

ASIAN SHADOW THEATRE



By

Jo Humphrey

© GOLD MOUNTAIN INSTITUTE
for Traditional Shadow Theatre
33-47 91st Street
Jackson Heights, NY 11372

ASIAN SHADOW THEATRE uses two-dimensional figures, made of animal hide that are animated behind a back-lit screen. Music is an integral part of shadow theatre performances. It is an Asian contribution to the performing arts.

Its origin is unknown but the oldest written references occur in both China and India. From these countries it spread to Indonesia and Indo-China and to the Mediterranean region. Shadow dramas are based on classical literature and folk lore. Unique styles of figures and performing techniques developed in each country.

CHINA

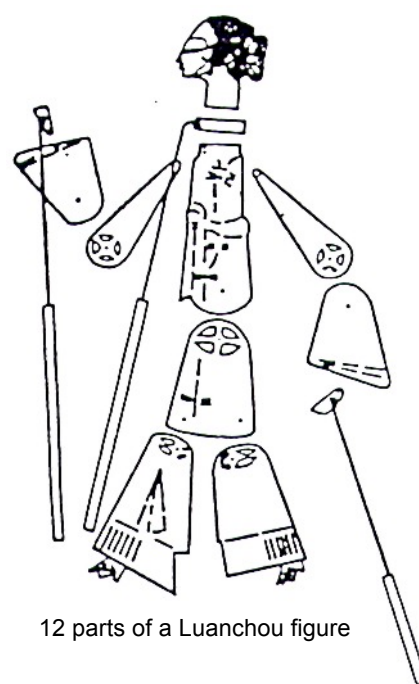
The legendary beginning of shadow theatre in China is credited to a 2nd Century BC Han Dynasty writing. As ruling dynasties moved their capitals from Xian, to Nanjing and finally to Beijing, three basic traditions appeared - -The *yueh ting* in North Central China, the Chaochou in the south and the Luanchou in the Northeast Generally, Chinese figures are the most articulated shadow figures with 12 or more separate parts.

Based on the art of paper culling the figures are intricately carved of animal hide - - cow, donkey, sheep, water buffalo, etc. - - and colored with translucent dyes.

The shadow screen is made of cotton, silk or mulberry paper that is stretched over a frame. Near the bottom of the screen is a narrow ledge to help control the legs of the characters and to allow figures and scenery to rest on the screen. The screen slopes toward the audience and is set on a small table. Around the screen, colorful embroidered drapes form the proscenium.

The stories fall into three categories, folk tales, religious epics and historic sagas. There are "short plays" which are performed within a couple of hours, and "serial plays" that is performed over several days or longer.

Touring shadow troupes performed in market places, temple courtyards and private homes. In large cities theatres were built for permanent companies.



12 parts of a Luanchou figure



Left: a Chaochou official
now found only in Taiwan

Right: a *yueh ting* Dragon
King from Sichuan



INDIA



Ravana-Chhaya (shadow of Ravana)
Sita, Orissa, solid black, 12-18" high

Some early references date Indian shadow theatre to the 2nd Century BC through the writing of Patanjali.

Today there are four areas of India where shadow theatre still exists: in the eastern state of Orissa, and in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala.

Some of the figures are 2/3 life size. Each region developed its own size and designs. Figures are constructed of animal hide - - buffalo, goat and deer. Deer hide is used only for imperial or spiritual characters. The hide is perforated to emphasize details of the costumes and physical features. Generally, the colors used are red, black and blue. In Kerala and Orissa the figures are black silhouettes.

Some figures are made in many parts so that arms and legs move freely. Other figures have only one articulated arm. Bamboo control rods are attached to the hands. The central control rod runs through the center of the figure to be held flat against the screen.

The cotton screen is between 10 and 12 feet long by 4 or 6 feet wide. It is attached to a box-like structure to conceal the animators and musicians. It is lit traditionally with either torches or oil lamps. Gods and royal figures are on the right, evil characters on the left. Shadow plays are primarily from the Ramayana and Mahabata interspersed with local events.



Tholu Bomalatta (1)
Sita, Andhra Pradesh
4 to 6 feet high



Tholu Gombe-atta (1)
Sita, Karnataka
2 to 3 feet high



Tholpava-koothu (1)
Sita, Kerala, opaque colors
2 to 3 feet high

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Travelers from both China and India brought shadow theatre to other countries. The Indian epics are performed in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia. Shadow figures are made of water buffalo vary in size from 15 to 50 inches high. Most have one or two articulated arms. Central rods generally through the middle of each figure.

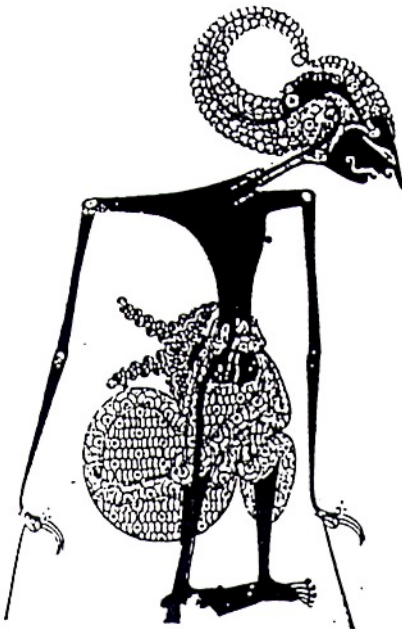
In Indonesia figures are painted with opaque paints. They appear black and white through the screen. A gamelan orchestra and singer sit behind the *dalang* (shadow master) who animates all the figures. In Java figures are very stylized with elongated arms and necks. In Bali they are more life-like.

In northern Thailand and Cambodia *nang yi* are huge partly colored panels held by dancers and performed on both sides of the screen. A story teller and orchestra are to one side in front. The southern *nang talung* are smaller figures, colored, translucent and have and one articulated arm.

Malaysian figures are similar to the Indonesian but are a little more translucent



Nang yi Garuda (Krut) from North Thailand and Cambodia



Arjuna, Java

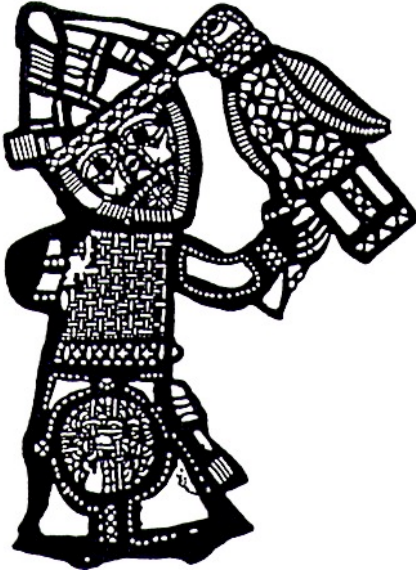


Gerantang, Bali



Rama, Malaysia

MEDITERRANIAN AREA



Hunter with falcon
Mameluke Egyptian Figure

By sea and land Asian and Western travelers traded goods and conquered each other's territories for centuries. They also left cultural traces that were incorporated into native traditions. Shadow theatre was one such example that came by sea from India to Egypt and thence to Turkey. The Ottoman Empire spread shadow theatre around the perimeter of the Mediterranean and through the Middle East. Eventually it may have been brought back to China as a new interpretation of an older tradition. This may explain why the Turkish shadow figures and those from Chaochou use the same single arm design and horizontal rodding techniques and why two hunch-backed comic characters with big hands (similar to Karagoz and Hacivat) appear in the Luanchou tradition.

The earliest figures in Egypt were unarticulated black panels, similar to those from Kerala in India. Made of camel hide they were generally not articulated. They told folk tales and related local events. The first Ottoman ruler of Egypt was so impressed with a shadow performance that he took the troupe to Turkey to show his son.

In Turkey, two human jesters, became the models for the principle characters of Karagoz and Hacivat. The stories they tell are always farces in which Karagoz plays tricks on everyone around but in the end he is always defeated. The two famous shadow comedians found their way throughout the Empire. As the Empire broke apart, countries adapted the characters and stories to suit their own cultures.

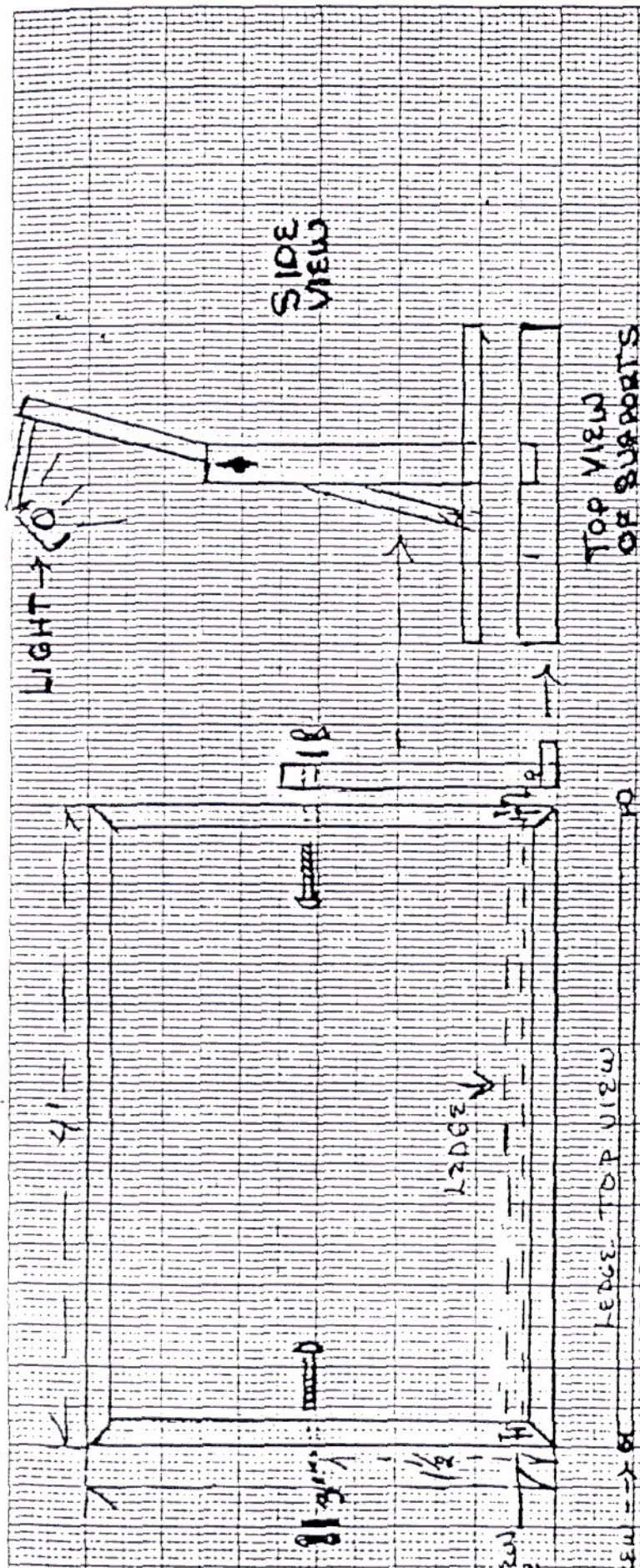
The Greek shadow theatre is an example of this cultural assimilation. Karaghiozis and Hatziaivatis have distinctly Greek personalities and their adventures have Greek folk themes. Rods have a hinge allowing figures to be turned in the opposite direction.



Hacivat & Karagoz



Karaghiozis & Hatziaivatis



LEDGE AT BASE OF SCREEN
ATTACH TO SCREEN BY PUTTING NAIL THROUGH 2 SCREEN EXES
STAPLE WHITE PERCALE OR SIMILAR
FABRIC TO FRAME SO THAT IT IS
STRETCHED TIGHT.

EASTEN SCREEN TO SIDE STANDS WITH
BOLT, WASHER AND NUT OR CONE NUT

USE HOOK AND EYE TO SECURE DESIRED
ANGLE OF SCREEN.

MARK DRILL HOLES WITH
FRAME SLOPING AND BASE
RESTING ON TABLE.

MOUNT LIGHT FIXTURE TO
TOP OF SCREEN.

DESIGN BY
JO THOMPSON 1979