

Who Defines Us?

**Exploration of Gender Script and Identity in China through
Píyǐngxì (Shadow-Puppetry)**

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Abstract

The thesis examines how identity in contemporary China is constructed through the influence of family structures, cultural traditions, and broader social expectations. My project analyzes the traditional Chinese art form of shadow puppetry to explore how individuals are shaped by these forces and how they might begin to understand and potentially transform the roles assigned to them. By combining shadow puppetry with audience interaction and installation-based exhibition design, the project creates a space where viewers can reflect on how identity is formed and how it might be redefined.

This project seeks to explore the following questions: How could art address the tension between what a person wants and what a person is expected to want? How could shadow puppetry reveal invisible systems of control and offer a sense of what it means to be both controlled and controlling? Furthermore, how can such an experience encourage viewers to reflect on who has the authority to define identity?

Drawing on traditional Peking Opera role types and shadow puppetry, this project deliberately adopts classical cultural forms not simply to reproduce them, but to mimic and subvert them. Through this strategy of mimicry, familiar visual and performative conventions are used to expose how identity is structured and normalized. At the same time, the work repositions these conventions as tools of critique, transforming them into a subversive language that questions the authority behind cultural scripts. The project incorporates my lived experience, traditional Chinese narratives, feminist theory, and artistic experimentation. The puppets are based upon four traditional Peking Opera characters: the Qingyi, Huadan, Laodan, and Chou, each representing different social identities and expectations that viewers may recognize in everyday life. The installation allows the viewer to first observe a story and then to interact directly with the puppets in order to control them. The viewer thus transforms from a passive observer to an active participant in the action and demonstrates how the identity of the character can be acted upon and changed in an active way.

Through the application of shadow puppetry in a contemporary environment, the project ensures the preservation of traditional culture while employing it to address the issue of identity in current societal settings. The project demonstrates how people are shaped and defined by their culture but how they too can redefine their own story. The project intends to inspire people, in particular female and marginalized communities, to claim their voice and redefine who they are through their identity.

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Introduction

1) Personal background, traditional Chinese context, and motivation.

Growing up in a Chinese family, I was surrounded by expectations from the moment I was born. For example, in the traditional *Zhuazhou*¹ ceremony on a baby's first birthday, adults place objects in front of the child to guess their future. Today, families usually put items they think represent a "good future," so the child's choice is not truly free. It becomes a way for adults to express what they hope the child will become. From our birth, this tradition already starts shaping us quietly.

As we grow, these expectations become more organized through schooling. From the first day of primary school, students are sorted and compared through grades, seating, and classroom rules. Over time, obedience and high scores are treated as signs of "goodness," while a student's own voice becomes secondary. Schooling thus extends and intensifies the disciplinary logic that begins in family and tradition.²

In this context, the *Gaokao*, China's university entrance exam, stands out and best represents the discipline in this education system because of its importance as the primary channel to a possible alteration in social status. The lengthy preparation process and the pressure associated with the exam turn the test into a "cultural ritual," and the students quickly grasp the fact that their worth is measured in grades and rankings. All of this gives the students an incentive to be disciplined and live up to the expectations and define themselves against the results because education in this way shapes the identity through and through: it classifies, compares, and labels the students to make them aware of what constitutes success.

In this broader cultural framework, gender discipline often operates subtly through everyday expectations that are difficult to name yet hard to escape.³ Ideas rooted in traditional Confucian gender norms such as common expression the widely circulated saying that a woman without talent is virtuous, associated with moral teachings popularized during the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the "Three Obediences and

¹ *Zhuazhou*, a traditional Chinese ritual dating back to the Wei-Jin period (220–420 CE), involves placing objects before a one-year-old child to symbolize future talents and life paths, reflecting family expectations for the child's identity.

² Qimeng Duan, "The Limits and Transcendence of Classroom Discipline: A Sociological Reflection Based on Classroom Institutional Culture," *Chinese Moral Education*, no. 4 (2024): 29–34.

³ Xiaoli Liu, "Tracing the Origin of the Saying 'A Woman Without Talent Is Virtuous'," *Jinyang Academic Journal*, no. 6 (1997).

Four Virtues,”⁴ a traditional moral code that prescribes women’s behavior in relation to family and society, continue to shape contemporary expectations of what constitutes a “good wife and a good mother.” Within this framework, women’s roles and identities are often constructed around obedience, sacrifice, and moral discipline.

I can relate this to my personal experience. When I was preparing to leave China for my graduate studies in Canada, I was asked about my academic achievements at a family gathering. However, rather than expressing recognition or support, some relatives voiced concern that “a highly educated woman might have difficulty finding a partner.” In this context, womanhood is sometimes framed as a “required course” that one must complete, reinforcing the idea that personal value is tied not only to education or individuality, but also to conformity with social expectations surrounding marriage and family. Although these traditional norms are increasingly questioned in contemporary society, they continue to shape how women understand their self-worth and make decisions about their lives.

On a broader social context, women face even tougher and more complex pressures. With the traditional norms such as “a woman without talent is virtuous” and “three obediences and four virtues,” and more contemporary notions such as “good wife and wise mother,” women continue to be driven by norms that celebrate obedience, sacrifice, and responsibility to one’s families. Womanhood is often described as a required course for women today.

Today, a question that is often being talked about on social media in China is: “What do you think is good about being married?” A great number of women can’t come up with any particular reason.⁵ However, when asked whether they “need to be married,” they all tend to respond yes. It all suggests that the strength of cultural traditions is simply overwhelming and persistent. It is true that the actual role of traditional norms is relatively reduced now. However, being married is still at the very heart of the female identity.

From my own experiences and background, I began to think about another big question: To what extent is the person I am and want to be determined by me within Chinese society, and to what extent is this already prepared for me through cultural scripts? From early-life rituals such as *Zhuazhou* to high-stakes examinations like the *Gaokao*, and from clan histories to gender roles, this may be all normal practice, and yet all together there is a system of discipline being maintained.

2) Shadow Puppetry as a Research Method

⁴ The Three Obediences and Four Virtues was a traditional moral code for women in ancient China. “Three Obediences” required obedience to father before marriage, husband after marriage, and son after husband’s death; “Four Virtues” referred to morality, speech, appearance, and domestic skills.

⁵ Huishan Zhang, *A Study on the Influence of Social Media Usage on the Views of Marriage and Love among Post-2000 Women in Hangzhou*. MA thesis, Ningxia University, 2025.

As I examined the cultural scripts that shape different stages of life, I began to ask myself: how much control do individuals really have over their own identity, and how much of it is shaped by outside forces? This tension between the self and society made me realize the need for an artistic medium that could carry both cultural symbolism and metaphors about power. For this reason, I chose traditional Chinese shadow puppetry as the focus of my research and practice. Shadow puppetry replaces the body with a shadow, and turns movement into an act of control, naturally creating metaphors about identity, power, and performance. This makes it an ideal medium for discussing the question, *Who Defines Us?*

Shadow puppetry, a traditional form of artistic expression in China and one of the country's oldest folk art traditions, has been a point of much discussion and dispute in terms of where and how its origin began. Various studies and ideas based upon the historical and legendary accounts and ancient findings suggest that the origin may be in the Pre-Qin period (221 BCE), the Han dynasty (202 - 220 BCE), the period of the Sui (581- 618CE) and Tang Dynasties (618 - 970 CE), the Five Dynasties period (907 - 960 CE), and the Song dynasty periods (960 - 1279 CE). Though the first recorded written note in ancient texts in Song period style has been found, a clear conclusion regarding its beginning has yet to be made.

Shadow puppetry is at the center of this work because its design automatically engages with concepts such as identity, control, and performance. The shadow on the screen is not a body at all; it is merely a larger image. The movement is not something the shadow can do on its own. Instead, it must rely on the marionette artist hidden stage left behind the screen. The marionette artist is hidden from sight while the shadow is front and center under the bright lights for the viewers. Together, "a hidden force guiding a visible figure" is one reason that shadow puppetry is so useful for examining the intersection between culture power and personal identity." The correlations between the puppet master and the shadow "echo the dynamic between culture and the person: culture is invisible, yet culture guides what a person does and what they can do; people appear to be free willed and autonomous, yet they act out within larger social frameworks."

Essentially, what this project attempts to do is to recreate the concept of shadow puppet play in a contemporary art context reverse the traditional power structure that is normally employed. In a traditional shadow puppet play, the puppet master is really running the show while the audience is merely watching. However, for my project, I empower the audience and allow them to run the show with regard to controlling the characters using the shadows. This allows the viewer to literally be in control while at the same time observing.

This participatory structure not only shows that identity is not fixed, but also creates a space where individuals can reflect where individuals can rethink the questions “Who am I?” and “Who defines me?”

3) What does “Who Defines Us” means?

A great number of people living and growing up in China today experience a life with norms and values that seem to form a preset script. From birth to adulthood going to school, finding a job, and getting married, many people are expected to follow the same “proper” sequence of milestones. When an entire society treats this script as common sense, the diversity of individual life paths and choices is reduced, because one model of living is framed as the only sensible option. What is lost when only one “right” way of life is considered acceptable?

In a 2025 essay published in *China Advertising*, Zhang Yue describes contemporary life as a sequence of socially expected stages. She argues that people are constantly pushed toward the next level. In their twenties, they are expected to secure a stable job and housing; in their thirties, marriage and childbearing become urgent pressures, in their forties, attention shifts to children’s education, and by their fifties, retirement begins to dominate their concerns. Zhang’s observation is useful here because it shows how life in contemporary Chinese society is often structured by externally imposed timelines rather than individual desire.⁶

In contemporary China, many of us watch friends get promotions, buy homes, open businesses, work late into the night, and measure our lives through “Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)” on social media. The surrounding message often feels like everyone else has already arrived so why aren’t we there yet? This constant comparison creates an invisible pressure to pursue a single, linear trajectory. As a result, the definition of success becomes rigidly fixed: marrying late is treated as failure, not owning a home becomes a mark of uncertainty, and choosing a different pace of life is easily framed as wrong. These reminders often appear through everyday conversations, family expectations, and social media messages such as “People your age are already ahead of you.”

In today’s constantly evolving and changing China, such subjects, thinking, and behavior haven’t disappeared entirely, yet they’re no longer fully in charge either. New ideas, new ways of thinking, and new forms of experience continue to emerge and press at the edges of what was once natural behavior. Increasingly young people know the conflict between

⁶ Yue Zhang, “Life Is Not a Level-Passing Game: Stop Forcing Yourself to Clear Stages Written by Others,” *China Advertising*, no. 6 (2025): 47–48.

the script and what they want for themselves. These young people want more than just the script they've been given. So, they're asking questions and challenging the script and maybe even seeking to write a whole new script for culture. It is a momentous moment for history when the "Who Defines Us?" question is more than merely a question, it becomes a consciousness shared among us: can we and do we want to take back for ourselves the power to define ourselves?

Therefore, "Who Defines Us?" does not search for one single answer. Instead, it invites viewers and participants to think together: Who is writing the script of our lives? Is it our families, society, cultural values, or ourselves? When we understand that identity is not fixed from birth, but is continually shaped by power, culture, and personal choices, we may finally begin to write a script that truly belongs to us.

This project does not aim to reject tradition entirely, but to work through it. By adopting the visual and performative systems of shadow puppetry and Peking Opera, the work employs mimicry as a method: it imitates established cultural forms in order to reveal their underlying structures. At the same time, this mimicry becomes a form of subversion. By slightly shifting movement, narrative, and audience roles, the work disrupts what appears to be natural or "normal," exposing identity not as fixed, but as constructed, repeated, and open to change.

Research Question & Objectives

1) How are individual identities in contemporary China shaped by family, language, and social expectations?

In today's China, personal identity is not something that grows naturally in a vacuum. Instead, it is slowly shaped by the mix of family, language, and social expectations. On the surface, the way parents raise children, the values shown in daily language, and society's ideas of "success" seem to be the main reasons for identity formation. However, behind these factors, deeper forces such as government policies, economic development, differences between cities and rural areas, and media stories create a long-lasting cultural environment that influences how people understand themselves.

From the family side, the one-child policy and fast urban development make families smaller and more focused on one child. Parents often put most of their resources and attention on their only child. Education, hobbies, and future plans can easily become a family project, where important decisions are made based on family wishes instead of the child's own ideas. In this situation, a person's identity often follows family expectations and is seen as a return on family investment, making it hard to grow freely according to one's own interests.

Language also plays a key role in shaping identity. Words and phrases such as the ideal child, successful, stable, or symbolic evaluation system are not just casual expressions, they reflect the value system of society. Through constant use, these words become a symbolic evaluation system. When making life choices, individuals often think, "Will this look right to others?" Over time, a person's sense of self becomes shaped by these value logics carried by language, shifting from "What do I like?" to "What seems more correct?"

Social expectations can also operate through public role-model campaigns. In a 2024 qualitative study of China's media-driven "Most Beautiful Teacher" selection, Liu Jinzhe, Yifan Niu, and Chuan Yu examine how certain teachers are presented as exemplary figures for public admiration. They argue that such campaigns do not merely recognize outstanding individuals; they also construct and circulate "ideal role models" that reinforce social expectations. In this framework, success is defined through strong performance, moral virtue, and public approval. Once a person is elevated as a model figure, that person's conduct can become a standard against which others are measured.⁷

⁷Jinzhe Liu, Yifan Niu, and Chuan Yu, "What Kind of Teacher Does Society Expect? — A Qualitative Study on Teacher Roles Based on the 'Most Beautiful Teacher' Selection," *Journal of Xingtai University*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2024): 92–101.

The same thing also happens to the rest of us too. Ideas such as a good degree, a steady job, and settling down and having kids begin to be repeated through the media, through policy, and through what people think is right and proper. And then the ideas begin to feel less and less like our own choices and more and more obligatory, things that the rest of the world wants each and every one of us to do to be a proper functioning citizen of the world.

To sum up, identity in modern China is shaped by many forces working together. Policies and the economy create the big environment, families explain and carry out these rules, language spreads and strengthens values, and social expectations make them feel natural in daily life.

2) How can shadow puppetry serve as a metaphor for control and self-definition?

In shadow puppetry, the puppets are controlled by three strings in the hands of the puppeteer. This control is similar to the expectations from family, society, and education that guide a person's life. Like the shadow on the screen, the individual may lose agency and follow a fixed path, repeating the same actions again and again. As Judith Butler states, identity is not something we are born with, but something shaped through repeated social rules and behaviors.⁸ We learn to act in certain ways because we want to be understood and accepted as a "proper person." The story and actions we see on the stage are not created by the puppet itself, but by the person who pulls the strings. This makes us question: how much of our own life is truly our choice, and how much is written for us before we even notice?

Real self-definition begins when one moves from the realm of the "shadow" to the realm of the "puppeteer." Drawing on Judith Butler's account of identity, the self is not a stable essence given at birth; it becomes socially recognizable through repeated norms and performances that are affirmed or constrained by the world around us. From this perspective, liberation is not about severing every string at once. Rather, it involves learning to see the strings clearly and to distinguish what is pulled by family from what is pulled by broader social expectations. Reflection can then function as a tool for loosening those pulls and reclaiming agency, even when the strings do not disappear entirely.

In the metaphor of shadow play, the "light" represents the unquestionable perspective and truth, projected from a single source, determining the form of the shadows on the screen. Our understanding of the "self" is often like watching this two-dimensional projection shaped by the light source flat, distorted, and full of unnoticed changes. True wisdom lies in realizing that the shadow is not the whole truth and summoning the courage to look

⁸ Notash Masoud Yaghoubi, Vahid Nejadmohammad, and Mahmoud Soufiani, "Language, Gender and Subjectivity from Judith Butler's Perspective," 2019, 305–316.

behind the screen to examine the more complex and three-dimensional "puppet" that creates the shadow. At the same time, we must ask: Where does the "light" that illuminates, defines, and distorts me come from?

The screen functions like a public stage on which people appear before the world. The front side is the carefully arranged front stage, where social roles are performed and shadows are projected to match the expectations of the performance. Behind it is the invisible backstage a space of trial and error, confusion and adjustment, and genuine, raw authenticity. The aim, then, is to allow the genuine self to exist in the backstage without being consumed by the process, while still presenting a front-stage image that honors one's inner message as it addresses the world. Shadow puppetry, therefore, involves more than the projection of control; it becomes a way to think through identity and the dynamics of who holds the power to define.

3) How does interactive installation help participants rethink the act of being defined?

In a traditional performance, the audience of a shadow play usually watches passively, and the meaning of the work is mostly fixed, shaped by the artist or the script. If the work appears only as a static installation, the power to interpret it mainly stays in the artist's hands, making the meaning relatively "closed." However, when interactivity is added to the work, this one-way relationship of definition is effectively broken.

In my thesis exhibition, you're not only an observer but also a participant, a collaborator. This piece requires you, among other participants, for the meaning to emerge and meaning is not simply provided for you by the creator. The moment you are finished with the shadow puppet piece and reach a stage where you get control of the puppets and get to control the direction of the piece, that moment symbolizes the fact that when one is said to "be defined," that definition is not imposed upon them. It is constantly being rewritten.

But the shift from merely observing to actually controlling the strings signifies that there is a transformation that takes place regarding who you are, that is, the shift from the "defined puppet" stage to the "self-made puppeteer" stage. This shift highlights that identity is not fixed. This, in the installation piece, also conveys the message that identity can be regained, rebuilt, and developed.

4) How can art practice empower marginalized voices to speak back?

This project begins with a reflection on and resistance to the mechanisms of social marginalization. Its goal is to create an artistic space that encourages critical awareness and challenges identity which is flexible and open for a change. In China's historical and

cultural narratives, identity labels are often produced and written by those at the center of power. Individuals at the margins usually have to accept rules and expectations coming from family, social systems, and the education structure. These structural forces are the main sources that define, control, and fix a person's identity.

In my exhibition space, viewers first encounter a story shaped by traditional power structures. This helps them realize that the process of being defined is not natural but formed inside cultural and social systems of power. However, when viewers later join the interactive part and begin to control the shadow puppets themselves, they move beyond the passive role. They shift from being the "object of the story" to becoming the "subject who creates the story." This active participation not only symbolizes rewriting the cultural script but also represents a symbolic act of taking back the power to tell one's own story.

In this respect, the space of interaction is a small utopian bubble where individuals temporarily escape the limits imposed on them by society. It is here that they attempt to live out a form of self-definition that is difficult to achieve within the real world. It is through this that the work demonstrates how identity can be fluid and mutable, and that it poses the essential question of how individuals can regain the freedom of self-definition that exists beyond the existing structure of power.

Theoretical Framework

1) Michel Foucault – Discipline and Surveillance

Foucault explains that modern power does not control people mainly by force. Instead, it works through many small and hidden rules that shape people into good and useful subjects. Power manages how people move, learn, speak, and behave in daily life. It does this in schools, workplaces, and other social systems by setting rules, watching behavior, and judging what is “right” or “normal.”⁹ In this way, people slowly learn to follow the rules without being told directly. They start to control themselves and act the way society expects.

In China, this kind of discipline appears in school education, media, and public values. Ideas like success, excellence, or normal life are repeated again and again. If someone does not follow these standards, they may be judged as “not good enough” or “not working hard.” To avoid being seen as different, many people change their behavior to fit social expectations.

This is the “watching” that is not a guard standing above you. Instead, it’s the constant social camera that we recognize in the form of social media and comments and our own presentation. We think of how other people view our posts, our lives, our bodies, and our decisions. It is because of this that we find the need to watch ourselves and correct ourselves in order to put out into the world a “better” us. We don’t need to be told what to do anymore because now we’re the “watchers.”

Discipline, therefore, is a process that is both externally and internally driven. The “ideal person” image that is imposed upon us by society leads to the fact that people begin to imitate it and stick to it and attempt to live up to it. The rules from the outside begin to be implemented from the inside out. Eventually, the “power” becomes soft but mighty because we begin to discipline ourselves even when nobody is watching us.

2) Antonio Gramsci – Cultural Hegemony

From the perspective of cultural hegemony, identity is not merely the result of individual self-expression but is shaped by the value systems defined as “normal,” “acceptable,” or

⁹ Zhaohui Zhao and Zhongfu Sun, “Foucault's Disciplinary Thought and School Discipline Education — Based on Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,” *Journal of Qilu Normal University*, vol. 29, no. 6 (2014): 79–85.

“ideal” by the dominant culture.¹⁰ In the Chinese context, values such as filial piety, obedience, success, gentleness, and respectability are continuously naturalized and normalized. These values are reinforced through family upbringing, institutional education, mass media narratives, and public discourse, until they are no longer recognized as socially constructed, but instead seen as unquestionable rules of life. Over time, such cultural expectations become deeply internalized, forming an invisible framework through which individuals understand the world and themselves, even before the development of personal consciousness.

This configuration, shadow puppetry carries a profoundly powerful metaphor. Firstly, the actions of the puppet are controlled by rods, strings, or the puppeteer's hands and thus how the puppet will stand, walk, and express itself on the stage is determined by what happens off-camera. This is structure mirror how cultural hegemony operates: People on the social stage generally behave within the cultural norms that are everywhere, but not very visible. Cultural hegemony, simply, operates like “the hidden hand behind the shadow,” which determines who we are and how we behave through cultural practices until the external norms become simply a part of us.

Therefore, shadow puppetry is not only a traditional technique of storytelling, but it is also a representation of how the power of culture operates between that which is visible and that which is not. It forces one to question how much of the “self” that particular individuals claim to be, is actually determined by their culture, and not of their own choice.

3) bell hooks – The Margin as a Space of Resistance

The idea of “the margin” from bell hooks is an important theory for this project. For hooks, the margin is not only a place of being pushed away or ignored. It is also a space where new thinking, resistance, and awareness can grow.¹¹ People who live at the margin, such as women, children, and those who do not fit social norms, can often see power more clearly because they are not fully inside the center. Their experience shows how rules are made, how identity is shaped, and how difference is controlled. In this way, the margin becomes a special point of view, a place to understand how power works

In *Who Defines Us?*, the margin is not only an alternative space, but also where new identities can emerge. This is what happens with shadow puppetry. The puppet exists

¹⁰ An Zhang, “The Enlightenment of Gramsci’s Cultural Leadership Theory on Ideological Construction in China,” *Journal of North China Electric Power University (Social Science Edition)*, no. 3 (2014): 75–79.

¹¹ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 15–23.

between the light and the dark, the same way that people living in the margin live between the seen and the unseen. The puppet also lives because of the unseen force behind the light, the same way that the lives of people living on the margin are controlled by societal norms that operate unseen. However, hooks also suggests that the margin is where resistance and new stories, new identities, can emerge.

It is through the interactive segment that the viewer is given the opportunity to control the puppet and recreate the script. They are not only viewing the script, they are actually revising it. The margin becomes a place where they can take control. It is small, but it gives them the opportunity to redefine their identity when they had only been living according to the rules. It is thus creating a “margin space” where people get the chance to question who they allow to define them.

4) Intersectionality – Gender, Class, and Culture

In today’s Chinese society, a person’s identity is never built from one label only. Instead, it is formed where many factors meet, such as gender, age, family roles, class expectations, and cultural rules.¹² For example, a young woman is not only “a woman,” but also a daughter, a “student, a future mother, and sometimes a symbol of family honor. These roles overlap, and when they meet each other, they create complex pressure. This is what intersectionality talks about, our identity is shaped by many social forces at the same time, not just one.

In my shadow puppetry, the concept of intersectionality appears as a visible, material thing. Each figure worn by the puppets has several layers of identity: the obedient daughter, the diligent student, the well-behaved woman, and the “ideal woman” demanded by the culture. Each of these attracts the figure toward a direction distinct from the other, much like real life. The movement of the figures on the screen represents how identities intersect, crash, and stretch. An individual lives according to the dictates of the culture, driven by various demands simultaneously, forming a self that is sometimes torn but whole.

In the case of the audience controlling the puppet on their own, they also experience these overlapping identities. They realize how identity can restrict a person, but also how new meaning emerges between the identities. In this manner, the artwork brings the concept of intersectionality from the idea stage to the experience stage. They realize, through their experiences in the body, how identity can shift, vary, and be rewritten.

¹² Heidi Gottfried, “Reflections on Intersectionality: Gender, Class, Race and Nation.” *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2002, pp. 23–40.

Research Method

Practice as Research: A Cyclical Process from Theory to Visual Form

This project follows a practice-based research method, which emphasizes producing knowledge through the act of making art. Creation is not an addition to theory; it is a central part of the research itself. Within this approach, visual expression, material experiments, character design, exhibition building, and audience interaction all function as forms of research. They not only present the results but actively shape the knowledge that is produced.

This research follows a cycle of theory → visualization → practical reflection → re-theorization.

While learning more about Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and bell hooks, I created something tangible with these concepts through testing, puppet-making, and movement-making. For example, when I was making the shadow puppet characters, I would wonder if their movements would ever be fully self-directed. I began to understand that the puppet's control is similar to disciplinary power in that the puppet's movement is not coming from within the puppet but from something else. This is hands-on learning that helps me understand power and culture in relation to bodily movement.

Similarly, when designing the female puppet's movements, I used my own experience and cultural gender norms as references. Labels such as gentle, patient, and obedient were translated into restricted gestures, making the character appear as if her body had been written into a script. This practical process became a way to examine power while continually confirming my theoretical ideas: people move between being controlled and controlling others. In youth, individuals often occupy the controlled position; with age and social conditioning, they may gradually take on the role of those who discipline the younger generation. In this way, society repeats and extends the cycle of discipline.

Historical & Control context

1) Shadow puppetry history

Chinese shadow puppetry is among the most valuable traditional folk cultural practices of the nation. It is universally believed that the origin of shadow puppetry occurred during the Western Han Dynasty. However, it developed into a mature form and gained popularity during the Tang and Song Dynasties. Originally, the shadow puppet performances took place at the royal court, but they eventually shifted from the palace to the cities and rural areas, becoming a popular folk art.¹³ According to Yao Sha and Hongzhen Fan, shadow puppetry is not merely a “folk art.” However, it tends to migrate between various social platforms, ranging from the art of the palace to the art of the cities and, finally, to the art of the people. This denotes that the art of shadow puppetry is a living cultural entity that develops with the passage of history, rather than a relic that stands still.¹⁴

But today, with the rapid expansion of film, television, and other digital media, there are fewer shadow play troupes, and it is difficult to find new generations of practitioners. However, the government and cultural organizations have made numerous efforts to keep the art alive, including declaring shadow play a state-recognized “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” training new generations of practitioners, integrating performances into the educational system, and recording the performances digitally. Advances in technology and the development of the tourism industry offer new opportunities for shadow puppetry. Modern shadow puppets also appear in short videos, computer animations, online performances, and even the shadow metaverse. Yao Sha and Hongzhen Fan state that “shadow puppetry is not simply waiting for rescue. It also divides itself into three distinct segments: the puppet as craft object, the shadow as video, animator, and the play as live theater and tourist entertainment.”

Shadow puppetry was also connected with the cultural strength of a nation. After the founding of New China in 1949, shadow puppetry was drawn into socialist art. Many new productions emerge in order to promote various political messages and practical knowledge, for example, “Couple Learning Words” and “Red Star Agricultural Cooperative.” During that period, the shadow artists gained increasing respect. They were not only lower-class entertainers but also cultural workers who serve the people. Consequently, shadow puppetry is not only art, but also a cultural instrument that is affected by politics.

¹³ Shuyuan Wang, “A Methodological Critique of Origin Studies on Chinese Shadow Puppetry.” *Folk Culture Forum*, no. 1, 2024, pp. 99–111.

¹⁴ Yao Sha and Hongzheng Fan, “The Internal Heritage Development Forces in the Historical Context of Chinese Shadow Play,” *Ethnic Art Studies*, vol. 38, no. 5 (2025): 37–44.

On a symbolic level, the art of shadow puppetry, where the figures on screen appear as puppets moved by strings controlled by a figure lurking behind the screen, is actually a representation of the concepts of control and identity. The figure with the control is the one operating the puppet, and the only thing the observer is left with is the image of the shadow, not the hand. This is actually how people living in society live their lives according to the dictates of other people. The “shadow” is the one that's watched and shaped, and the control is not visible.

Overall, shadow puppetry is not simply a quaint folk entertainment. Through shadow puppetry, the ways that society is structured, the dynamics of power, and the construction of identity are uncovered. This study finds that the history of shadow puppetry, the evolution of shadow puppetry, and the connection between shadow puppetry and politics provide it with the cultural foundations. Shadow puppetry is used here as a means of examining how contemporary Chinese individuals are influenced by cultural narratives.

2) Women and family character Analyzing the “shaped” or “molded” female images in classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Legend of the White Snake*.

In traditional Chinese literature and cultural narratives, the construction of female images is deeply shaped by Confucian ethics and feudal values. Literary works often place women at the center of family and moral relationships, giving them qualities such as obedience, sacrifice, and moral responsibility. Women were expected to obey their fathers and husbands in order to protect family order, and this value system naturally influenced how female characters were written and imagined in art and literature.

In Cao Xueqin’s novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the fate of many women shows how Confucian rules restrict female individuality.¹⁵ Lin Daiyu is talented, sensitive, and emotional, yet she dies young, showing how women with strong self-awareness often face tragic endings under strict social norms. In contrast, Xue Baochai is gentle, patient, and virtuous, an ideal woman in traditional culture. On the surface, her life seems smooth, but her gentleness and tolerance also reflect the passive acceptance of female duties. This contrast suggests that Lin Daiyu’s talent and sadness reveal how Confucian culture suppresses female individuality, while Xue Baochai represents the expectation for women

¹⁵ *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin in the Qing dynasty, is a landmark classical Chinese novel that follows the rise and decline of the Jia family and the intertwined fates of characters such as Jia Baoyu, Lin Daiyu, and Xue Baochai. Through love, kinship, and tragedy, the work exposes the oppressive nature of feudal ethics, especially toward women, and is regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces in Chinese literature.

to be both talented and virtuous, even at the cost of their personal desires. Through these characters, the novel shows that women in a feudal society often carried moral duties for the family. Whether as obedient wives and daughters or as gifted but unhappy women, their value is measured by how well they serve others, while their own wishes are pushed aside.¹⁶

Folk tales and opera stories also shape a large number of obedient and self-sacrificing female figures. *Legend of the White Snake* is one of the most well-known examples.¹⁷ Over time, Bai Suzhen, the lead character of the story has been shaped into a kind, loving, and selfless ideal woman in the story or her image in the society. Although she is a powerful white snake spirit who has practiced for a thousand years, she chooses to live as a human wife. She follows social rules, takes care of her husband Xu Xian, and even agrees to drink realgar wine on the Dragon Boat Festival because he asks her to, although she reveals her true form as a result. Her obedience gives her temporary happiness and space to act. She later risks everything to save her husband by stealing magic herbs and fighting Fa Hai. In the end, she becomes pregnant but is trapped under Leifeng Pagoda. Her story shows both devotion and loss, shaped by love, sacrifice, and order.

These female images in literature and opera not only reflect historical gender norms but also continue to influence modern expectations of women. Words such as good girl, dutiful daughter, virtuous wife, gentle, and self-sacrificing show how traditional female roles are still carried into everyday language today. The idea that women should be moral carriers and emotional caretakers continues to shape how society views women and how women understand themselves.

In this research, these old-school female archetypes aren't just cultural vibes; they're also the foundation on which the shadow puppet chars and their movements are based. Lin Daiyu's vulnerability and sensitivity come across in small, internal, and shivering movements. Xue Baochai's gentle compliance manifests in low arm movements and limited walking. Bai Suzhen's mom-like love and sacrifice come across in open and protective movements. Zhu Yingtai, the legendary heroine in Chinese folklore who defied traditional marriage arrangements and pursued her own freedom and independence,

¹⁶ Mishuang He, "An Analysis of the Tragedy of Female Characters in Dream of the Red Chamber." *Mudàn*, no. 4, 2021, pp. 24–25.

¹⁷ *The Legend of the White Snake* is one of the Four Great Chinese folk love stories. It tells the tale of Bai Suzhen, a white snake spirit who takes human form and falls in love with Xu Xian, facing constant struggle against the monk Fahai and the moral authority he represents. Through romance, sacrifice, and the final imprisonment under the Leifeng Pagoda, the story reflects traditional social discipline placed on women, desire, and supernatural agency, while expressing a longing for freedom and self-determination.

manifests in her attempts to break free, although she's still kind of attached to the strings. By embodying these traditional female archetypes in body language, gestures, and design, I'm physically illustrating how culture influences women.

Therefore, female figures in classical Chinese literature are not only research material but also theoretical and methodological support for the character design, movement creation, and narrative structure in this shadow-puppet project. By translating literary female scripts into visible shadow bodies, this research explores how culture shapes female identity through stories, ethics, and visual symbols, while offering the audience a chance to rethink and question these norms.

3) Social discipline culture source: The Three Obediences and Four Virtues

Moral norms such as “Three Obediences and Four Virtues,” “virtuous wife and good mother,” and “filial piety” have deep roots in Confucian teachings, patriarchal lineage systems, and family rules in traditional China.

The concept of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues summarizes the behavioral expectations imposed on women in ancient Chinese society, and its origins can be traced to early Confucian ritual texts from the pre-Qin and Han periods.¹⁸ Within a patriarchal family structure, these rules were treated as natural and unquestionable because they were believed to protect clan order and family interests. One early ritual classic, *Yili*, in the section “Sangfu” with the *Zixia zhuan*, states that a woman must follow the “three obediences” and has no right to act independently.¹⁹ Before marriage, she obeys her father; after marriage, her husband; and after her husband's death, her son. Another ritual text, *Zhouli*, in the section “Tianguan Jiupin,” outlines the four standards for women: moral virtue, proper speech, graceful appearance, and skillful work.²⁰ The combination of three obediences and four virtues created a gender morality structure where women had to depend on and obey male members throughout their lives. In this structure, men had the privilege and benefits, while women had to live as dependents without any real freedom or status. A woman's identity was mostly defined by her roles as a daughter, wife, or mother. These roles may have been subject to change over time, but her position as a subordinate

¹⁸ Yu, Qiong. “The Tradition and Modernity of Etiquette — ‘Three Obediences and Four Virtues.’” *Young Writers*, no. 15, 2016, pp. 163–165.

¹⁹ *Yili* (《儀禮》), an early Confucian ritual classic, “Sangfu” (喪服), with the *Zixia zhuan* (子夏傳)

²⁰ *Zhouli*·Tianguan·Jiupin records moral and behavioral expectations for women in the royal palace, including virtue, speech, appearance, and domestic skills, and is considered one of the classical textual bases of the “Four Virtues.”

to men remained constant. This structure essentially embedded a huge inequality of power, compelling women to exhibit obedience and virtue, but without any right to self-identity.²¹

In conclusion, it can be said that the idea of the virtuous wife and good mother is based on Confucian ideals of womanhood. While it appears to laud the qualities of gentleness, talent, and nurturing qualities in females, it also reinforces the idea that a woman's value lies in her ability to provide support to her husband, to bring up children, and to manage the household. While it cannot be said that this was merely an ancient idea, it was in its modern form that it was created by combining Confucian ideals of feminine virtue with Meiji Japanese ideals of women's education. In China, in the late Qing and early Republican periods, the idea of the virtuous wife and good mother became popular.²² Women were encouraged to be models of the modern woman who was not merely expected to embody the virtues of a modest and moral wife but also to possess knowledge that would enable her to support her husband, bring up her children properly, and teach them effectively.

Essentially, the ideal, because of its overlap between old-school morality and the contemporary discourse on nation-building, is simply a new spin on the same old concept, where women's worth continues to come not from pursuing their own development, but from their worth to the family. Despite receiving some flak for it by the New Culture Movement, the ideal remains firmly entrenched within the social psyche. Even today, women who are on top of their game professionally but still manage their household chores are lauded for their efforts and dubbed the "virtuous wife and good mother" type, demonstrating how tenaciously this gender script continues.²³ This only goes on to demonstrate that the expectations of women have not disappeared but have merely been rephrased with a softer, updated message.

History includes exaggerated examples of female filial piety. In the *Book of the Later Han*, women are depicted slicing their own flesh to treat their ailing fathers.²⁴ Such instances

²¹ Meng, Qian, and Lianshe Zhang. "From 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' to 'Fear of Wife': The Status of Chinese Women from a Gender Perspective." *Forum on Chinese Culture*, no. 3, 2013, pp. 96–99.

²² Sitong Wang, *The Ideology of "Virtuous Wife and Good Mother" in Modern China and Its Literary Representation (1915–1949)*. PhD dissertation, Jilin University, 2021.

²³ Women in traditional Chinese society were expected to extend their filial duty to their husband's family after marriage, a norm rooted in the "Three Obediences" system. Texts such as *The Book of Rites* and the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" code prescribe that wives should obey their husbands and show filial respect to their parents-in-law.

²⁴ *Biographies of Exemplary Women in the Book of the Later Han* records stories of virtuous women from the Eastern Han, reflecting traditional expectations of female chastity, obedience, and filial duty within a Confucian patriarchal context.

were not very common, but they were recorded and used for the purpose of imparting a great lesson, that of prioritizing filial loyalty over personal ambitions. Such ambitions, of course, included the pursuit of married life.

Here, the code of filial piety imposed a dual duty on women: that of being filial to their parents prior to marriage, and subsequently filial to their parents-in-law following their marriage. Even beyond the death of their spouse, the duty that the woman was expected to perform and maintain the family lineage was expected. The code of filial piety, within the norms of Confucian morality, imposed the duty on women of prioritized commitment to family responsibilities.

Even today, the concept of “filial and obedient” continues to affect how women are judged by society, mostly as daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law. If the woman is capable of caring for both households, she will certainly be viewed as a virtuous woman because the ideal is implanted deep within us.

These traditional moral rules for women still influence gender culture in modern China, but they have also changed over time. Since the mid-twentieth century, with social reform and the development of modern law, the idea of gender equality has become more widely accepted. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the government promoted women’s equality through legal reform and political slogans such as “women hold up half the sky.” Harmful customs such as foot-binding and concubinage were gradually abolished, and marriage freedom, monogamy, and girls’ access to education were increasingly protected by law.²⁵ As a result, the direct control of traditional patriarchal rules was significantly reduced.

Even after years of advancement, women have begun playing major roles in politics, the economy, and educational sectors. The notion that women are merely “dependents” of the male gender has relaxed subsided. Many women today earn a living, are not dependent on their husbands for money, and are also authoritative figures within their households. When the woman also brings home as much, if not more, money, it changes the dynamics of the relationship. To the point that today, people joke about “being afraid of wife” when it comes to their husband, who listens actively to their wife and is not the dominant figure within the household. Some experts claim that this is the dissolving of the typical patriarchal family order, where equality is emerging within marriage.

²⁵ Foot-binding was a historical Chinese custom of tightly binding girls’ feet to make them small, symbolizing beauty, obedience, and female virtue within patriarchal culture. Concubinage refers to the traditional practice in which a man could maintain secondary female partners below the status of a legal wife, reflecting women’s unequal position in the patriarchal family system.

Couples today are not like the ancient proverb “the woman has to obey the man.” They are advised to treat each other with respect and share responsibilities. This reflects how changing gender roles, along with new ideas, are transforming gender dynamics between the sexes in the country of China.

However, traditional expectations have not disappeared but continue in more hidden forms. While society advocates equality, it often still expects women to take primary responsibility for family care. In media and public culture, a “successful woman” is often imagined as someone who excels at work while also being a good wife and mother, essentially a modern version of the “virtuous wife and good mother” ideal. Many women still face pressure to handle childcare and elder care after marriage, and phrases like gentle, selfless, responsible, and good at managing the home remain common compliments for women. This suggests that the expectation for women to prioritize family has not truly faded. In intergenerational education, parents still frequently teach daughters to be polite, frugal, patient, and filial, encouraging them to put family first. These examples show that norms shaped by Confucian ethics and patriarchal lineage systems have long been internalized, becoming part of cultural psychology that is difficult to erase quickly.

In conclusion, moral labels such as “Three Obediences and Four Virtues,” “virtuous wife and good mother,” and “filial piety” were historically used to regulate and define women’s identities, and they continue to influence gender values today. Passed down through literature, opera, and social teaching, they shaped traditional images of obedient and self-sacrificing women. Although modern society has granted women legal equality and greater autonomy, traditional values still influence expectations for women and personal identities in subtle ways. This tension between tradition and modernity is a key context for understanding gender roles and identity formation in contemporary China. Recognizing the historical roots and evolution of these norms helps us understand why society continues to reflect on identity, power, and the cultural scripts that shape women’s lives.

Art Research

For the visual style, I looked at the work of Wang Tianwen (1950-), a well-known shadow puppetry artist from Shaanxi and one of the most representative inheritors of the craft in contemporary China. With more than fifty years of experience, Wang is recognized for his fine carving, vivid colors, detailed costume patterns, and expressive character design. He not only carries forward the traditional Shaanxi shadow puppetry system but also explores ways to connect traditional aesthetics with modern visual language. His work provides an important reference for my understanding of shadow puppetry as a metaphor for identity.



Figure 1. Wang Tianwen
One Hundred Saints, figure No. 48 “Sun Wukong”

In his representative work *One Hundred Saints*,²⁶ figure No. 48 “Sun Wukong” (Figure 1) shows the symbolic structure of traditional shadow-puppet design: exaggerated facial patterns, rich costume motifs, rhythmic knife strokes, and flexible joint structures that allow lively movement when projected with light. Wang emphasizes the spirit of each character, how posture, line, gesture, and movement express personality and emotion. This

²⁶ *One Hundred Saints* by Wang Tianwen is a representative shadow puppetry work that features a composition of one hundred figures, showcasing refined carving and layered light-shadow techniques, reflecting both traditional aesthetics and contemporary innovation in shadow art.

way of using movement and line to convey inner qualities directly inspires my own puppet design. In my work, I also focus on how posture, gesture, and the articulation of joints can express not only external identity, but internalized states such as control, hesitation, and resistance. Rather than treating the puppet as a static visual object, I approach it as a moving body shaped by both structure and constraint.

At the same time, I do not simply reproduce traditional aesthetics. Instead, I adopt these formal qualities as a form of mimicry, allowing the visual language of shadow puppetry to remain recognizable while subtly altering its function. Through this process, the puppet shifts from representing fixed character types to expressing fluid and conflicted identities. In this sense, the design becomes not only a continuation of traditional craft, but also a site of transformation, where established forms are used to question how identity is constructed and performed.



Figure 2. Wang Tianwen
Black Myth: Wukong

It is important to note that Wang does not treat shadow puppetry only as folk art. Instead, he actively connects it with contemporary cultural contexts. After the release of the popular video game *Black Myth: Wukong*,²⁷ he created a modern shadow puppet version of the Monkey King based on the game's character design (Figure 2). Through this cross-media transformation, traditional craft and digital game culture enter a new dialogue.

²⁷ *Black Myth: Wukong* is an action role-playing game developed by Game Science in China, based on *Journey to the West*, blending Chinese mythology, martial aesthetics, and real-time combat, and is regarded as a milestone in Chinese game development and cultural representation.

Such experiments bring shadow puppetry back to the view of younger audiences and demonstrate its flexibility and potential for contemporary expression.

In my research, this dual path of “traditional technique – contemporary context” is significant. On one hand, Wang’s craftsmanship offers references for character design, joint construction, movement rhythm, and color language in my own puppet-making process, allowing me to continue the visual aesthetics of traditional shadow puppetry. On the other hand, his contemporary approach encourages me to explore how shadow puppetry can be reactivated today to discuss issues of identity discipline, gender scripts, and cultural power.

In this sense, Wang Tianwen is not only a craft inheritor, but also a cultural translator. His work shows how shadow puppetry communicates emotion and spirit through light and movement, and how it finds new vitality in today’s cultural landscape. This model of transformation from tradition to modernity provides methodological guidance for my practice and supports my use of shadow puppetry as a medium to discuss the core question of “Who defines us?”

Puppet Story Summary

The story revolves around a female character, as presented in the role of Qingyi in Peking Opera, which embodies order and control and proper conduct in society. From the beginning, she is shown moving in a slow and controlled manner, reflecting how society has already molded her body.

Huadan appears as her younger version. She's more active and less on a leash. She tries to remind Qingyi of who she used to be before all these rules. Qingyi understands that she never changed; she just learned how to control herself so that she doesn't cause drama.

Laodan also appears as the future version of Qingyi. She's more mature and composed. But she's also completely sold out. She explains that the way people survive is by playing the game. And people are more willing to play the game when they are praised and appreciated for it.

Next, Chou also appears as the third person. He's the one who represents the judgment of the people. He calls the rules "normal" and "reasonable." And people are supposed to be "just right," not too much and not too little.

However, as the story progresses, Qingyi starts to think critically. She realizes that her whole life has been a constant effort to reach the expectations of other people. It's like passing an exam. But she doesn't want her life to be just that. She wants her own actions and movements to be based on her own decisions and not based on what other people taught her. And so, in the end, she takes back her own life. The story ends with all the characters standing together and doing similar moves but with slight differences.

Body of work & Design process

Composition: Story video, interactive shadow-puppetry installation; strong directional lighting; puppet-control zone behind the screen; looping video and sound; audience prompts and a feedback board.

Installation structure: front-stage visibility and back-stage control

The installation is designed as a spatial metaphor for how identity is produced through being seen, evaluated, and corrected. A strong light source enlarges the puppets' shadows on the front screen, emphasizing how individuals are placed under a public gaze and how social rules become internalized through repeated exposure. The two-screen structure reinforces the relationship between a visible "front stage" and an invisible "back stage":

- a. Front screen (story): presents characters whose bodies and behaviors have already been shaped by social scripts.
- b. Back screen (interaction): allows participants to manipulate puppets from behind, foregrounding how power often operates from an unseen position.

By placing viewers within this environment of light, shadow, and staged visibility, the work turns discipline into an embodied experience rather than a purely theoretical concept.

1) Character Design through Peking Opera Role Types: Qingyi, Huadan, Mohangdang, and Laodan

In the creation of these puppets, the roles of Qingyi, Huadan, Laodan, and Chou will be considered in the context of the four categories found within the Peking Opera role system due to the fact that the opera system of roles is based on pre-written identity conventions, each one with its particular gestures, behaviors, and moral values. As a result, in this case, the use of the mentioned roles will not imply their simple use as a cultural icon, but rather it will be about their mimicry and transformation. The adoption of such conventions allows for recognizing them in the first place. Yet, due to small shifts in behavior, narration, and context, these conventions become unstable. Thus, Peking Opera becomes not only a method of maintaining the identity, but also a means of challenging it, which enables the transformation of mimicry into subversion.

- a. Qingyi — Qingyi functions as a visual model of a disciplined body. Her restrained and symmetrical movement is not presented as personality, but as the result of long-term training and normalization.

- b. Huadan — Huadan represents a less-regulated state of identity. Her expanded movement range introduces contrast, revealing that discipline is not natural but gradually imposed.²⁸
- c. Laodan — Laodan embodies internalized regulation. Rather than enforcing rules directly, she maintains them through reasoning, advice, and normalization.²⁹
- d. Chou (the clown) — Chou operates as a third-person perspective that frames control as neutral and reasonable, masking power as common sense.³⁰

This structure responds to Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony: when cultural norms are repeated and reinforced, they become taken for granted. Individuals may not even realize they are "performing a script."

Peking Opera also has a theoretically valuable feature: historically, many female roles were performed by male actors. This means gender in traditional theatre was never "natural," but constructed, imitated, and performed. This directly connects to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and also echoes bell hooks' idea that the margins reveal power structures.

This role structure supports the project's core argument: identity is not innate; it is rehearsed, repeated, and stabilized through cultural scripts.

2) Narrative video: from disciplined body to refusal of "optimization"

This video is not simply a narrative, but a visual and embodied exploration of how control operates over time. It begins with external discipline, moves into internalized control, and gradually shifts toward self-awareness and negotiation. Rather than presenting a complete liberation, the work reflects the complexity of identity formation, where control is not fully removed but reconfigured. In this sense, the video mimics familiar structures of discipline and normalization, while subtly subverting them through disruption, hesitation, and altered movement patterns.

²⁸ Suhua Li, "An Analysis of Performance Techniques in Huadan Roles in Traditional Chinese Opera." *Playwright*, no. 4, 2025, pp. 115–117.

²⁹ Jinmin Cai, "A Brief Discussion on the Performance Style and Artistic Features of Laodan in Qiong Opera." *New Legend*, no. 3, 2025, pp. 49–51.

³⁰ Qiang Ma, "Research on Stage Image Innovation and Inheritance Strategies of Wen Chou Actors in Peking Opera." *Comedy World (Upper Monthly)*, no. 1, 2025, pp. 64–66.

The main character appears as Qingyi, a character from Peking Opera, which is about being calm, under control, and proper. She is initially in a proper state, with slow and steady movements. A bright light shines on her, and she is transformed into a large shadow. This represents the scrutiny of family, society, and institutions. Every movement is as if it is being observed. The more proper and under control she is, the more perfect her shadow is.³¹

However, as the story progresses, audience can start to notice changes in the rhythm and the moves, which become shakier and less steady. These changes disrupt the feeling of control and show that this “perfect behavior” isn’t really natural, just learned.

At one point, the sleeve of the girl’s clothing begins to tremble slightly. This is a big moment, as it shows that the control isn’t coming from outside anymore, but from inside the girl’s mind, as she starts to hold herself back before anyone else does, showing the ways in which social rules become embedded in the body.

At the end of the video, her movements change again. This time, she is not trying to move with perfect control. Instead, she starts moving by her own choice. The video does not end with her having total freedom or total control. All the characters stand in a line and perform similar movements with slight differences. The slight differences suggest that people may have some freedom of choice in the same system.

In the exhibition, the video does not play automatically. The audience needs to use a remote to start it. This gives viewers the choice to begin the story. It also connects to the idea of control, asking who has the power to start and shape a story.

The video features Beethoven’s *"Moonlight Sonata"* as background music. The calm and slow beat is appropriate for the measured movements in the beginning. As the story continues, the music increases the tension and reflection. This is appropriate in illustrating the transition from merely following the rules to becoming aware of oneself.

³¹ Li, Jing. “A Brief Discussion on the Character Construction of the Qingyi Role in Peking Opera.” *Home of Drama*, no. 14, 2024, pp. 43–45.



Figure 3. Story video screenshot
Qingyi on the left and Huadan on the right

3) Audience Participation: How the Audience Controls and Manipulates the Puppets

Apart from the existing shadow puppet video, the exhibition also includes an interactive section where visitors can choose and manipulate different puppet characters. In this way, they are not only observing the artwork but also actively contributing to it. Through the act of manipulating and controlling the puppets, visitors are invited to reflect on how identity is shaped and constructed. They become both participants and temporary controllers, which echoes the way society influences people's behavior and defines who they are. Because of this interactive structure, the exhibition remains dynamic, and each visit can produce a different experience. This also suggests that even within the same social framework, individuals still retain the possibility of choice.

4) Materials & Techniques

In terms of materials and technical realization, the work combines traditional craftsmanship with modern technology. The shadow puppets are made using traditional carving techniques.

The traditional Chinese shadow puppets were originally crafted from animal hides, particularly from a donkey. This material is hard, flexible, and slightly transparent, which is ideal for carving minute details and achieving clear images when the light shines through it. The crafting of the puppets involved a labor-intensive process, as the hides had to be treated, polished, carved, and painted. These techniques enabled the artists to achieve

clear images with minute details, which is a major aspect of the aesthetic appeal of the Chinese shadow puppets.

Today, the use of materials for crafting Chinese shadow puppets is different. Contemporary artists use plastic sheets, paper, or synthetic films. These are more convenient for crafting, lighter, and more easily available, which is a major advantage for contemporary installations. Although the material for crafting Chinese shadow puppets is different, it is an extension of the traditional one. The ideas of transparency, the use of light, and the association of the object with its shadow remain the same. The use of material for crafting Chinese shadow puppets is a contemporary aspect of the traditional one.

In traditional Chinese shadow puppetry, puppets were often made from treated donkey skin, a material valued for its durability and semi-transparency when illuminated from behind. This material allows artisans to carve intricate patterns while producing clear and expressive silhouettes when projected under light. While this project does not strictly replicate the historical material, it draws from the same principles of translucency and shadow projection that define the visual language of traditional shadow puppetry.

The use of projection and video further enriches the performance. A projector casts the puppet's image onto the screen, while pre-recorded background footage and digital effects play simultaneously, allowing the shadow performance to move in sync with the visual environment. The immersive space of the installation is carefully constructed to connect traditional craft with contemporary media technology. Through this spatial arrangement, the work separates two modes of experience: observing the narrative and actively performing it. The projected video introduces the story and its themes, while the interactive shadow-puppet screen invites visitors to explore and reinterpret the characters through their own actions.

Therefore, materials and technology in this work are not used only for visual form. Instead, they function as a method for understanding cultural power, allowing theoretical ideas about discipline, identity, and control to be experienced through light, material, and movement.

Exhibition

1) Exhibition design

Story video link:

<https://vimeo.com/1176055198?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

This puppet performance explores how female identity is shaped, internalized, and potentially resisted within social and cultural systems. The story is structured as a dialogue between three female characters Qingyi, Huadan, and Laodan, who represent different stages of a woman's life.



Figure 4. Female Characters Costume Design Sketch

Qingyi represents the present self: a woman who has already been partially disciplined by social expectations and has learned to regulate her behavior in order to fit into accepted norms. Huadan represents her younger self, around the age of fifteen or sixteen, who has not yet been fully shaped by these systems and still expresses herself more freely. In contrast, Laodan represents a possible future: a middle-aged woman who appears stable and mature, fully internalized and accepted these norms. Through their dialogue, the work reveals how identity is continuously shaped by family, society, and institutional structures.

A key decision in this work was that I performed the voice-over for all three female characters myself. This choice transforms the piece into a form of self-dialogue rather than a conversation between separate individuals. It emphasizes that these identities coexist within one person, reflecting internal conflict, negotiation, and transformation across different life stages.

Another important decision was to present the story in Chinese with English subtitles. Since shadow puppetry is a traditional Chinese art form, using Chinese allows for a more accurate and culturally grounded expression of tone, emotion, and meaning. At the same time, the English subtitles function as a bridge, making the work accessible to audiences from different cultural backgrounds. This also reflects the challenge of cultural translation within my broader practice.

In the interactive section, I incorporated a mirror as part of the installation. When viewers manipulate the shadow puppets, they can simultaneously see both the puppet's shadow and their own reflection. This creates a dual perspective in which the audience becomes both the controller and the observer. By placing viewers in this position, the work invites them to reflect on how they participate consciously or unconsciously in shaping and defining others. The act of controlling the puppet parallels the way society imposes expectations and norms onto individuals.

Overall, the project aims to create a space where viewers can not only observe but also physically engage in the process of how identity can be constructed and reconsider their own role within it.

2) Exhibition final show photo



Figure 5. Story Video Zone



Figure 6. Story Video Screenshot
Chou on the left, Qingyi in the middle, Laodan on the right



Figure 7. Storyboard Peking Opera Garment Design Book



Figure 8. Interactive Zone (Puppetry Characters)



Figure 9. Interactive Zone (Shadow Puppetry Screen)



Figure 10. Interactive Peking Opera Garment Design Book

Analysis & Reflection

1) Answer to “Who define us”

In our daily lives, family, social rules, and culture all affect our identities. Over time, these factors slowly change our ways of thinking and behaving. We have to learn to adjust ourselves according to these rules and expectations to avoid any kind of conflict or to attain approval. However, if more people follow these rules, then individuality might not exist anymore.

In China, identity is not something that is created by us alone. Factors such as family, culture, social rules, and beliefs have a big effect on our identities. Family influences us with their beliefs about things such as obedience and proper behavior. School judges us according to our grades. Society judges us according to their ideas about how to attain success and how to attain respect.

I find this whole process similar to shadow puppetry. Just like how light is required to see a puppet, these factors affect our ways of behaving, even though we do not realize them.

Therefore, if we go back to the question, “Who defines us?” the answers might be:

- a. Family: Defines us through their intimate relationships.
- b. Social Systems: Train us to become ‘acceptable.’
- c. Cultural Traditions: Create the image of ‘ideal woman’ and ‘ideal person.’
- d. Language: Creates the image of ‘us’ through public discourse.

When people become aware of these factors, ~~then~~ they can start to think about them through a critical lens. In the installation, moving from watching the shadow to manipulating the puppet is similar to becoming aware of these factors. Now, identity is not something that is defined by others, but something that can be molded by our own will.

2) Reflection about Audience experience

One of the comments during the feedback session was that, while controlling the puppet, the audience felt as though there was a conversation between the puppet and their body. They were moving the puppet, and they started thinking about what it would be like inside the character of the puppet. They were thinking about the identity, background, and feelings of the puppet. This shows that the viewers are not just passively watching the piece; they are feeling the piece through their own body, as the puppet’s controller.

Another feedback commented that piece was about the cultural understanding of the piece.

The piece incorporates a lot of Chinese culture, like the shadow puppetry and the Peking opera roles. The viewers from the West may find these parts hard to understand.

In making this project, I started to understand that the problem is not that there is too much Chinese culture involved in the work, but that the audience may need to be more clearly introduced to the work to understand the context of the installation. I don't think that I need to change the work to make it more accessible for me to relate to it. What I need to do is to clearly introduce my work to the audience to enable them to understand the context of the Chinese culture involved in the characters, symbols, and stories. This experience has helped me to look at the issue of cultural translation from a different perspective. It is not that I need to change the Chinese culture to Western culture; it is more that I need to introduce my work to the audience to enable them to enter the work from their own perspective.

This process made me reflect on the relationship between cultural specificity and audience understanding. At first, I worried that using too many Chinese traditional references might make the work difficult for Western audiences to connect with. However, after discussion and feedback, I began to realize that the problem is not the cultural content itself, but the lack of contextual support for the audience. I do not want to dilute the Chinese cultural foundation of the work, because that foundation is central to both my identity and my research. Instead, I want to think more carefully about how to introduce the work, so that viewers can understand why these references matter and how they connect to the themes of gender, discipline, and identity. This reflection helped me see that accessibility does not always require changing the artwork; sometimes it requires changing the way the work is framed and introduced.

Conclusion & Future development

This project does not aim to provide a single answer to the question “Who defines us?” but instead opens a space for ongoing reflection. By working through traditional forms such as shadow puppetry and Peking Opera, the project demonstrates that identity is not a natural or fixed state, but something constructed through repetition, discipline, and cultural expectation.

In this process, mimicry plays a central role. By adopting recognizable cultural forms, the work makes visible the structures that shape behavior and identity. However, rather than reinforcing these structures, it uses them as a means of subversion. Through small disruptions in movement, narrative, and audience participation, the work challenges what appears to be natural, exposing identity as something that can be questioned, negotiated, and partially reclaimed.

Looking forward, this project has the potential to expand beyond its current exhibition format. In a Chinese context, the work may produce a different kind of response. For audiences who are more directly embedded in these cultural systems, the experience may be more immediate, personal, and even uncomfortable, as it reflects familiar social expectations and pressures. In contrast, international audiences may approach the work from a more observational perspective, engaging with it as a cultural and theoretical exploration. This difference highlights how identity is always shaped by context and suggests that the work could evolve through site-specific adaptations.

Future developments may include transforming the project into participatory workshops, educational programs, or digital interactive platforms, allowing a wider audience to engage with the process of identity construction. In addition, the project may extend into art therapy contexts, where the act of manipulating and redefining symbolic characters can support personal reflection and self-understanding.

Ultimately, this project suggests that while individuals cannot fully escape the cultural systems that shape them, they can begin to recognize, question, and reposition themselves within those systems. In doing so, identity becomes not something that is simply given, but something that can be continuously negotiated.

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Appendix A

Scripts Draft

1) Part 1: Be taught to be quiet

1.1 Screen 1

- 1) 舞台：青衣立于幕布中央，静止三秒。
- 2) 动作：右手缓慢抬起，到胸前停住，微微颤动。

Stage: Qingyi stands at the center of the screen, still for three seconds.

Movement: Her right hand slowly rises and stops at her chest, slightly trembling.

青衣（缓慢、平静但有压抑）：我小时候走路很快，老师总是提醒我女孩子不要跑得太急，说裙子会乱形象会不好，我笑得大声时亲戚会说女孩子要文静一点才讨人喜欢，我考试考第一他们会夸奖我聪明但同时提醒我不要太骄傲，于是我慢慢明白，如果我提前把自己收好，把声音放低，把脚步放慢，把情绪藏起来，别人就不会来纠正我，我也不会因为“太多”而被提醒。

（水袖轻轻落下）

Qingyi (*slow, calm, but with pressure underneath*): When I was little, I walked very fast. My teacher always reminded me that girls should not run too quickly, because it looked messy and not proper. When I laughed loudly, my relatives would say that girls should be gentle and quiet if they want to be liked. When I ranked first in exams, they praised me for being smart, but at the same time told me not to be too proud. Slowly, I understood that if I adjusted myself first if I lowered my voice, slowed my steps, and hid my emotions, then others would not need to correct me, and I would not be reminded that I was “too much.”
(Her water sleeve gently falls.)

1.2 Huadan Coming

动作：花旦从右侧轻快进入，做小幅度移动。

Movement: Huadan enters lightly from the right side, making small energetic movements.

花旦（带着不服气）：你不是这样的人，你小时候站在椅子上唱歌，声音大到连锣鼓都盖不过去，你还说过你不想只是被看懂，你想被真正看见，你画画的时候把房子画成歪的，说世界本来就不是直的，那时候的你一点都不怕别人怎么看。

Huadan (*with dissatisfaction*): You were not like this. When you were young, you stood on a chair and sang so loudly that even the drums could not cover your voice. You once said

you did not want to be simply understood; you wanted to be truly seen. When you drew, you made houses crooked and said that the world was not straight anyway. At that time, you were not afraid of what other people thought.

青衣 (目光平视前方)：人是会变的，当你一次次听到别人说那样的表达不成熟，说那样的想法不现实，说那样的野心太锋利，你就会开始思考是不是应该换一种方式存在，因为被看见有时候意味着被质疑，被评价，被纠正。

Qingyi (looking forward): People change. When you repeatedly hear that your way of expressing yourself is immature, that your ideas are unrealistic, that your ambition is too sharp, you start to wonder whether you should exist in a different way. Because being seen sometimes means being questioned, judged, and corrected.

花旦：可是你后来明明不是改变，你只是把自己磨平，你把棱角削掉，把想法压低，把声音调小，只为了让别人更舒服。

Huadan: But later you did not really change; you just smoothed yourself down. You cut off your sharp edges, lowered your thoughts, softened your voice, all just to make others feel more comfortable.

青衣：不是为了让别人舒服，是为了让自己安全，因为当我顶嘴的时候换来的是更长的沉默，当我坚持的时候被说成不懂事，当我表达不满的时候被提醒要成熟，于是我学会了在冲突发生之前先让步。

Qingyi: It was not to make others comfortable; it was to make myself safe. When I talked back, I was met with long silence. When I insisted, I was called childish. When I showed dissatisfaction, I was told to be more mature. So I learned to step back before the conflict even began.

1.3 Huadan Coming

动作：老旦从左侧缓慢进入，影子略大。

Movement: Laodan slowly enters from the left side. Her shadow is slightly larger.

老旦 (沉稳)：她不是软弱，她只是学会了在这个世界上活得久一点，你记得高中那次你说想学艺术的时候家里是怎么回应的吗，他们说艺术可以当兴趣但不能当饭碗，于是你选择了更稳妥的路，因为你知道坚持的代价会落在你自己身上。

Laodan (calm and steady): She is not weak, she has simply learned how to survive longer in this world. Do you remember in high school when you said you wanted to study art and how your family responded? They told you that art could be a hobby but not a way to

make a living. So you chose the safer path, because you knew that the cost of insisting would fall on you alone.

花旦：那不是保护，那是妥协，她明明有选择，却被一步步推向所谓安全的方向。

Huadan: That was not protection, that was compromise. She clearly had choices, yet she was slowly pushed toward the so-called safe direction.

老旦：想要和能够拥有从来不是一回事，当一个人发现顺从可以换来夸奖，可以换来认同，可以换来“懂事”“乖”“有前途”这些标签时，她自然会开始内化这些标准，因为被认可本身就是一种奖励。

Laodan: Wanting something and being able to have it are never the same thing. When a person realizes that obedience can bring praise, approval, and labels like “mature,” “well-behaved,” and “promising,” she will naturally begin to internalize those standards, because recognition itself is a kind of reward.

青衣（轻声）：我后来才发现，被夸奖其实是会上瘾的，当你一次次因为听话而得到肯定，你就会开始替那些要求你听话的人解释，你会告诉自己他们是为你好，他们只是更现实一点，他们经历过所以更懂，于是有时候我会怀疑这是不是某种斯德哥尔摩综合症，当你长期被规范被塑造被控制，你会开始爱上那种控制，甚至主动替它辩护。

（全场静止两秒）

Qingyi(softly): Later I realized that praise can become addictive. When you are repeatedly affirmed for being obedient, you begin to explain the behavior of those who demand your obedience. You tell yourself they are doing it for your own good, that they are simply more realistic, that they have more experience and therefore understand better. Sometimes I wonder whether this is a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. When you are constantly shaped, guided, and controlled for a long time, you may start to grow attached to that control and even defend it yourself.

(The stage remains still for two seconds.)

2) Part 2: Tags and Reviews

2.1 场景四 丑角进入 Chou Coming

动作：丑角滑入，指向青衣。

Movement: Chou slides in and points at Qingyi.

丑角 (笑)：你们说得太沉重了，我们不过是在给建议，比如不要太瘦也不要太胖，不要太锋利也不要太软弱，不要太出头也不要太沉默，我们只是希望你刚刚好，而所谓刚刚好不过是大多数人觉得舒服的位置。

Chou (*laughing*): You are making this sound too serious. We are only giving advice. For example, do not be too thin and do not be too heavy, do not be too sharp and do not be too soft, do not stand out too much and do not be too quiet. We only hope that you are “just right,” and “just right” simply means a position that most people feel comfortable with.

花旦：那谁定义这个刚刚好，为什么她一定要活在那个舒适区里。

Huadan: Then who defines what “just right” is, and why must she live inside that comfort zone?

丑角：社会定义，社会由无数双看着她的眼睛组成，每一次目光都是一种评分，每一句评论都是一种修正，而她只是其中一个角色。

Chou: Society defines it. Society is made up of countless eyes watching her. Every look is a kind of grading, and every comment is a small correction. She is only one character among many.

青衣：如果我选择不再把这些评价当成命令，而只是当成声音，那会怎样。

Qingyi: What if I choose not to treat these judgments as commands, but only as sounds? What would happen then?

老旦：那你就承担被误解的风险，因为当你穿得随便一点会被说不体面，当你表达愤怒会被说情绪化，当你拒绝要求会被说太强势，你不是没有试过，但每一次尝试都像考试，而你从小就习惯了及格。

Laodan: Then you must accept the risk of being misunderstood. When you dress more casually, people will say you are not proper. When you express anger, they will call you emotional. When you refuse a request, they will say you are too aggressive. You have tried before, but every attempt felt like an exam, and since childhood you have been used to passing.

青衣 (*water sleeve begins to tremble slightly*)：我确实习惯了及格，可是有一天我突然意识到，我的人生不应该只是为了维持一个安全分数，我不想再把自己的存在压缩成一张合格证书。

Qingyi (*her water sleeve begins to tremble slightly*): It is true that I am used to passing, but one day I suddenly realized that my life should not exist only to maintain a safe score. I do not want to reduce my existence to a certificate that says “qualified.”

丑角：可观众需要清晰的角色，他们需要知道你是温柔的，是稳重的，是可以被预判的。

Chou: But the audience needs clear roles. They need to know that you are gentle, stable, and predictable.

青衣：那如果我不想被预判呢，如果我想在抬手的时候不是因为别人期待，而是因为我自己愿意。

Qingyi: What if I do not want to be predictable? What if I want to raise my hand not because others expect it, but because I choose to?

2.2 场景五 压迫 Oppression

动作：老旦靠近幕布，影子扩大，青衣部分被覆盖。

Movement: Laodan moves closer to the screen. Her shadow becomes larger, and part of Qingyi is covered.

老旦：你以为自由只是表达吗，自由意味着后果意味着孤独意味着不被理解，你准备好承受那些了吗。

Laodan: Do you think freedom is only about expression? Freedom also means consequences, loneliness, and being misunderstood. Are you ready to bear those things?

青衣：我不确定，但我知道继续压低自己已经让我越来越模糊，当我替别人解释他们的苛刻，当我说这是现实这是为我好，我已经分不清我是在成熟还是在消失。

Qingyi: I am not sure, but I know that continuing to suppress myself has made me more and more unclear. When I explain other people's harshness for them, when I tell myself that this is reality and that they are doing it for my own good, I can no longer tell whether I am becoming mature or slowly disappearing.

花旦（靠近，与青衣叠影）：你没有消失，你只是被覆盖，你仍然记得跑得很快的感觉，仍然记得画歪房子的快乐，只是你太习惯替别人说话，忘了替自己说。

Huadan (moves closer, overlapping with Qingyi): You are not disappearing; you are only being covered. You still remember what it felt like to run fast, and you still remember the joy of drawing crooked houses. You have just become too used to speaking for others and forgotten how to speak for yourself.

青衣（声音渐稳）：我不想再说他们也是为我好，我不想再用理解掩盖自己的委屈，我不想再把顺从当成爱，因为成熟不应该等于把自己藏起来。

Qingyi (*her voice becomes steadier*): I do not want to keep saying that they are doing this for my own good. I do not want to use understanding to hide my hurt. I do not want to mistake obedience for love, because maturity should not mean hiding myself.

3) Part 3: Recapture

音乐变轻。老旦缓慢后退一步。

The music becomes softer. Laodan slowly steps back.

老旦：如果你要改变，你打算怎么面对接下来的一切。

Laodan: If you choose to change, how will you face everything that comes next?

青衣：我会害怕会犹豫会犯错，但至少那些选择是我做的，而不是提前被安排的，我不是要否定你们，我只是要把决定权拿回来。

Qingyi: I will feel afraid, I will hesitate, and I will make mistakes, but at least those choices will be made by me, not arranged in advance. I am not trying to deny you; I only want to take back the right to decide.

丑角：观众会评价你，他们可能不再满意。

Chou: The audience will judge you. They may no longer be satisfied.

青衣：那就让他们评价，我不是为了维持满意度而活着，当我沉默是因为我选择沉默，当我温柔是因为我愿意温柔，当我愤怒是因为我真实地愤怒，而不是因为我被教会。

Qingyi: Then let them judge. I am not living to maintain their satisfaction. When I am silent, it is because I choose to be silent. When I am gentle, it is because I want to be gentle. When I am angry, it is because I truly feel anger, not because I was taught to behave that way.

老旦：那我在你生命里的位置是什么。

Laodan: Then what is my place in your life?

青衣：你不是敌人，你只是曾经保护我的方式，但从现在开始你站在我身后而不是压在我身上，当我需要稳的时候我会找你，但不是让你替我活。

(老旦退到后方)

Qingyi: You are not my enemy. You were once a way to protect me. But from now on, you stand behind me instead of pressing down on me. When I need stability, I will turn to you, but I will not let you live my life for me.

(Laodan steps back.)

青衣 (最后独白)：我曾经以为成为一个好女儿好学生好角色就是成功，但如果那个“好”不是由我定义，那它只是一个漂亮的牢笼，这不是一场叛逆，而是一场回收，我要回收我的声音，回收我的选择，回收那个曾经跑得很快的自己，而这一次，当我抬起手的时候，我清楚地知道，那是我自己。

(水袖缓慢展开，灯光渐暗)

Qingyi (final monologue): I used to believe that becoming a good daughter, a good student, and a good character meant success. But if that “good” is not defined by me, then it is only a beautiful cage. This is not a rebellion; it is a reclaiming. I am reclaiming my voice, reclaiming my choices, and reclaiming the self who once ran very fast. And this time, when I raise my hand, I clearly know that it belongs to me.

(Her water sleeves slowly open. The light gradually fades.)

Appendix B

1) Exhibition Area Layout

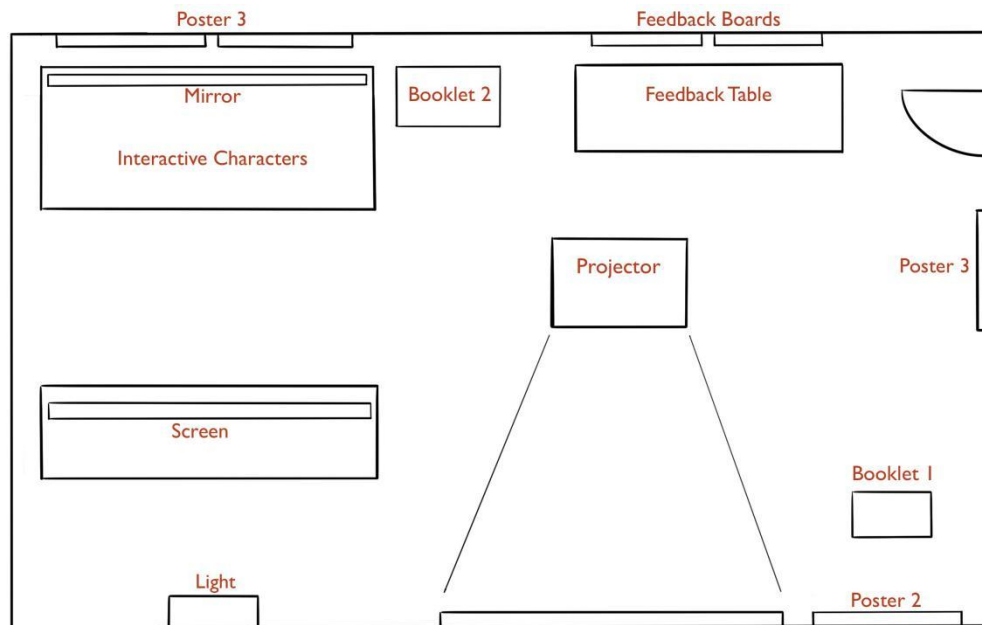


Figure 11. Exhibition Area Layout

2) Posters Design

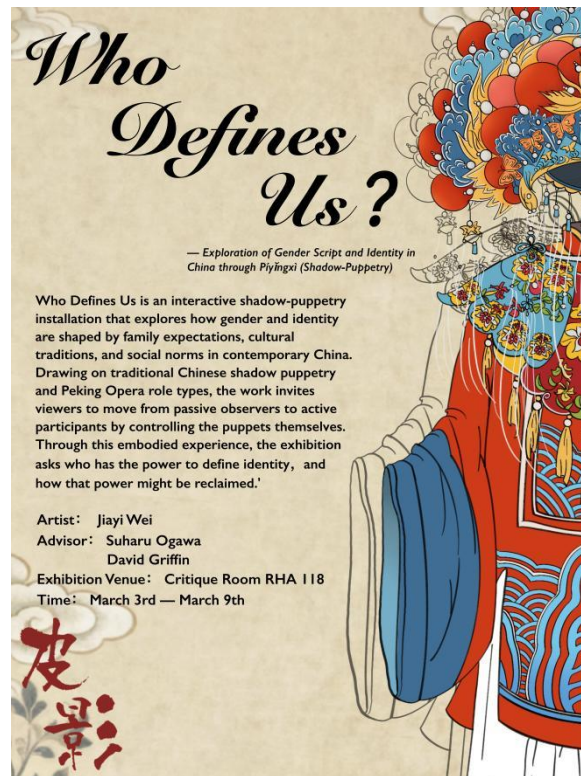


Figure 12. Poster 1

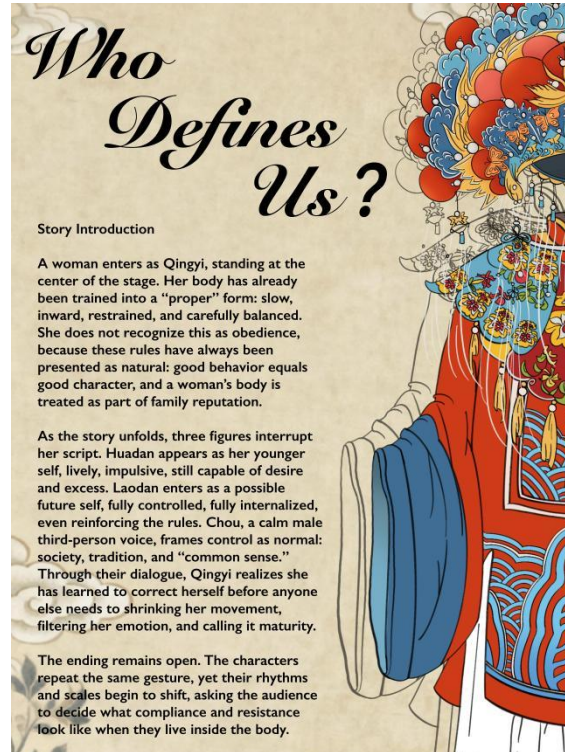


Figure 13. Story Board Poster



Figure 14. Interactive Zone Poster 1



Figure 15. Interactive Zone Poster 2

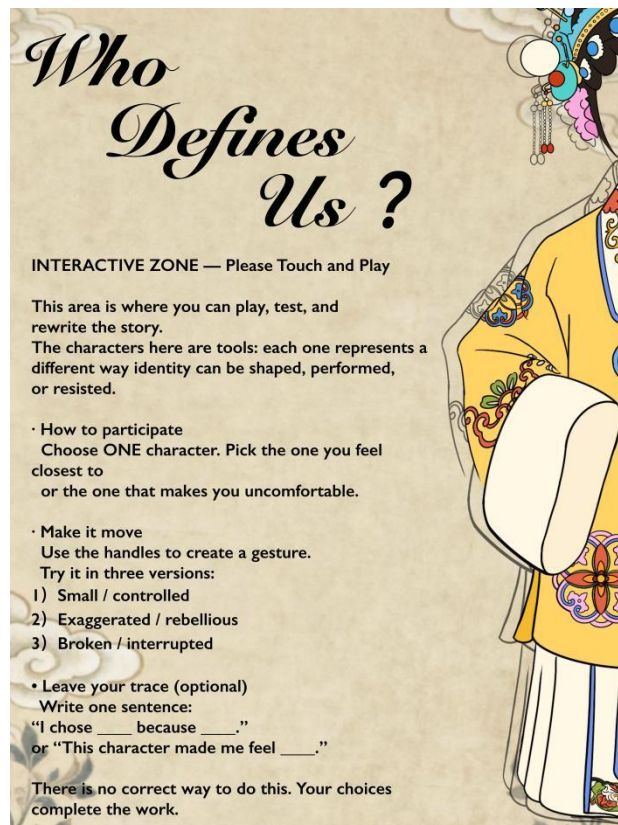


Figure 16. Feedback Zone Poster