

From Sacred to Profane: Teochew Opera in the Malaysian Chinese Community

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Abstract

Teochew opera is a traditional cultural performance that has been practised since the early 19th century when the Chinese Teochew immigrated to Malaysia. It is often presented as a theatrical performance dedicated to the gods during folk festivals or as entertainment. Teochew opera is associated with the beliefs and entertainment desires of Chinese immigrants and usually accompanies the traditional festivals and cultural events of the Chinese community in Malaysia. When Malaysia advanced towards modernisation in politics, economy, culture and education, Malaysian Chinese culture also underwent a modern transformation. Teochew opera, one of the Chinese cultures, is reflected in the change of its function from the sacred to the profane. This thesis analyses the performance of Teochew opera in the sacred and profane context of the Chinese community in Malaysia to illustrate the trends and challenges facing it under the influence of modernisation.

Keywords: Sacred and Profane Contexts, Teochew Opera, Chinese Community in Malaysia, Chinese Beliefs.

Introduction

The hitherto human theatre¹, including early primitive and folk theatre, is intertwined with the various human instincts of life, sprung from the roots of human primitive culture. People dance, sing, wear masks and costumes; impersonate other people, animals or supernatural forces (or are possessed by these others); perform stories and re-present alternative histories; rehearse and prepare special places and times for these speeches—all of these coexist with the human condition (Eliade, 1987).

Throughout history, based on archaeological and anthropological evidence, sacred and profane rituals have often involved one or more types of performance, such as theatre, dance and music. These ritual performances were not only spiritual, but often beautiful and pleasurable—spirituality, pleasure and aesthetics are closely linked in performance (Attisani, 1999). Originally theatre was motivated by the desire to “reward the gods”, but with the

¹ Theatre is a collaborative form of performing art that uses live performers, usually actors or actresses, to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place, often a stage.

development of science and social progress, religious superstition is becoming diminished, and the performances became mainly “entertainment”. The so-called “from sacred to the profane” is not an either/or from “A” to “B”, but rather from “focusing on rewarding the gods” to “focusing on entertaining the people”. With the development of modernisation and under the impact of mainstream culture, the sacred ritualistic attributes of Teochew opera, as a subculture, have been weakened and its profane entertainment attributes have been enhanced.

The Spread of Teochew Opera in Malaysia

Teochew opera² is a traditional form of theatre (opera) from China, in which music is a fundamental component and dramatic roles are filled by singers (Riley & Jo, 1997). Teochew opera is mainly distributed in Guangdong (广东) Province, China, but is also popular in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand (Chen, 1999). Malaysia is the second most populous overseas country in the world after Singapore in terms of Chinese population, and is a cultural enclave³ where Teochew opera has spread and developed (Cheu, 2021). The arrival of Teochew opera in Malaysia is the result of migration, the ancestors of Teochew migrated to Malaysia, bringing with them advanced technology, production methods and customs, as well as Chinese poetry and prose, music and painting, and opera. As a symbol of Teochew cultural identity and community, Teochew opera has been adored by Teochew immigrants for a long time since it took root in Malaysia, with its secular and popular aesthetic characteristics and flavours, becoming a symbol of their community identity and performing its unique social and cultural functions (Chen, 1999). With the modernisation of Malaysia, the context of Teochew opera has been greatly affected. However, the Teochew people in Malaysia have traditionally maintained a unique cultural tradition of performing theatre as an expression of behaviour and symbolic representation that has uninterruptedly manifested the imagery of community.

Teochew opera is deeply rooted in Malaysia in the footsteps of the early Chinese ancestors, motivated by the desire and pursuit of Chinese culture among the Chinese. The appreciation value of the art and the ritual function of faith in Teochew opera was the reason why it was noticed and welcomed by the overseas Chinese. Most of the Teochew people who migrated to Malaysia in the early days were from poor families and had to endure hardships as they lived abroad (Chee-Beng, 1997). Whenever they had spare time for work, one of the immigrant groups and theatre fans who were obsessed with Teochew opera would spontaneously sing Teochew opera as a way to fill their simple but empty spiritual life, as a way to ease the pain of being uprooted from their homeland in their hearts and to send their thoughts of home with music (Lai, 1993).

The presence of Teochew opera in Malaysia is inseparable from the beliefs of the Chinese. As the number of Teochew people grew, they therefore carried over the original customs and religious beliefs of their homeland, building temples to worship the gods and praying for

² Teochew opera is one of the most distinctive local operas in Chinese opera (opera sung in the dialect).

³ Cultural enclave refers to small immigrant cultural groups that exist within a larger cultural environment; these immigrants have not been assimilated into other cultures because of their firm psycho-cultural boundaries.

blessings and peace. Worship was necessary when there were temples, and the performance of plays in honour of the gods was a must (Chen, 1999). Teochew opera performances exist as offerings to the gods, were closely linked to the entertainment of both the gods and the people, and this entertainment function was most fully displayed in the festival folklore. At the same time, it is also a reflection of the cultural exchange between the art of the Chinese immigrant community and Malaysian society, and has considerable cultural connotations. It is evident that Teochew opera has been localised in Malaysia precisely because of its ritual and entertainment function in the Chinese community, as illustrated in Figure 1, the two contexts are performed for different purposes.

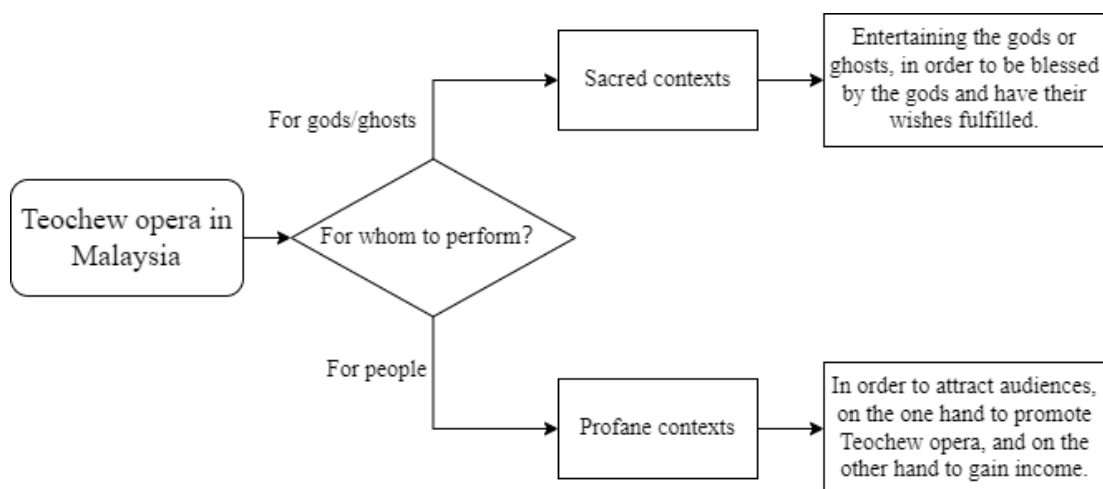


Figure 1: The function of Teochew opera in different contexts in the Malaysian Chinese community

Teochew Opera in Chinese Community Rituals

Ritual, is one of the most ancient, universal and persistent cultural phenomena in the history of mankind (Kelly & Kaplan, 1990). As a particular form of behaviour, rituals are often based on ideas of deity and religious beliefs, or are closely linked to social structures and folk rituals such as politics, ethics, morality, customs and traditions (Xue, 2003). Music, dance and poetry were an integral part of early human rituals and are still retained in community communal ceremonies or large-scale rituals, as evidenced by the presence of Teochew opera in the Chinese community in Malaysia.

The anthropologist Richard Schechner (1995) pointed out the differences and distinctions between ritual performance and theatre performance, the former requires efficacy, while the latter is characterised by entertainment. Schechner contrasted the similarities and differences between the two, argued that:

“Ritual is about results, also relevant to those who are not present, the time is symbolic, the performers can be involved up to a state of ‘possession’, the audience participates, the audience believes, criticism is not encouraged, group finished work; theatre is about play, only relevant to those who are present, emphasis on the present, the performers are involved but awake, the audience watches and appreciates, a lot of criticism, individual work” (Schechner, 1995, p. 120).

In the Chinese community of Malaysia, Teochew opera is not only associated with many Chinese folk customs, but also with the religion of the Teochew people. In general, Chinese people worship both Buddhas and gods, and also pay tribute to their ancestors and adore their divinities, similar to the situation in China (Cheu, 2021). In Malaysia, Teochew opera is always accompanied by Chinese religious rituals and festive folk events. The Italian religious scholar Gaster (1961) regarded ritual as a performance of myth and explored the origins of ritual performance. Gaster considered myth to be the “narrate” of the actions of the primitive or archetypal gods, and ritual to be the “enact” of that narrative (Gaster, 1961). It is clear that Teochew opera matches this characteristic, by playing the role of gods in ritual activities and enacting their stories for their appreciation, maximising its religious function of entertaining the gods.

The spread of Teochew opera in Malaysia is attributed to the traditional Chinese folk festivals. Festivals are the periodic memory and review of various cultural elements in Chinese life (Kang, 2007), and are an important medium for linking the consumption and production of opera and spreading opera culture. In the daily life of Chinese people, the various festivals related to the gods and ghosts have often become the foundation for Teochew opera performances. Chinese in Malaysia perform Teochew opera during festivals, basically following the traditional Chinese performance conventions (Zheng, 2004), mainly during various festivals, including: traditional Chinese festivals (such as Chinese New Year, Hungry Ghost Festival) as well as different divine festivals and temple fairs, where Teochew opera is an important part of the festive folk rituals of worshipping the gods and praying for blessings. Some of the highly appreciated divine festivals among the Chinese community in Malaysia include the Nine Emperor Gods Festival (九皇誕), *Guan Yin* Festival (观音誕), and *Tian Gong* Festival (天公誕), as well as some ritual activities for the parade of deities, such as the Teochew opera performed at the Johor Old Temple Parade of Deities (Lee, 2018).

In addition, the Teochew opera performance at the Hungry Ghost Festival (Obon, 中元节) is a typical ritual among the Chinese community in Malaysia. In contrast to other festivals, the Teochew opera performed at the Hungry Ghost Festival is not only for the enjoyment of the gods, but also for the ghosts. In Chinese culture, the fifteenth day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar is called Ghost Day and the seventh month in general is regarded as the Ghost Month (鬼月), in which ghosts and spirits, including those of deceased ancestors, come out from the lower realm (China Daily, 2014). During this month, the gates of hell are opened up and ghosts are free to roam the earth where they seek food and entertainment. These ghosts are believed to be ancestors of those who forgot to pay tribute to them after they died, or those who were never given a proper ritual send-off (Essortment, 2008). As a result, the Chinese community has always performed opera or other musical forms to please the ghosts at the Hungry Ghost Festival, these acts are better known as “Merry-making”.

The Chinese in Malaysia generally refer to the rituals of the Hungry Ghost Festival as “*Pudu* (普渡)” (a ceremony to overtake the souls of the deceased). Take Penang as an example, the ceremony is held separately in Chinese communities, with different dates for the start and end of the ceremony in each community, and choose auspicious days for the ceremony, which usually lasts for five days. During this period, Teochew opera was presented as an offering to

the gods and ghosts in a ritual. The basic framework for the practice of Teochew opera performance is in sacred spatial and temporal contexts, and the spatial venues for performance can be divided into two types: one is a sacred place in their own right such as temples and ancestral halls; and the other is specific spaces temporarily endowed with sacredness for the performance of rituals such as temporary altars and shrines in open squares. All the rituals are organised and held by Persatuan Teong Guan Pulau pinang, a permanent Chinese organisation that co-ordinates the individualised Hungry Ghost Festival rituals in each community.

In Penang's Chinese community, the grand ritual of *Pudu* is held not only for religious reasons, but also for secular purposes, as an opportunity to link the ritual with the Chinese community's sponsorship of charitable welfare and educational endeavours. This is one of the most important features of Penang *Pudu*, which is the outward manifestation of the strength of the Chinese community, the popularisation and promotion of Chinese culture and education, the prayers for the welfare and prosperity of the Chinese such as the prosperity of trade and commerce, and the peace of the local community (Du-Bian, 1998). One of the most notable practices is that the Persatuan Teong Guan Pulau pinang (槟州中元联合会) raises funds for at least one Chinese school every year during this ritual, as well as holding other charity events, including fundraising for the poor and the sick.

The performance of Teochew opera is an integral part of the *Pudu* ritual, and the Chinese community in Penang usually builds a temporary stage next to the festival square and recruits a troupe to perform for the gods and ghosts. The local Chinese believe that the Teochew opera is performed to entertain the *Da Shi Ye*⁴ (大士爷, the main deity of the ritual), the Buddhas and the ghosts, and to keep the prayers safe, it is also necessary and effective for the edification of the living and the appeasement of the ghosts. Grimes (1995) argued that a gesture or posture (performance) has been ritualised when humans give it meaning, turning it into a means of communication or a form of performance, and relegating its functional practical value (appreciating value) to a secondary position. As a traditional art form, Teochew opera has taken on a special role. This is partly a reflection of the purpose of opera—to please the gods and ghosts. Even when no one came to see the performance, the opera was performed as usual.

As a result, the Penang Chinese folklore tradition of the Hungry Ghost Festival and the corresponding performances reflect the Chinese cosmology. They believe that heaven, earth and hell are one integrated, and that they can communicate with each other over time. The rituals performed by the Chinese in a community at the Hungry Ghost Festival also reflect, to a certain extent, the common desire of the Chinese in the community for a better life in the

⁴ Da Shi Ye, the Venerable Great Lord. also known as the king of Ghosts, is one of the most fearsome Hell deities. Worship of Da Shi Ye becomes very widespread during the Seventh Month which is Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival. During this period souls serving penance in Hell are temporarily set free for a month's reprieve. Da Shi Ye will keep his glinting eye on the prisoners to ensure that they do not harm any human beings or escape. In accordance with this belief, large paper effigies of him are erected in temple grounds, cemeteries and other strategic areas where the wandering spirits frequently appear.

future. Through ritualistic methods, they hope to conquer unpredictable disasters, entertain the gods and ghosts with theatre, and pray for the blessing of the *Da Shi Ye* and to be protected from the invasion and disturbance of ghosts and spirits, especially those who have perished; it is also expected that through the power of Gods and Buddhas, with compassion and divine power, the greed, injustice and obsession of all beings will be dissolved, so that both humans and ghosts will have a spirit of fraternity. The tradition of performing theatre at festive rituals has strengthened the attraction of Teochew opera to Chinese audiences and reinforced the radiating power of opera culture to survive and thrive in the multicultural environment of Malaysia.

The Challenge of De-Sacralisation in Teochew Opera

In a discussion of the “consequences of modernity”, Giddens and Pierson (1998) proposed the proposition of a rupture between tradition and modernity. Although a number of scholars have strongly questioned this, there is no denying that there is a huge difference in how people deal with their “past” in both traditional and modern contexts. In traditional cultures, the “past” is particularly respected and symbols are of great value as they contain and immortalise the way a community has behaved and experienced for generations. In contrast, in the modern context, tradition is more commonly seen as a set of dynamic processes linked by the past, the present and the future, which are themselves constructed by recurring social practices. It means that change, adaptation, alteration and even reconfiguration are fundamentally inevitable.

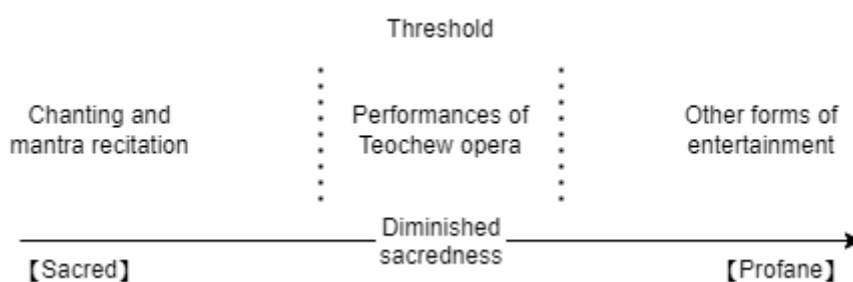


Figure 2: Teochew opera as an intermediate representation of the sacred and the profane.

As Figure 2 shown, the Teochew opera presents an intermediate expression between the sacred and the profane in the ritual activities of the Chinese community. Schechner (1976) has studied a ritual dance in the highlands of Papua New Guinea to illustrate how a performance will change over the course of history. In Schechner's case, the evolutionary trajectory of the ritual dance slides along a continuum of efficacy from sacred ritual to secular theatre, in other words a gradual increase in entertainment and a gradual decrease in ritual function. This seems to be the inevitable fate that the traditional ritual dances (theatre) of many nationalities around the world have to face in the modern changes. A similar trend can be seen in the cultural phenomenon of Teochew opera, but the situation is more complex.

On the one hand, based on its increasingly strong entertainment function, Teochew opera has also been utilised as a cultural symbol to fulfil other social functions. Before the Chinese community was formed in Malaysia, Teochew opera was only used as a form of entertainment to relieve tiredness among some immigrant groups and played a role in promoting individual relationships and connections within them. With the growing number of Chinese immigrants

in Malaysia, the Chinese gradually formed community-based groups, at which time the Teochew opera became an artistic symbol for the Teochew community to imagine their homeland, and through the performance of Teochew opera, the uprooted immigrants reconstructed their imagination of their homeland in performance and song. When the economic power of the Teochew people in the Chinese community grew, clan organisations were formed. The organisers funded traditional rituals and celebrations to strengthen connections with their members, and the ritual role of Teochew opera in communicating with the gods was recaptured as an integral part of the ritual. But as the vast modern tourism industry today reaches out to all corners of Malaysia, the entertainment aspect of Teochew opera has been further emphasised. It is often staged in front of an expectant audience, or the tourist joins in the performance for a participatory cultural experience. As a result, Teochew opera has become a sort of folklore label for the Chinese community, a consumer product in the tourism industry chain that can generate economic benefits, and a form of cultural capital for the local government to compete for tourism resources.

On the other hand, although the changing social context and the introduction of foreign ideas have led to the gradual folklorisation and entertainment of Teochew opera as a community heritage, its social function as a traditional ritual has been preserved to a considerable extent. It is only behind its ritual function that the traditional concept of the Teochew community as a whole has become increasingly fragmented.

As a long-established traditional cultural practice of the community, today's Teochew opera performance still serves the function of community integration and identity cohesion for the Teochew people in the Chinese community in Malaysia. But in the face of foreign culture, industrialisation and modernisation, this scene of integration has mixed implications—there is a conflict of interests between the community and the outsiders; the traditional social field is fragmented in the face of the strong forces of foreign culture and the modernisation process; and the frustration of people facing the decline of Chinese tradition.

Furthermore, Teochew opera, which is situated between the sacred and the profane, faces serious challenges. Under the impact of modern forms of entertainment, it seems that the “outdated” Teochew opera is no longer the main form of entertainment for the Chinese community. On the one hand, the challenge comes from the variety of modern forms of entertainment consumption, with films, television, Ko-tai⁵ (Tan, 1984), dance halls, fashion shows, home cinema, and so on, competing to entertain people with a more participatory and entertaining character; On the other hand, Chinese opera is an old and outdated art form that is no longer able to cater to the entertainment needs of the new generation of Chinese in Malaysia today, and even the older generation of opera lovers have new ways to entertain themselves, and there has been a serious loss of people as an audience in performance of Teochew opera. As the sacred rituals of Teochew opera diminish, if the secular entertainment also disappears, the culture will be lost in the memory of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

⁵ An outdoor concert held at the Hungry Ghost Festival, this is a popular form of performance with singers singing, a band accompanying them, and interspersed with the host's hilarious dialogues.

Conclusion

The significance and socio-cultural function of Teochew opera in Malaysia is not one-sided, but has tended to diversify from the more monolithic religious context to the realm of secular society, showing an inherent change from sacred to profane. In order to survive and thrive, Teochew opera began to transform from a sacred ritual to a profane entertainment function, as reflected in: The performance of Teochew opera at Chinese folk festivals has been declining and the purpose has changed from entertaining the gods and exorcising ghosts to a more secular and charitable goal, such as the performance of Teochew opera at the Hungry Ghost Festival in Penang to raise funds for the education of Chinese schools. Furthermore, the increasing frequency of Teochew opera performances in theatres or cultural festivals, where the audience has changed from gods and ghosts to citizens or tourists, has become a cultural presentation with commercial value. The intention is to display Malaysia's tolerance for multiculturalism and the unique charm of the Chinese culture.

Ultimately, the transformation of Teochew opera from the sacred to the profane in Malaysia has been influenced, on the one hand, as a result of the commercialisation of modern society. With the rapid development of the commodity economy, various fashionable forms of entertainment and leisure have emerged, such as Ko-tai and other forms of performance, squeezing the space for the survival of Teochew opera in traditional Chinese festivals. Compared to the archaic and outdated performances of Teochew opera, Ko-tai is more adaptable, able to change its performances according to the requirements and preferences of its sponsors, and has low employment costs; Ko-tai is popular among the Chinese community—especially the young Chinese—for its cost-effective and modern performances, which has led to the gradual abandonment of Teochew opera in traditional Chinese festivals. On the other hand, the loss of dialect is a crucial determinant of the younger generation's appreciation of Teochew opera. The young people in the Chinese community were born and raised in Malaysia, receiving more education in English and Malay, and have objectively been removed from their Chinese cultural parentage. With the alienation of ethnic attachment, the younger generation of Malaysian Chinese have little or no knowledge of Chinese history, culture and customs. Coupled with the language barrier, they have shown considerable distance and reluctance towards the archaic culture of Teochew opera. As a result, Teochew opera can only develop in a profane context, being presented as a performance for tourists at cultural festivals or theatres. These venues display subtitles on screen in English or Malay, which can enable the audience to better understand the plot and enhance their acceptance of and interest in Teochew opera.

The old functions are gradually weakening, and new functions and meanings are emerging. This is the result of the artificial adaptation and transformation of Teochew opera in the modern context, and a positive measure to maintain its vitality. But what is revealed behind the decline in the sacredness of Teochew opera is the diminishing identity of the Malaysian Chinese with Teochew opera. From my perspective, if we want to change this situation, Teochew opera should make the following adjustments: On the one hand, Malaysian Chinese should strengthen the education of traditional Chinese culture within the community and emphasise the learning of Chinese language— especially the dialect. The younger generation of Malaysian Chinese should be able to understand and identify with Teochew opera as an excellent traditional Chinese culture. With the recognition and support from within the community, make it possible for Teochew opera to prosper again in traditional Chinese

festivals. On the other hand, Teochew opera should be creative and innovative in its inherited content, such as combining it with popular music or dance to create a performance form that meets modern aesthetic needs. It is also important to adapt to the contemporary aspect of cultural communication by utilising mass media such as TikTok and YouTube to increase the appeal of cultural dissemination and broaden the audience base. Only in this way can Teochew opera maintain its sacred and profane social functions in a balanced manner in the multicultural context of Malaysia, without being assimilated by other cultures.

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