humidity and temperature, keeping them intact is a major challenge. Shadow puppets can be improved and made faster.

Second, shadow puppets have high requirements for actors, who must not only operate the shadow puppets but also provide narration and have a keen sense of music to perform with the accompaniment. In addition to excellent skills and diligent training, a large amount of performance experience is required, so in the direction of training actors, we must work hard, abandon the previous bloodline inheritance and teacher-apprentice inheritance, and teach them the art of the class. We should invite the older generation of artists to come out and teach them by hand, as well as train more professional shadow actors by opening training courses, as this is unquestionably necessary for the inheritance and development of shadow puppet.

Leather-silhouette show performance is the embodiment of the people's aspirations for life, is the people's heart for the beautiful vision of life and aspirations, but also art from the embodiment of life, as China's traditional folk culture and art treasures, has a deep cultural connotation and artistic value. Jiashan leather-silhouette show was chosen as the first batch of provincial "intangible cultural heritage" in Hunan Province in 2006. However, due to the impact of today's market economy, it is now in danger of being lost, necessitating the collaborative efforts of the local government, heritage groups, youth and folk art enthusiasts, so that the art that the people truly love can be passed down and developed from generation to generation.

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