



Imprints in Time: The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore

SU ZHANGKAI

NAM HWA O P E R A

Imprints in Time:

The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore

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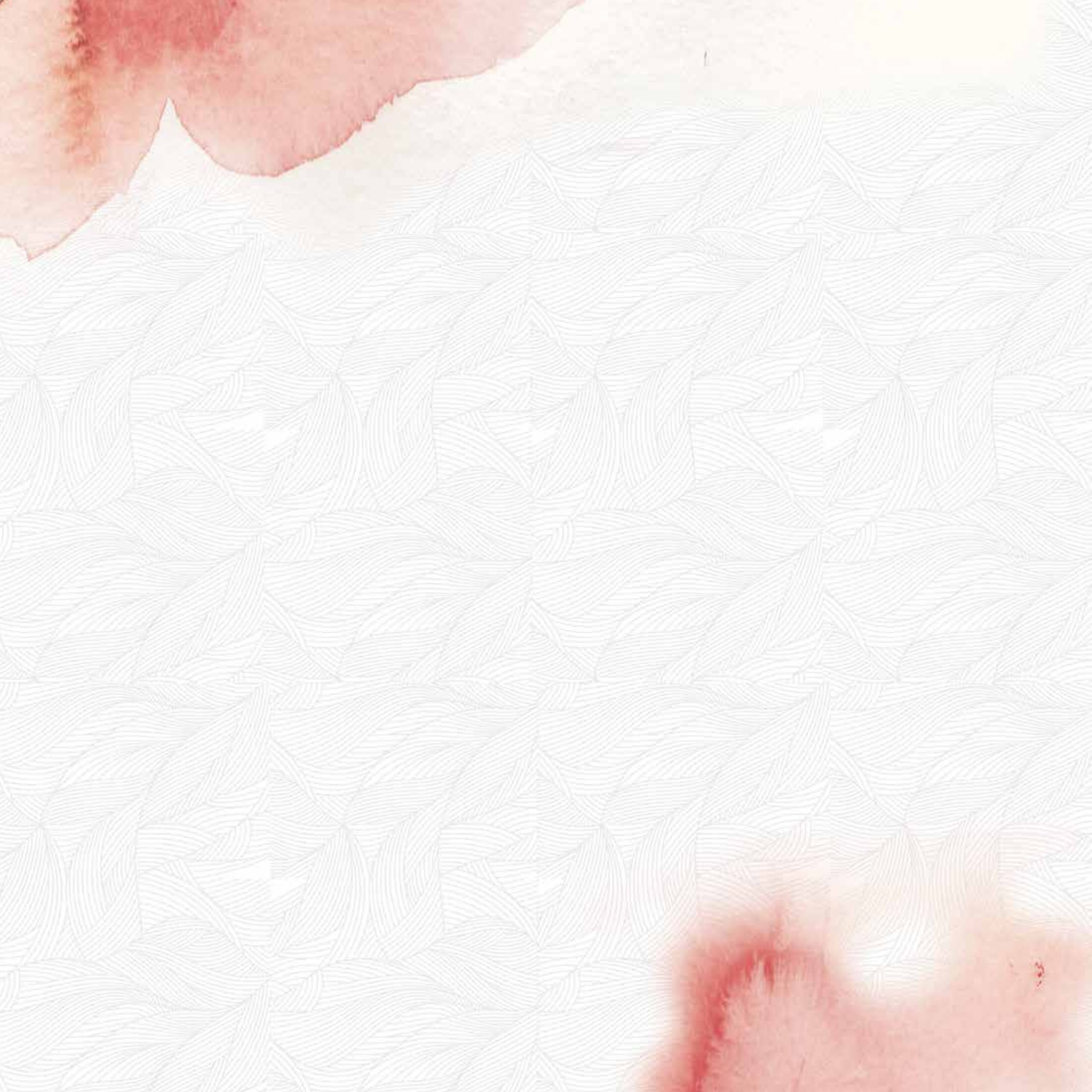
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Foreword

Mr Baey Yam Keng

Senior Parliamentary Secretary
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of
Transport

Datuk Seri Teo Kiang Ang, PBM

Chairman, Nam Hwa Opera Limited

Mr Ang Chin Koon, PBM, S.B.St.J.

Organising Chairman of Nam Hwa's 55th Anniversary
Committee

Mr Toh Lim Mok JP, BBM(L)

Acting Chairman and President, Nam Hwa Opera Limited

Mr Xie Keng

Vice-Chairman of the 12th Shantou City Committee of the
Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
Professor, Shantou University

Mr Wu Dianxiang

Artistic Advisor, Nam Hwa Opera Limited



Mr Baey Yam Keng

**Senior Parliamentary Secretary
Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth & Ministry of Transport**

Chinese opera is a traditional performing art that brings together literature, music, dance and martial arts. It is an important part of our intangible cultural heritage, which should be safeguarded and passed down to future generations.

Nam Hwa Opera has been a key player in the development and promotion of Chinese opera – specifically Teochew opera and music – since its establishment in 1963. It was recently incorporated as a non-profit company limited by guarantee, with Institution of a Public Character status. Today, Nam Hwa Opera is known for its innovative approach of infusing multicultural elements into its performances, while staying true to cultural traditions in Chinese opera. It is also expanding its audience base to different communities, overseas spectators, and engaging the younger generation through technology.

These efforts are key to the continued relevance and transmission of our traditional arts. Teochew opera, like other traditional art forms,

will evolve as it interacts with multi-ethnic cultures to become an art form that is uniquely Singaporean, reflecting our multicultural diversity and shared values.

In 2016, Nam Hwa Opera published *A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore*, to document the developments of Teochew opera in Singapore. It has followed-up on this successful first effort with this new book, *Imprints in Time*, which delves deeper into the rich history of Teochew opera in Singapore's context. Published in conjunction with Nam Hwa Opera's 55th anniversary, *Imprints in Time* is a timely gift to Teochew opera aficionados, researchers, and anyone interested in our intangible cultural heritage. I commend Nam Hwa Opera for making the book available in both English and Chinese, which allows a wider audience to enjoy its richness and insights.

I wish Nam Hwa Opera a happy 55th anniversary, and hope to see the organisation scale even greater heights in the years ahead.



Datuk Seri Teo Kiang Ang, PBM
Chairman, Nam Hwa Opera Limited

Since its establishment in 1963, Nam Hwa Opera has worked hard to preserve and publicise Teochew opera. True to its mission of developing, promoting and imparting the tradition, it has embarked on numerous projects over the years, including the publication of “A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore” in 2016. The book resonated with local Teochew opera lovers. It stirred their collective memories and left an important mark for the art in Singapore.

Now Nam Hwa is back with another publication: “Imprints in Time – The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore”. Just like “A Pictorial History”, the editorial work for “Imprints” is spearheaded by Nam Hwa’s honorary secretary Su Zhangkai. He had led a professional editorial team, which has conducted interviews, reviewed oral history and gathered expert opinions for the book. Although “Imprints” is published in both English and Chinese, the editorial team has opted to write in both languages instead of settling for a direct translation. They have worked tirelessly to research, edit and proofread. Kudos to their dedication.

I believe art is everlasting. I once heard a story of a great artist who left an epitaph on his tombstone saying: “Here lies a foot soldier for art and culture.” I deeply admire this spirit of dedication to art. Many of our predecessors were committed to carrying on tradition with little regard for personal recognition or glory. Without their efforts, art would not have flourished or been passed on. It is vital to record their stories.

“Imprints” is invaluable because it records the history of local Teochew opera in a complete and inclusive manner. We want to present a thorough account that is impartial to all organisations and troupes – the same approach that was taken for “A Pictorial History”. Teochew opera will only survive if its community is united.

“Imprints in Time – The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore” tells the story of Singapore Teochew opera’s history, development and future. I dedicate it to all Teochew opera lovers.



Mr Ang Chin Koon, PBM, S.B.St.J.

Organising Chairman of Nam Hwa's 55th Anniversary Committee

Nam Hwa Opera was born in October 1963, formed by a group of friends who loved studying opera and were keen to promote traditional Teochew culture. It became a place for the like-minded to gather. Through the efforts of its leaders and members, Nam Hwa grew quickly. It left footprints both in Singapore and abroad, with performances that received praise from a broad audience.

More than half a century later, Nam Hwa celebrates its 55th anniversary. We take this opportunity to pay tribute to our history and pioneers, through a series of celebratory activities that includes the publication of "Imprints in Time – The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore". Besides documenting the development of local Teochew opera, the book also celebrates the contribution of our predecessors and provides an outlook for the future development of Teochew opera in Singapore.

At Nam Hwa's 16th anniversary celebration in 1979, Senior Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of the Environment Chor Yeok Eng said: "A people without cultural roots will never be able to flourish. Cultural roots are the most precious – only these can bring one to greater heights."

I agree completely. This is precisely why we need to trace our roots, record our history and pass on our culture. Our book's editor-in-chief Su Zhangkai wrote in Nam Hwa's last commemorative book that "searching for roots must take place while one still has roots". As such, I'm heartened that he carried on his efforts from the last book to oversee this new one.

The values that propel Nam Hwa in its efforts have always been: to preserve tradition, to cherish what we have and to pass on the Nam Hwa spirit. In terms of preserving tradition, I feel that Nam Hwa has done very well. Seeing how united the editorial team is, working day and night toward a common goal, I can feel the sense of mission brewing in them.

I hope more people can come forward to contribute to the cause. We are not superficially passing on tradition – we want to thoroughly understand our past, so that we know how to navigate the future. Understanding the challenges our predecessors faced will also make us cherish what we have now even more.

It is a heavy responsibility but with our combined efforts, we will be able to hand over our best traditions to future generations. Let us ensure that the most beautiful parts of Teochew culture live on!



Mr Toh Lim Mok JP, BBM(L)

Acting Chairman and President, Nam Hwa Opera Limited

While preparing for Nam Hwa's 55th anniversary celebrations, an idea crossed my mind. If collective memory is such an important part of history, why don't we put together a book that commemorates both the history of Nam Hwa as well as the development of Teochew opera in Singapore? Firstly, the book would pay tribute to Teochew opera practitioners and their contributions in Singapore. Secondly, it would be symbolic of Nam Hwa's embarkation on its next chapter.

Inspired by the reception of our publication "A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore" two years ago, this new book aims to continue our mission of taking Teochew opera to new heights.

The beauty of Teochew opera is key to its continued relevance and progress as an art form. Ever since Nam Hwa Opera became a professional arts group in 2015, we have sought to preserve, develop and promote Teochew opera as an important heritage of Singapore. In what we do, we strive to continue the good work done by our pioneering members, while exploring new frontiers.

Looking back at over 100 years of Teochew opera history in Singapore, many Teochew opera organisations have come and gone.

What is encouraging though, is that there is still a group of pioneers who refuse to give up on their passion and are still persevering to this day. Because of them, the spirit and beauty of Teochew opera live on. This book, *Imprints in Time – The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore* – is an attempt to carry on the legacy of Teochew opera.

My special thanks to Mr. Su Zhangkai, the Honorary Secretary of Nam Hwa Opera, who volunteered his time in leading a team of both English and Chinese editors to produce this book. The team worked tirelessly to gather research through interviews and archival materials. Through digital media, we are now also able to share this book with a global audience.

To move ahead, we need to reflect on the past. Together with Teochew opera performers, practitioners and enthusiasts, we hope to explore the future of the traditional arts in Singapore, and overcome the challenges that lie ahead.

Let us persevere together and keep the tradition alive. Teochew opera lives on!



Mr Xie Keng

Vice-Chairman of the 12th Shantou City Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

Professor, Shantou University

"Every spring flower of Teochew opera bloom brilliantly." Teochew operas, also reputed as "Wonder of the South", are treasures of Teochew culture and is listed in the first batch of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Teochew operas has accompanied the footsteps of Teochew immigrants for a couple of centuries to spread overseas from China, becoming an indispensable source of consolation for overseas Teochew immigrants and having vast influence in the world.

Nam Hwa Opera, the well-known Teochew opera association of Singapore, is celebrating its 55th anniversary today. 55 beautiful springs and bountiful autumns, 55 glorious years of history. As a Singapore Chinese cultural entertainment organisation, Nam Hwa has persevered in its mission of inheriting, promoting and developing traditional Teochew operas. Generation after generation of Nam Hwa people held onto Teochew opera and imparted Teochew tunes and Teochew arts to fellow Teochews in Singapore.

Singers croon to the tunes on stage, tugging at the heartstrings of audiences off stage. Teochew operas has become the common spiritual home of overseas Teochew immigrants now. Nam Hwa Opera has put in 55 years of dedication and perseverance to agglomerate the spirit of home amongst fellow Teochews, to spread Chaoshan culture and built bridges to enhance arts and cultural exchanges between China and Singapore. I believe in the prospects of Teochew opera in Singapore and the future of Nam Hwa Opera.

“潮剧春花色色香”

贺南华潮剧社55年志庆



Mr Wu Dianxiang

Artistic Advisor, Nam Hwa Opera Limited

Since I first stepped through the gates of Nam Hwa in 1986, the earth revolved around the sun for thirty-two times. I have grown from a man in his prime to a silver-haired old man, and Nam Hwa has grown from a tender juvenile to become strong and youthful.

To achieve growth, I toiled and sweat with my brothers and sisters in Nam Hwa, tackling difficulties, and enjoying the fruits of our labour together...

I am a relatively fickle person: I thirst for an innovation every play, and a new pursuit every opera, and the Nam Hwa folks also followed me “blur-ly” and “sank deeper and deeper, becoming unable to extricate themselves”.

The word “new” often means more capital investment is needed, longer rehearsal times required, more demanding technical barriers to overcome, and wanting more people to join. The Nam Hwa people have never been discouraged: be it raising funds, finding venues, pushing box office results and recruiting talents. Nam Hwa bore the mettle of “entrenching itself and never giving up”, building their ideal structure a brick and a tile at a time, laying the garden of paradise a tree and a flower at a time.

At that time, skipping meals and sleep were commonplace, brain exhaustion followed everywhere; it was finding joy in the bitterness, bitterness in joy. This means “being both in pain and joy” in today’s words.

From Victoria to the Kallang Theatre, from the Chinatown to the Esplanade, and the community clubs that bloom like flowers, they were battlefields for the Nam Hwa’s members to gallop in. When the audience

left in satisfaction, one should know: What is left are your charming shadows and the long-lasting rhythm of the music!

Who ever thought that the sisters hugging the flowers were tearful because of the tough training, the brothers who kissed fame were riddled in bruises because of the difficulty of the moves. Nam Hwa’s signboard is covered in layers after layers of gold, and the banner of Nam Hwa rises higher and higher!

As the years go by, I am getting older and am unable to adjust to Nam Hwa’s pace. Gradually my role changed from “caretaker” to “spectator”. However, Nam Hwa’s focus on traditional culture, love of traditional art, the tenacity in scaling and seeking new heights and its unyielding persistence left in me lasting memories. The words “Nam Hwa” has left a deep mark in my life, one that cannot be easily erased.

A few years ago, Nam Hwa took an amazing step in the reform of its system. It is said that “extraordinary people do extraordinary things, extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures”. In this ever-changing world, anything can happen. Standing at the top of the tide bravely and the spirit of pioneering, is the mainstream of this era.

I am pleased to see that Nam Hwa has taken the lead in the running of the system, and I hope that Nam Hwa will take the lead in artistic innovation!

I shall gaze at your new dance with expectant eyes and listen to your new melody with elongated ears.

Nam Hwa: I hope that you will become famous in Singapore, and become reputable in the opera industry!



Su Zhangkai

Imprints in Time: The History of Teochew Opera in Singapore is a follow up to *A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore* published in 2016. This also marks our persistent effort to reflect on the past and look to the future. To put it simply, I would like to continue tracing the historic paths of Teochew Opera in Singapore.

The publication of *A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore* was very well-received by both local and international readers - Teochew opera practitioners from China expressed high regards for this book, while Mr Chan Kok Hua (art collector and Artistic Advisor of Nam Hwa Opera) praised the book in an article on Lianhe Zaobao. As the Chief Editor, I am truly honoured and humbled by their kind words. Hence, while I was on a cultural exchange with Mr Toh Lim Mok in Shantou last year, I immediately agreed to his suggestion to start work on the second book. I still remember he offered me a piece of Teochew foie gras and I jokingly replied that we will go through thick and thin together in writing the second book.

Thanks to Mr Toh's trust in us, we reunited with our original editorial team and on top of that, we recruited young and passionate members to take on this gargantuan task. We have also decided to launch this book in both Chinese and English, in hope of reaching out to non-Chinese readers. It has always been our goal to share the history of Teochew opera in Singapore with more readers and to give recognition to our predecessors.

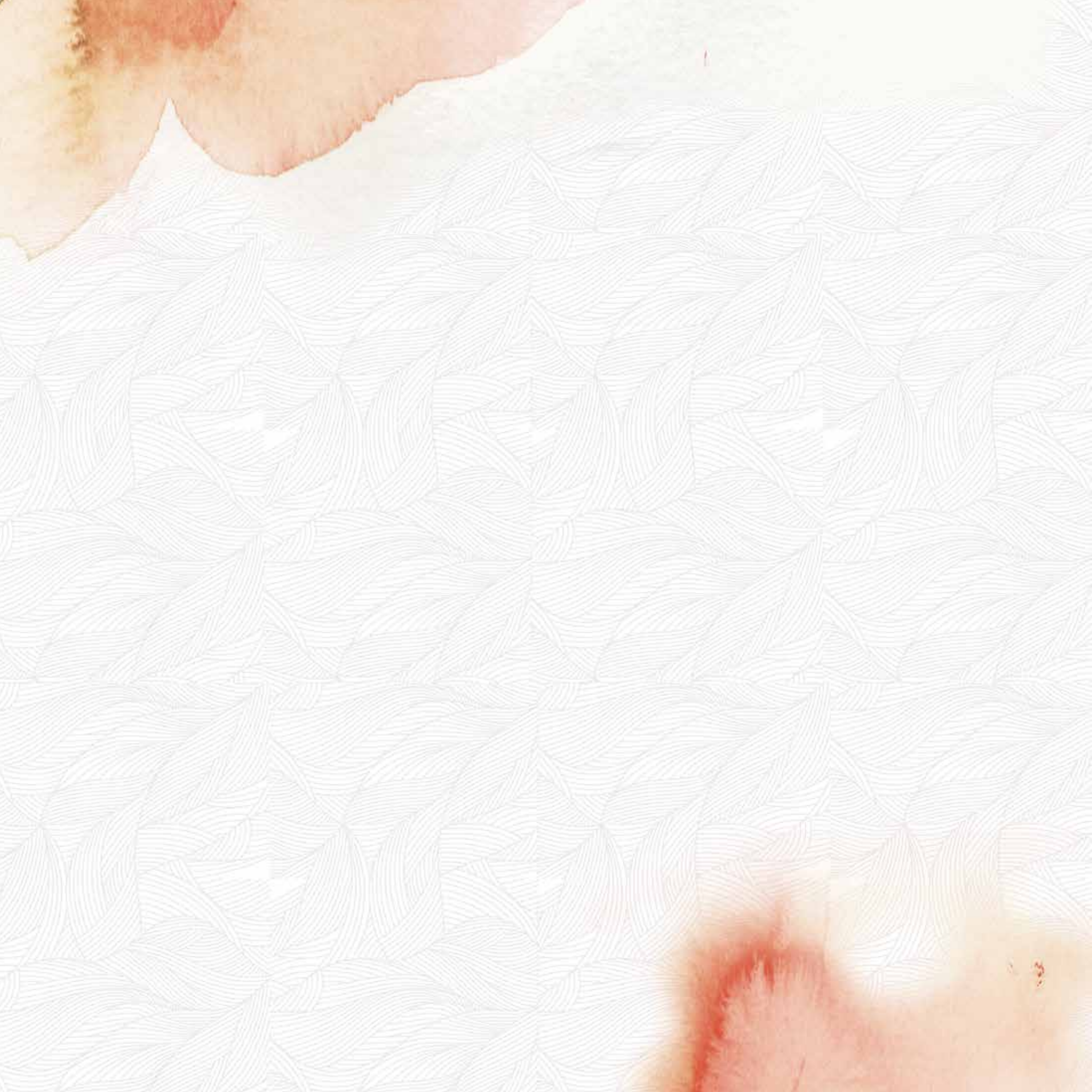
To stay true to the facts, our editorial team flipped through numerous historical materials to be as accurate as possible. We ploughed through my collection of old newspapers and studied the reports carefully to

reconstruct the development of early Teochew opera in Singapore. We also went digging in the library at National University of Singapore and National Library Board to source for information about Teochew opera during the Japanese Occupation. Both Mr Patrick Png and Dr Chua Soo Pong have given us valuable advice and guidance during the process. My mentor, Dr Yung Sai-Shing, once again stood by me and offered his timely support and encouragement.

This book traces the development of Teochew opera in Singapore and the 55-year history of Nam Hwa Opera. The editorial team hopes that this "short history" of Nam Hwa Opera can bear witness to the history of Teochew opera in Singapore and its prospects for the future. The content in this book is arranged in chronological order. The 6 major chapters are Humble Beginning, Early Days, Silver Screen, Historical Footprints, Turning Tides and Moving Forward. It also includes a list of "55 Keywords for Nam Hwa Opera" which acts as milestones for the 55 years of Nam Hwa Opera history. Last but not least, we have invited both local and international Teochew opera experts to contribute academic papers to this book. I am certain their contributions will provide readers with insightful discoveries of Teochew opera in Singapore.

The making of this book has been an arduous journey, but compared to our predecessors who trod the path and left their footprints in history, we are merely retracing their steps to make sure their hard work do not go unnoticed. It is our mission to follow this path and share this with the future generations to come. This, in turn, is how we go through thick and thin with our predecessors and all our supporters of Teochew opera.







Chapter 1

Humble Beginning

19 Century

- The origins of Teochew opera since the Ming dynasty
- The beginning of Teochew opera in Southeast Asia
- The first overseas Teochew opera troupes in the 19th century
- Performance venues and conditions in the 19th century
- The operation model of the early day troupes
- Performance customs and child actors

Where the sea meets land, there are Teochews. And where there are Teochews, there is Teochew opera. As one of the most distinctive and important art forms in Teochew culture, Teochew opera not only showcases the finest of Teochew tradition, it is a living link to a rich and storied heritage.

According to the book "The History of Teochew Opera" by Lin Chunjun and Wu Guoqin, Teochew opera as a whole has had a history of over 580 years. In Singapore, Teochew opera was first introduced by early migrants who had arrived from Chaoshan. Since then, the art form has carved its unique history, both in Singapore and Southeast Asia. In fact, the earliest record of Teochew opera in Singapore is from a book

titled "A Description of Singapore" by Li Zhongjue, written in 1887. In the book, Li notes that "the troupes consist of both men and women. There are about four to five troupes north of the Singapore River, and one to two troupes south of the river. There are also Cantonese, Fuzhou and Teochew opera."

Our own research also shows that Teochew opera flourished in Singapore as early as the 19th century, as part of religious ceremonies. This means that the art form has had a history of nearly 200 years in Singapore. The fact that Teochew opera remains active in Singapore today speaks of its timeless appeal and charm.

察於是此風小息
戲園有男班有女班大坡其四五處小坡一二處皆演粵劇
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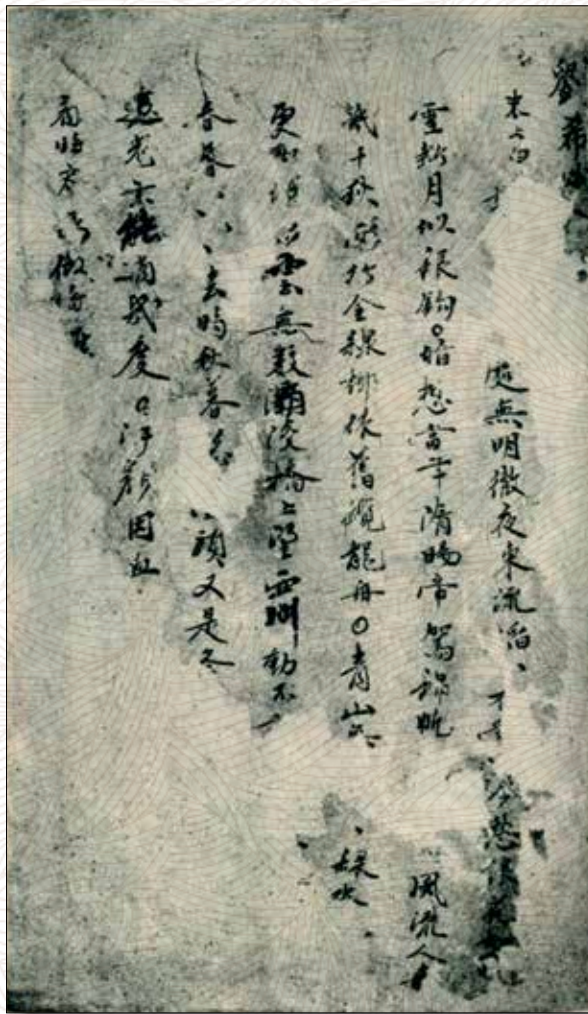
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華紳言於英總督允下護衛司議章保護設保良局以時查

"The Customs of Singapore" by Li Zhongjue

The origins of Teochew opera since the Ming dynasty

According to the authors of "The History of Teochew Opera", who carried out extensive research on another book titled "Liu Xi and the Golden Hairpin" that was written in 1431, there is evidence to suggest that *nanxi*, a southern form of opera, had taken root around the Song and Yuan dynasties. This form of opera was further developed to become what we know today as Teochew opera. As such, Teochew opera has had a history of close to 590 years.

As evidenced, Teochew opera has its roots from *nanxi*. This southern form of opera itself has its origins from the Wenzhou area, during the Northern Song dynasty under the reign of Emperor Huizong, in the years 1119 to 1125. At that time, the areas around the Central Plain and Jiangnan enjoyed a period of stability and peace, allowing culture to thrive and develop. Moreover, there was a proliferation of entertainment venues that provided the opportunity for the performance arts to be popularised and recognised.



A page from the script "Liu Xi and the Golden Hairpin"



A page from the script "Lychee and the Mirror"

Nanxi is different from the performance arts in the north, *zaju*. The former resonated more with the everyday folk with its accessible appeal, especially through its repertoire of folk tunes. As such, it did not take long for the art form to become popular.

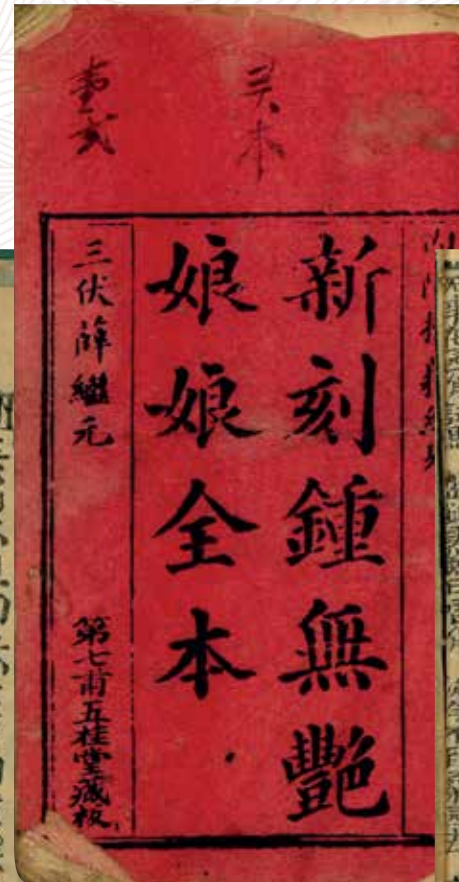
As economic trade flourished around the coastal regions and people began to travel, so did opera culture. Because of its beautiful melodies and captivating storylines, *nanxi* soon spread from Wenzhou to Fujian to Chaozhou.

The arrival of an art form cannot be isolated from the local culture. For it to develop and thrive, it needs to be localised. In the case of *nanxi*, this means integrating with indigenous customs and adapting to local ways of speaking and accents. By using the Teochew dialect, tones and inflections in *nanxi*, as well as being influenced by local practices like music, folk tunes, dance, and shadow puppetry, a new form of opera was born – the Teochew opera.

Since then, this unique art form has followed the Teochew people wherever they went, all around the world.



鮑親翁小且回去老僕回家擇其吉日送女
門完矣鮑如此親翁且鮑且安人我鬼俺可回
果去鮑從僉鮑我子一齊回家鮑吩咐回麻鮑
領命科鮑振花轎到鮑稟老翁得知花轎到鮑
挂采同候科鮑我子今日且喜合家相念可一
齊拜送蒼天作個團圓大會鮑且谷七拈香
禮



安人信住孩兒罵你等好忘奸
把三屋事亦妻話通勒三姑有几番
鍾公便对安人說免說話可是真謀
安人查道噯久言定吉期月十三
鍾公順了安人意此事妻而不必談
此時回母必安衆將身移步出房向
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菜吃已盆还未足數斤魚肉打光殊
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先事在國前試馬盤旋美劇白吾旬
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何令者主定江山
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便把兵書勤習練
外也不喚了奴
用其頂大葵花碗
共計連添六十三
燒酒噯沾把飯滾
用其頂大葵花碗
共計連添六十三
燒酒噯沾把飯滾

The beginning of Teochew opera in Southeast Asia

While it is difficult to ascertain the exact year Teochew opera was first introduced to Singapore, we can gain some insights by looking at the history of the Teochew people in Singapore. After all, it was them who brought the art form here when they had left their hometowns in China.

By 1819, the year Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore, there were already thousands of Teochews living on the island. Then, because of geographical, political, and social turmoil in China, many people had left their homeland to seek a better life in Singapore. When these early migrants arrived, they brought with them their customs, their ways of life, and their rituals.

According to Chen Hanxin's "The Study of Teochew Opera", the proliferation of Teochew opera overseas can be traced back to the middle of the 17th century. In fact, Teochew opera was already being performed in Thailand. Since then, the art form has continued to develop and thrive throughout the region.

Another writer, Teo Liang Chye writes in his article "Teochew Opera in Singapore", that the Teochews in Singapore enjoyed gathering in the evenings to listen to music. People loved to talk about Teochew opera and sing its tunes. This was in fact how Teochew opera became popular among the common folk.



New Market: A place of confluence for Teochews in the early days

From a postcard that dates back to 1830, which shows a religious ceremony conducted by Fuk Tak Chi Temple, we can tell that there were already street operas in Singapore at that time. Street operas, commonly known as *wayang*, were linked to religious rituals. “Where there are gods, there is opera”, as one would say. Many of these religious rituals were carried out in temples that were set up by the early migrants. In order to trace the development of Teochew opera in Singapore, we have to start with the temples that were built by the Teochews, the most prominent being the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple. The history of the temple is also linked to Ban Si Soon Kongsi, which was managing the temple at that time.

When early Teochew migrants arrived in Singapore by sea, they would first visit the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple to offer thanks to the goddess *Mazu* for protecting them on the voyage. At first, the temple was just a simple *attap* house, until 1827 when the Ngee Ann Kongsi managed to procure the land on a 999-year deed.

Over time, as worshippers continued to make donations as a gesture of thanksgiving, the temple accumulated the money and used it to hold an annual ceremony for *Mazu*, on the third day of the third month on the lunar calendar. It is also thought that the Ban Si Soon Kongsi was set up to manage the funds.

We can assume that Teochew opera started to flourish in Singapore at about the same time that Ban Si Soon Kongsi was set up. Although it is difficult to specify the exact year the company was established, information from the “The Teochews in Malaya” shows that the founder of the Ban Si Soon Kongsi, Lin Pan, died in 1738. This means that the company had existed before then. From this, we can infer that Teochew opera might even have started in Singapore from as early as the 18th century.

Ever since the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple was established, a ceremony known as “New Year Eve’s

Thanksgiving” would be organised every year. The “The Teochews in Malaya” also shows that the Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple used to hold an elaborate ceremony on the 11th lunar month every year. This ceremony took place on Boat Quay, Circular Road, Chulia Street, Robinson Road, North Boat Quay and Fish Street with lively performances. From this record, we can also infer the history of Teochew opera in the region.

Other records also attest to the fact that from the middle of the 19th century onwards, Teochew opera troupes began to cater to the demand of overseas Teochew migrants, bringing in larger scale performances to Southeast Asia as well as to Hong Kong and Taiwan. During the late Qing dynasty, because of what was happening, the troupes often travelled between Chaoshan and Southeast Asia. Their first port of call would usually be Thailand. From there, the troupes would move on to the rest of the region. Although street opera was important in popularising Teochew opera in Singapore, the function of Teochew opera was not just limited to just religious ceremonies. As long as there were employment opportunities, the troupes would travel to Singapore.



Wak Hai Cheng Bio Temple

The first overseas Teochew opera troupes in the 19th century

According to an issue of Nanyang Siang Pau published in 1963, the first Teochew opera troupe to arrive in Singapore is thought to be the Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe. Another troupe, the Lau Sai Thor Guan Troupe, was established in Singapore as early as 1853, according to its ex-troupe leader, the late Mr Johnny Ng. When Mr Ng visited Chaozhou, the locals there had told him that the troupe had to move away from their village in Fucheng because of floods. For survival, they had no choice but to seek a living in Thailand and Singapore.

Separately, in the article "A Review of 100 Years of Teochew Opera in Singapore", the author Chen Xingnan cites that the first Teochew opera troupe to arrive in Singapore was the Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe. By the end of the 19th century, following the footsteps of the Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe, there were Lau Yong Hua Heng Troupe, Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe, Lau Buan Lye Choon Troupe and Lau Sai Thor Guan Troupe.

Yet, according to the veteran Teochew opera leader Chen Yizhen of Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe, his troupe had been in Singapore more than 10 years earlier than Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe. The veteran of the Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association Lau Peng Ser, who also served as its president in 1954, said that when he had arrived in Singapore in 1911 as a 14 year-old boy, there were already several opera troupes here, including Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe, Lau Sai Thor Guan Temple, Lau Buan Seng Troupe and Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe.

In Chen Hanxing's "The Study of Teochew Opera", he cited that the earliest Teochew opera troupes in Singapore were Sai Yong Hong Troupe and Lau Sai Poh Hong Troupe during the Qing dynasty. At the beginning of the 20th century, other troupes such as Lau Yong Hua Heng Troupe, Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe, Lau Buan Lye Choon Troupe, Lau Sai Thor Guan Troupe, Tong Sai Thor Guan Troupe, Sin Sai Thor Guan Troupe, Lau Tong Chia Soon Troupe, Lau Beoy Chia Heng Troupe, Tong Gek Choon Hiang Troupe, Lau Sai Yong Troupe, Lau Guan Hua Heng Troupe, Lau San Thor Troupe, Sin Tian Chye Troupe and Sin Soon Hiang Troupe started to come to Singapore.

It may be difficult to ascertain which is the first Teochew opera troupe to arrive in Singapore. The facts appear to contradict, and historical records are lacking. However, we are able to infer that Teochew opera troupes started coming to Southeast Asia as early as the 17th century, often travelling around the region to perform. It was not until the mid to late 19th century and the early 20th century that these troupes began to establish themselves in Singapore.



Performance contract for Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe



Group photo for Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon Troupe

Performance venues and conditions in the 19th century

Most of the Teochew opera performances in the 19th century took place on the streets, which is why they were also referred to as street opera. They were also localised performances to worship the gods. Whenever there were religious occasions, the troupes would set up a temporary theatre on the streets to perform.

These religious rituals were usually adapted to local customs, which is why street opera was heavily influenced by local practices as well. Back then, Singapore was divided according to the different dialect groups. Naturally, there were more Teochew street opera performances where the Teochews gathered. For anyone who wanted to watch a Teochew opera performance, the best place to go would be by the Singapore River. Other than that, there were also areas like Boat Quay, Circular Road, Chulia Street, Robinson Road, North Boat Quay and Fish Street where the Teochews lived and organised numerous religious ceremonies to worship the gods.

For audiences of street operas, the performances were a reward after a hard day's work. There weren't entrance fees and the performances were free for everyone to watch. As a result, these street performances were usually well-attended by a lively crowd.

Other than on the streets, Teochew opera was also performed in fixed theatre venues. According to Li Zhongjue, the theatre was made of up both male and female performers. The area south of the Singapore River had about four to five theatres, while the area north of the river had about one to two theatres. These theatres staged not only Teochew operas, but also Cantonese and Hokkien ones as well.

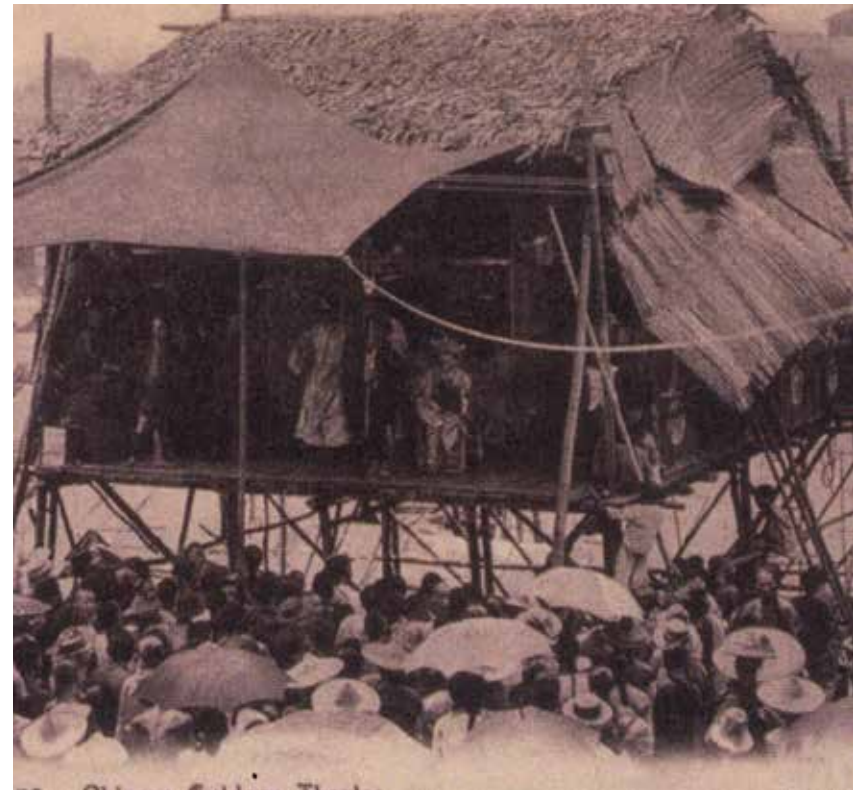
The research by Zhang Xuehan and Bao Aiguo also attests to the fact that of all the different dialect groups in Singapore at that time, the most numerous and professional troupes belonged to the Hokkiens, Teochews, and Cantonese. The troupes from other dialect groups were either amateur troupes or had only performed occasionally.



Wayang Street in the early days

In the article "Singapore's performing arts: Singing life's joys and sorrows", Chua Soo Pong wrote that by the end of the 19th century, traditional operas were being performed in two venues. One was of a more mobile nature, and the other was at a fixed location. The former took place along the streets, usually by a smaller troupe. They moved around from place to place, according to the locations in which religious ceremonies and events were held. The latter were usually professional theatres located at Chinatown, set up especially for opera performances. These included Lai Chun Yuan, Qing Wei Xin, Qing Sheng Ping, Jing Chun Yuan, Don Gui Yuan, Sheng Chun Yuan, Tiat Hng and Ee Hng Theatre. There were also troupes that were invited to perform in the city centre, using temporary theatres.

Furthermore, according to older generations of Teochews, Teochew opera was also performed at the Chui Huay Lim Club, a businessmen's club established in 1845. Back then, the club had facilities for performances, and the club members being rich businessmen, would hire Teochew opera troupes to perform there.



Early days opera stage

The operation model of the early day troupes

In his article “A Review of 100 Years of Teochew Opera in Singapore”, the author Chen Xingnan provided a detailed description of how the first opera troupes operated in Singapore. According to him, the opera troupes that were in Singapore had different objectives than the ones in China. They had come to Singapore to earn a better living. As such, the troupes here were run commercially and professionally based on a set hiring system.

Where then did the money come from? Firstly, it came from the paymaster, the person who had invited the troupe to perform in Singapore. Secondly, according to the “A Description of Singapore”, the troupes also earned from the sales of tickets for performances in theatre venues. The prices, however, were cheap. Everybody paid a flat fee of a few cents.

According to secondary sources, the money also came from advertising revenue. On stage, if there was an advertisement for a certain business, it would have had been paid for by the business owner. Other

than the stage front, advertisers could also place their advertisements on either or both sides of the stage. For a package deal of three thousand dollars, the ads could also appear wherever the stage was.

Even though there were different sources of revenue, there was still a need to be prudent. The troupes had to be careful about their expenses and ensure that they had saved whatever they could. Oftentimes, this meant cutting short the rest time for the performers and stretching their work hours. They woke up as early as 5 a.m. and worked all the way till midnight, and sometimes even up to 3 a.m. before ending their day. Even though the troupe members might have breaks in between, the troupe leader often worked the troupe hard so as to appease the paymaster, sometimes at the expense of the performers’ health.

In order to save costs, the troupes also did not cover the performers’ healthcare expenses. Even though the health problems might have arisen from the gruelling hours, the performers had to bear the financial responsibility of buying medicines to aid their own recovery.

The troupes also drew a line between the provisions for shared and personal use, such as costumes and props. Sometimes, the performers had to pay to have their own costumes and make-up set as well.

The troupe members also received a meagre salary, and increment often took a long time. Even when they received tips from the audience, the money was often kept by the troupe leader until payday. Sometimes, the group leader might even regard the tips as part of the actor’s salary. It is worth mentioning that salaries in the troupes were usually paid only twice a year. The reason for this was that since most of the members lived with the troupe, it might not be safe for them to keep the money themselves. The salaries were also distributed during the months when there were fewer performances, so that the troupe members had the time to safe keep their own money.

In order to cut costs, the troupes also fed the members very simple meals, made up of mostly vegetables and very little meat. Breakfast usually consisted of salted fish and black dates with porridge. Lunch was a simple fare of two basic dishes with porridge. Dinner was served at 5 p.m., with two dishes and a soup, and leftovers from lunch and canned food.

Life for the troupe performers was difficult and hectic. They had little rest and recuperation between the many performances. Nevertheless, this tough life seemed inevitable for those who had chosen this path.



Crowds gathering to watch opera in the early days

Performance customs and child actors

• Performance customs:

The close ties between local opera and religion is apparent in both the management and performance of the art form. For instance, the troupe would usually pray to the gods before their performance, especially on the opening day. They would have a ceremony to raise the banner, and make offerings to the heavens.

The article “A Review of 100 Years of Teochew Opera in Singapore” explains the ceremony in detail. It says that “before the opening performance, there has to be a ceremony to raise the banner. The first performance of the season usually takes place on the fourth day of the lunar year, but if the paymaster wants to bring that forward to the second day, then the banner raising ceremony would have to be brought forward as well. Everyone has to be present for the ceremony. There is a proper ritual too. First, a trunk belonging to the troupe would be brought out of the theatre by carrying it across a pile of charcoal. Next, after the incense sticks are prepared, the troupe leader would then go on stage to make sure that the offering table is centralised and covered with a red cloth. He would place a stove on the table. The brighter the stove burns, the better it is. This is to invite the gods to the table. There are also other tables to place offerings of fruits and pastries. These have to be prepared three days before the ceremony. After that, the banner is then put in place to be raised. The words sewn on the banner are auspicious to suggest glory and prosperity. The banner is secured to bamboo poles on either side. There would be music too. Someone, usually a child, would offer the incense as an invitation to the gods. This person would be appointed beforehand by seeking guidance from the gods. For example, if it is the year of the dragon, the person making the offering cannot be born in the year of the dog. He must also be of an upright and moral nature. The trunk is then opened, and a pair of oranges is placed on it, along with a red packet. The masters of the troupe are to stand by the side of the trunk. The troupe leader would then say something auspicious, and the musicians would play. The louder and more lively they play, the more prosperous the year is going to be. Amidst rousing

drum music, the banner is finally raised. The people raising the banner are the leads who play the main male and female roles, and it is preferable if they are child actors. Their zodiacs must be compatible too – for example, a ‘dog’ and a ‘dragon’ cannot be paired together to raise the banner. Their zodiacs should ideally be a dragon, a pig, or a horse. The female lead is in front, followed by the male, and the rest of the cast. Starting from one side, a mixture of rice and salt is scattered, and the leader has to quickly open the trunk. After the incense offering is made, a portion of pig’s blood is drunk as a blessing of harmony and goodwill within the troupe. The opening play of the season is also a gesture to the omnipotence of the gods, of the fortune, prosperity, and promotion they will bring.”

It is evident that the destiny of the troupe is inextricably tied to the will of the gods. From how the troupe is going to fare in the coming year, to the health of its members and even how well everyone will get along, every aspect depends on blessings from the gods. This kind of folk religion became an integral part of life in the troupe, and a very distinguishing and important feature too.



Three patron gods worshiped by Opera Troupe

• Child actors:

The emergence of child actors in Teochew opera began in the Qing dynasty, although child actors were not unique to Teochew opera and had been around since ancient times. According to the book “The History of Teochew Opera”, child actors appeared in Teochew opera during the time of Jiaqing Emperor and became popular during the late Qing dynasty and the time of the Republic of China. In the 19th century, all of the Teochew opera troupes in Singapore came from China. When they arrived, they would have brought along their child actors. Although this was a novelty, the practice of using child actors was also at times seen as inhumane.

Other the roles of jesters and older male characters, the rest of the characters in a Teochew opera were sometimes played by child actors. At one point, this practice became so prevalent that the singing styles and techniques were adapted especially to suit their range and abilities. In fact, some of the most renowned troupes in Singapore at that time relied on the virtuosity and talent of their child actors to become famous. The sweet and pleasing timbre of their voices never failed to capture the hearts of audiences. Their tone was bright, clear and beautiful.

5 am	Wake up, Start of training
8 am	Breakfast, Singing lessons
10 am	Performing on stage
12 noon	Lunch, Break
1 pm	Performing on stage
5 pm	Shower
7 pm	Performing on stage
Midnight	Supper/Bedtime

Besides their naturally gifted voices, these child actors were also all-round professionals, quick to learn if given the proper training. Ranging from ages 7 to 14, they brought extraordinary artistic flair to Teochew opera.

Why then might the practice of child actors be seen as inhumane? Firstly, this was because child actors were “sold” to the troupes, typically for as long as 7 years and 10 months. Secondly, during that time, they would be subject to an extremely strict regiment of gruelling training and even punishment.

A typical day for a child actor, for example, might begin at 5 a.m., where they would wake up and start training immediately. At 8 a.m., they would have breakfast, before continuing with singing lessons. At 10 a.m., they would already be on stage to perform. At 12 p.m., they would break for lunch before getting back on the stage again an hour later. At 5 p.m., they would shower and at 7 p.m., resume training or performing again. Finally, their workday would end at midnight, when they would have some porridge before going to bed.

The contract of a child actor would have several pieces of information on it: the parents’ names, the child’s own name, the child’s age, the length of the contract, the troupe that the child would be bonded to, the wages, terms of breach of contract, the name of the person who made the introduction, the signatures of both the child and his or her parents, and the date of the contract. Once the child actor signs the contract, he or she will be inducted into the troupe and be fully under their charge.

Veteran actress Goh Gek Lan laments that she could only leave after serving out her bond of nine years. Out of 365 days a year, she only had two days off during the Lunar New Year. “As child actors, we were stuck in the troupe. The troupe masters became our parents,” she says.

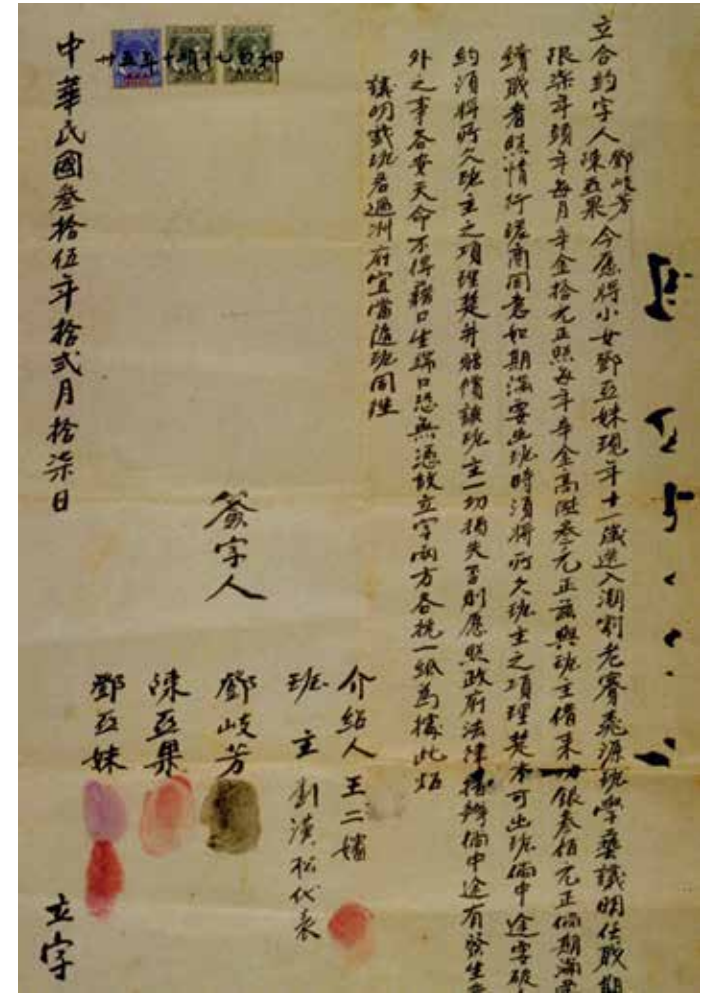
The tragic plight of the child actors was not only due to the fact that they could not return home, but also the way they were disciplined in the troupe. Ng Sio Sio recounts in the “Singapore Teochew Opera Stories”, “there were three people who could discipline us. The first was the opera teacher, the second was the troupe leader, and the third was the drum master. The troupe leader could even scold and beat us as he wished. Off stage, we had to listen to the opera teacher. On stage, we had to obey the troupe leader and the drum master. During practice, we would be beaten for even the slightest mistake, and were often left with bruises.”



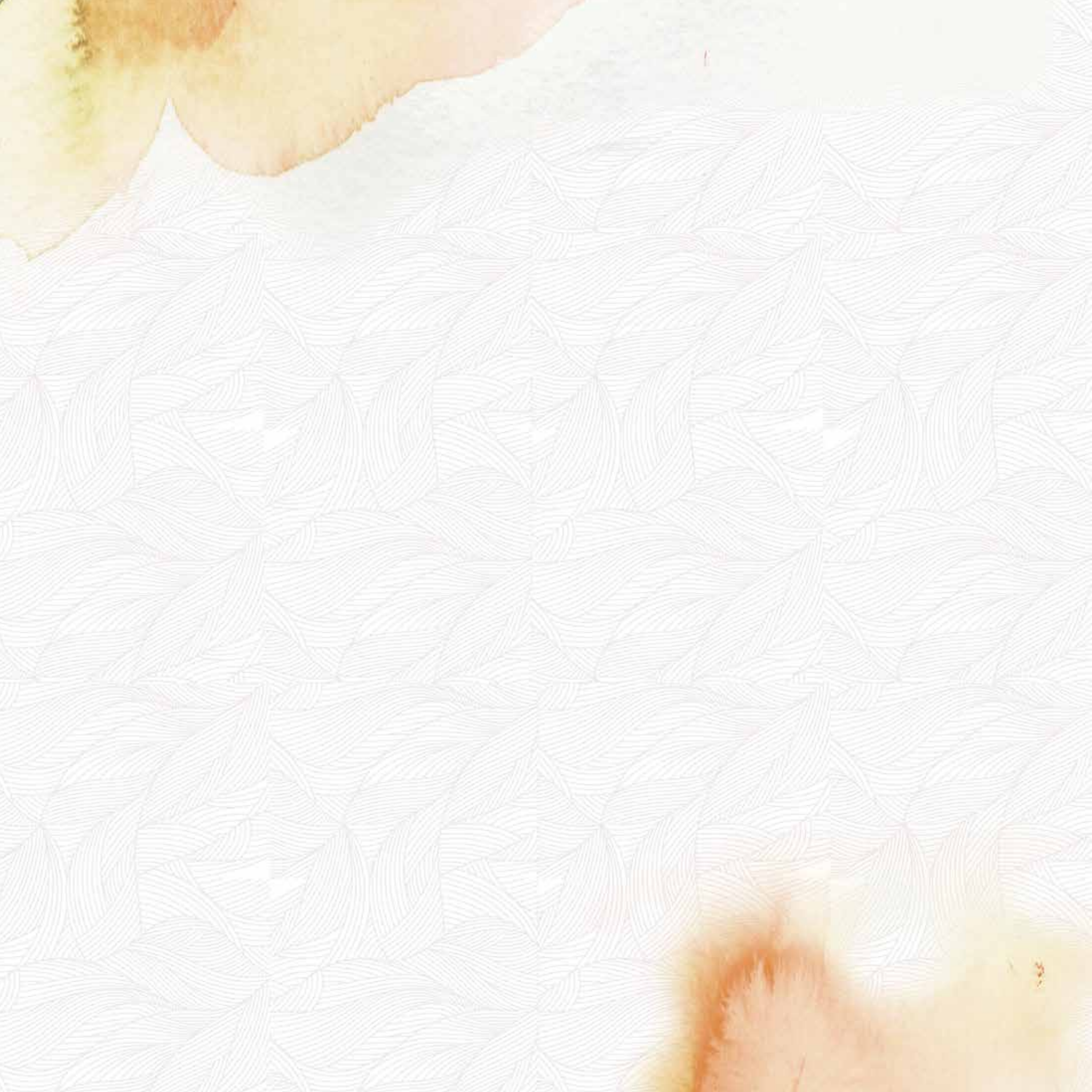
Teochew opera child actors

Whenever someone had made a blunder, everyone would be punished. The disciplinary system was like a strict court ruling. Ng continues to explain, "The opera teacher, troupe leader, or drum master would beat us with a cane. The cane was specially made. We were spared no mercy. Every lashing was more painful than the last. It was heartbreaking to even watch. There were even times when the child was beaten to death. When that happened, they simply dug a hole to bury the child, pretending nothing had taken place. When asked, they would tell the parents that the child had died of illness." Another child actor, Phua Tong Gek, also recounts that they were so used to getting punished that on days that they weren't, it felt like they had won the lottery.

In "The History of Teochew Opera", the book also states that there were more than 20 ways to inflict punishment on child actors, including scorching, beating, suspending them by rope, and submerging them in water. The conditions were unimaginable. Even on days when they weren't being punished, life for the child actors wasn't easy to say the least. To delay their voices from breaking when they reached puberty (which meant a shortening of their singing career), the child actors were sometimes not allowed to shower and even deprived of sleep. This harsh and inhumane treatment of child actors is hard to accept and has now become a real and regrettable part of history.



Sale Deed for child actor





Chapter 2 Early Days 1900–1958

- The development of Teochew opera in Singapore in the first half of the 20th century
- Teochew opera's different performance venues
- Teochew opera performances during the Japanese Occupation
- Directory and map of professional Teochew opera troupes
- Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union
- Amateur Musical Associations and Opera Troupes
- Prominent Teochew opera performers
- Early record productions

The development of Teochew opera in Singapore in the first half of the 20th century

As Singapore's economy became more developed during the early 20th century, standards of living for its people improved, which in turn spurred the development of opera.

From 1920 to 1940, professional Teochew opera troupes frequently held performances in Singapore while touring Southeast Asia, enlivening the opera scene in the region.

During this time, opera troupes were no longer always travelling shows. For example, Sin Yong Hua Heng had its own *xiguan*, or administrative and living quarters. The troupe was large and well-organised, boasting more than 100 performers and its own opera teachers, musicians and even lawyers.

At the same time, amateur musical groups interested in Teochew and Chinese opera sprouted. They were active in amusement parks, as well as in venues which held performances for celebrations or fundraising for disaster relief. These amateur groups also hired teachers and pushed the envelope in storytelling, costume design and prop design, even adapting modern dramas to present new experiences for their audience.

Teochew opera troupes and professional groups were not only prominent in Singapore's entertainment scene, or in important religious thanksgiving ceremonies. At a time when the status of Chinese immigrants in Singapore was uncertain, Teochew opera troupes often performed to raise funds to help their motherland.

For example, after the 1928 Jinan Tragedy, Lau San Chia Soon Troupe staged performances in June that year in Victoria Theatre and Tiat Hng Theatre in Chinatown to raise funds. Lau Chia Tian Hiang Troupe similarly staged a fundraising performance in Tian Le Yuan theatre. After war between China and Japan broke out – but before the Japanese occupied Singapore – there were also many performances to raise funds for China. In 1937, for example, Teochew opera troupes responded to the call from Chinese immigrants to raise funds to help China.

But after the fall of Singapore during World War II, social turmoil and the rise of other entertainment forms led to a decline in fortunes for professional Teochew opera troupes here. Many either closed for good



Teochew opera in the early days: Sword fighting

or moved to Malaysia. Fortunately, public enthusiasm for Teochew opera did not fade. Teochew opera tunes played on radio were still popular. In the immediate aftermath of the war, troupes would still be actively performing during the two weeks of the Lunar New Year or during the Hungry Ghosts' Festival, with Teochew and Hokkien communities hiring them to stage performances to offer thanks to the gods. Outside of these periods, however, due to the cost of travelling, troupes would no longer perform abroad. Instead they preferred to be hired at fixed entertainment venues for public performances.

Amateur Teochew opera groups also mushroomed after WWII. In the 1950s, Teochew opera movies swept Singaporeans up in a wave and led to many troupes to adapt movie styles in updated performances. They constantly made improvements to their plots, performances, sets, lighting and music. They actively sought to attract audiences, reviving the popularity of Teochew opera.



Lao San Zheng Shun troupe performers

Teochew opera's different performance venues

The venues where Teochew operas were staged at the time were divided largely into permanent ones like theatres, or temporary ones that were built to hold performances for religious offerings or celebrations. For example, Sin Yong Hua Heng opera troupe performed for the Singapore (Ji Yang) Cai Clan Association's 18th anniversary celebration and opening ceremony of its new location. It also performed at Siong Lim Temple's ritual offering for the City God's birthday. According to "History of Chinese Opera in Singapore", besides public performances, rich Teochews would hire troupes to perform in their own homes to liven up celebrations. As we thumb through the pages of history in Singapore, we can see that Teochew opera lit up the country's every corner.

1. Purpose-built theatres

The four biggest Teochew opera theatres at the time were: Ee Hng (Joyous Theatre), Tiat Hng (Philosophical Theatre), Tong Le Yuan (Mutual Happiness Theatre) and Yong Le Yuan (Everlasting Happiness Theatre).

Ee Hng and Tiat Hng were two famous Teochew opera theatres. Ee Hng was located at 41 Merchant Street, while Tiat Hng was at 61 New Market Street. These two theatres were situated at where Teochews lived, and before WWII, famous troupes such as Lau Sai Yong Hong, Lau Yong Hua Heng, Lau Gek Lau Choon, Lau Buan Lye Choon, Lau Sai Thor Guan, San Soon Hiang, Lau Zhe Tian Hiang, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Sin Tian Chye, Lau Tong Chia Soon, Sin Sai Poh Hoong, Lau Sai Poh Hong, mainly held their public performances in these two theatres. Ee Hng and Tiat Hng often competed with each other, and the exciting performances delighted audiences. According to Goh Ngan Hong's book "Places of Interest and National Monuments in Singapore", at the height of Ee Hng and Tiat Hng's popularity, their audiences often numbered more than a thousand.

Records show that Ee Hng was built around 1889 and its owner was Tan Ann Siew. By 1896, Ee Hng had been sold to Seah Liang Seah. During the Japanese occupation, Ee Hng stopped holding performances and was turned into a clan association's office. When the occupation ended, it would sometimes stage modern plays. Unable to sustain their business, however, the venue was converted to become the Da Tong Shopping Centre in 1948.

Meanwhile, Tiat Hng was built in 1921 but according to "Places of Interest and National Monuments in Singapore", records in the national archives showed that Tiat Hng had already presented a building blueprint in 1918. It indicated that women would be seated separately and that the municipal government required Tiat Hng to install emergency oil lamps to light up its exits and corridors. This was because eates in those days usually hung five kerosene lamps from the ceiling to illuminate the stage, creating a potential fire hazard. Around 1948, however, Tiat Hng could not sustain its business and was converted to a biscuit factory warehouse.

According to the opera veteran Yeo How Jiang from Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association, Tiat Hng theatre folded before Ee Hng theatre. Yang came to Singapore in 1938 and while in studying in primary school would after run off to Ee Hng – "Tiat Hng had already turned into a warehouse" – to watch Teochew opera after classes ended.

"Tiat Hng was forced by the British government to close down because it didn't have a back road that could serve as an escape route in the event of a fire. Ee Hng, however, didn't have this problem," Mr Yeo recalled. As such, it can be seen that Tiat Hng's closure was caused not just by internal problems, by external pressures as well.

Tong Le Yuan was situated in modern-day North Bridge Road. Around 1946, it was renamed Royal Theatre, screening mostly Indian films. Yong Le Yuan, on the other hand, was situated at Fraser Street. After 1932 – due to its proximity to where the Hainanese community lived – it began putting up Hainanese opera as well. Around 1946, it became the Diamond Theatre, screening mostly Tamil films and, for a period, Chinese films.

Local Teochew opera troupes would sometimes hold performances in these theatres. According to an interview in "The Stage Story by Wong Chin Soon" with café owner Fang Yujia, whose business was located opposite Cantonese theatre Spring Pear Theatre or Lai Chun Yuen before WWII local theatres would stage performances by both local and foreign opera troupes. Tickets would be sold at 30 cents, 50 cents, 80 cents or \$1.

怡园 哲园不见了

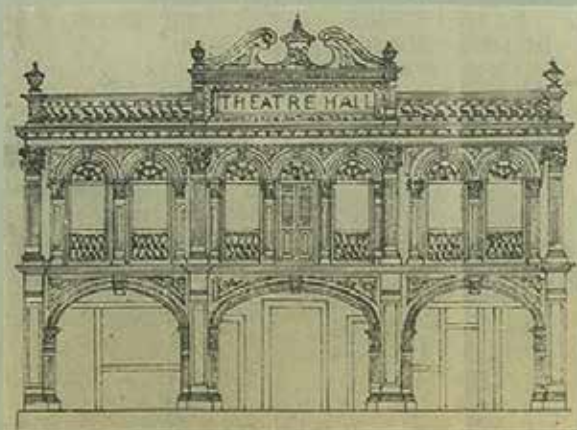
● 区如柏

去年9月，当我撰写《哇央街不见了》一文时，曾到哇央街、马真街、纽马吉路（俗称奉教街）去流连，去捕捉童年的记忆。

那时候，马真街的房子已被木板钉封，不得入内，只能从三角形的屋顶建筑去辨认那是昔日的怡园。奉教街上的哲园的旧貌犹在，“哲园”两字依然保存，三角屋顶上刻写着兴建的年代“1921”仍旧存在。这次旧地重访，怡园和哲园已被夷为平地，只能从相片去捕捉它们的险庞。

提起怡园和哲园，潮剧老观众不会忘记它的光辉日子，那时候，许多著名的潮州戏班都在这里上演，两间戏院的距离不远，就像上演粤剧的庆维新与庆升平一样。

虽然哲园的建筑物上刻写着“1921”的年代，不过，它的真正兴建日期更早，可能在1890年就建筑好了，根据档案



这是哲园的建筑图，现在已成为历史了。



这是六十年代的怡园，它的楼下是市场，楼上是皇华香汕起卸工友联合会的会所，现在已被夷为平地。

记录，1904年，它的业主李清渊向政府提呈改建哲园的蓝图。李清渊是19世纪下半叶及本世纪初华人社会的领袖之一。他是来自马六甲的土生华人，祖籍福建永春。1890年，李清渊上永春会馆的领导人。

1911年李清渊辞世，1918年，他的儿子李俊源再向当局提呈哲园改建的建筑蓝图，把楼下的观众席改为男女分坐的观众席。“1921”这个年号相信是修建后的年号。李俊源是本世纪的新华社会的领导人之一，俊源街和俊源学校便是纪念他的街道和学校。

1921年至1941年是哲园和怡园的黄金时代，也是潮剧的鼎盛年代，光复后，它们还有一段演出的岁月。1948年以后，哲园和怡园结束了它的舞台生涯，哲园改为一家饼干厂的货仓，怡园则改为商店，如今，这两间戏院已经被夷为平地了。(PP)

2. Amusement parks

After the 1920s, many amusement parks were built in Singapore. “Scenes: A Hundred Years of Singapore Chinese Language Theatre” wrote that crowds thronged the amusement parks, which often had several stages. This made them suitable for many organisations to simultaneously hold performances at the same time, particularly to combine for a united disaster relief fund-raising effort. But compared to theatres, the stages in amusement parks were usually more crude and simple. Furthermore the environment is often crowded and noisy, and they were often regarded as places where crude and kitschy culture was propagated.

Still, these parks were an important source of leisure activities for the masses at the time. They not only provided a venue for local professional and amateur troupes, but also a platform for cultural exchanges with foreign arts groups. To attract crowds, amusement parks did not charge troupes rent. As such, troupes gradually moved their performances from theatres to amusement parks, selling tickets for their performances in the latter venue. Popular amusement parks for Teochew opera shows included: Happy Valley, Great World, Happy World and New World.

a. The Happy Valley

According to “History of Chinese opera in Singapore”, after the opening of Happy Valley in Tanjong Pagar in September 1924, the park invited Lau Sai Poh Hong Troupe – at a significant cost – to perform for four consecutive nights, starting from 29 Dec, 1925. They also invited Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe and Lau Gek Lye Choon Troupe to perform at different stages in Old World. After that, Teochew opera troupes such as Lao Sai Thor Guan, Lau Tong Chia Soon Hiang, Lau San Chia Soon Hiang, Lau Yong Hua Heng, Lau Buan Lye Choon also came to stage performances.

Nanyang Siang Pau reported that Happy Valley proclaimed itself as an “unrivalled amusement venue”, reflecting its status in Singapore at the time. Happy Valley probably held regular Teochew opera performances, because when there were breaks in their runs, newspapers ads would report this to readers. The entrance fee to Happy Valley was usually 10 cent, occasionally raising to 20 cents for special days such as National Tree Planting Day. The open-air stage charged different prices for different seats, from 30 cents per ticket up to \$12 for a seat of six.

歡 樂 園
◀ 告 廣 ▶
The Happy Valley Limited

◎注意！
馬來由最有價值的歌劇！

歡 樂 歌 劇 團
即晚開演

名著
新 齣 頭
全 班 歐 亞 男 女
劇 員 落 力 拍 演

◎本班的四大特色

(四)	(三)	(二)	(一)
音 樂	配 景	劇 員	服 飾
悅 柔 瓦 揚	陸 光 輝 琴	雙 色 全 藝	翠 華 麗 貴

露天影戲
完全開放：不收券資：

潮 劇
玉春香班主演
由十月十二號起

大 法 戲

京 劇
上海同樂大舞台男女班
大門入場收銀壹角

歡 樂 園 啟

Performance advertisement at Happy Valley: dated 19 October 1926

b. Great World

Great World was built in 1931 in Kim Seng. It was easily accessible, either by tram or foot. In an area of more than 500,000 sq ft, it had entrances at the north and south, and had parks, pavilions, sports halls, restaurants, ice-cream parlours, cinemas, dance halls, markets and so on. It was open daily from 10am to midnight.

During its second anniversary, it attracted crowds by hiring Lao Sai Thor Guan and Gek Lau Choon to put up competing shows. The admission fee was 20 cents and ticket sales did very well, because audiences were excited by the competition. Competing shows would pit two troupes with similar standards, performing similar shows at the same time near each other, to see who put on the better show. The two troupes would have to be of similar depth and ability, or there would be no contest. It is not hard to imagine the excited crowd scenes on such days.

After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the United Chinese Library called on the Chinese community in Singapore to hold a fund-raising carnival for troops in northern China. After 6pm on 8 August, Great World suspended its regular programmes and provided public transport from different places in Singapore to Great World's entrance, in support of the fund-raising activities.

Performances that evening took up the main square of Great World and seven stages. It involved more than 1,000 performers and attracted more than 20,000 people. In 1939, Singapore Chinese Relief Fund organized its third fund-raising carnival in Great World, which included performances by the Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association and Tong Sai Thor Troupe. In 1940, the Teochew group in the Singapore Kwangtung Hui Kuan also helped to raise funds for Guangdong refugees at Great World's third stage. The results were impressive, as they raised more than \$12,000 through performances by Thau Yong, Er Woo and Lak Aik amateur musical associations.

晚 年

十二月卅一日(拜四)元月一日
(拜五)二日(拜六)三日(禮拜)

一連四晚增加非常遊藝

大 世 界

大 放 上 海 名 貴 煙 花

慶祝新年元旦

元月二日兩晚大放上海烟花
元月三日兩晚大放潮州烟花
元月四日攀登檳榔樹頂摘取贈品
元月五日天弓有聲影戲一連四晚公開發演
元月六日白雲默片影戲一連四晚公開發演
元月七日特聘粵東女伶公開發演新調
元月八日尚有其他節目不能盡錄

舊歲已過，新春又來！
逢此良辰，及時行樂！

注意！
在上述四日期
間內每日午後
六時起有巴士
載客車由小坡
德國神農、大
坡必麒麟街利
峇峇利律來往
大世界直透大
門外。
(卅石)

(石)日卅

Performance advertisement at Great World:
dated 31 December 1936



Great World anniversary special issue on the newspaper: dated 20 September 1952

c. Happy World

Happy World was founded in 1936 by businessman George Lee Geok Eng and was situated in Geylang. In 1964 it was renamed as Gay World. Like other amusement parks, Happy World had restaurants, theatres, dance stages and other entertainment facilities. But Happy World differentiated itself by being a child-friendly place. Lau Chia Soon Hiang, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Lau Chia Tian Hiang, San Chia Soon Hiang, Chit Hoon, Tong Chia Soon, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Gek Lau Choon and other professional Teochew opera troupes all performed on Happy World's stage before.

In 1947, after Lau Jit Kee Hiang Troupe staged "Qiu Qiong Mountain", "The Night at Escape", "Xiao Guang Zu" in Happy World, troupe leader Shen Tingyu proposed improving the stage equipment to include: specially produced new props, lighted flying swords and movable gears, among others. Then the troupe staged: "The Sword", "Dragon's Pond and Tiger's Lair", "The Loyals" and "The Injustice" which were well received by audiences.

In 1948, Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe also staged performances of "The Story of Lady Rong", "Chang Wan Qing's Resuce" at Happy World. So did Lau Jit Kee Hiang Troupe. To attract more people to Happy World, the amusement park even gave away free tickets in newspapers, with one voucher allowing two people to enter the park. Lao Sai Thor Guan staged "Yang Guang Wen" at the fourth stage in Happy World, using famous characters in its newspaper advertisement to attract readers.

After WWII, amusement parks and Teochew opera troupes were rejuvenated. In 1954, Sin Yong Hua Heng staged performances to celebrate the new year at Happy World's second stage, specifically emphasising a batch of gorgeous new costumes from Shanghai, a new set created by a Hong Kong designer, and a famous opera actress from Thailand. In the sign of the show's popularity, Nanyang Siang Pau urged its readers to book their seats in advance.





Happy World

大華
影有聲
院聲
映公晚今

快樂世界

要摘樂娛晚今

台三第
劇潮
老玉樓春

。劇台舞。
第一台 馬來歌舞劇團
第二台 新舊玉麒麟劇團
第四台 聯星粵劇團
第八台 呂宋歌舞團

賓漢。
中國羅

凡在快樂
世界大門
購本院戲
票者大門
入場免費

半時九。半時七

Performance advertisement of Lau Yu Lou Chun: dated 30 September 1941

d. New World

New World was built in 1923 at Jalan Besar by Ong Boon Tat and his younger brother, Ong Peng Hock. It was popular for its singing and dancing performances, theatres, shops, restaurants, open-air cinemas, boxing rings, and shooting ranges.

In 1931, after famed comedian Charlie Chaplin finished shooting his classic "City Lights" he stopped in Singapore as part of an extended holiday, en route to returning to the United States. There at New World, he caught the Teochew opera "The Generals of the Yang Family" and reportedly exclaimed, "Teochew opera is great!"

"My outstanding memory of Singapore is of Chinese actors who performed at the New World Amusement Park, children who were

extraordinarily gifted and well read, for their plays consisted of many Chinese classics by the great Chinese poets... The play I saw lasted three nights... Sometimes it is better not to understand the language, for nothing could have affected me more poignantly than the last act, the ironic tones of music, the whining strings, the thundering clash of gongs and the piercing, husky voice of the banished young prince crying out in the anguish of a lost soul... as he made his final exit."

Lau Tong Chia Soon Hiang Troupe staged performances that played to full houses every night in New World in 1929. Other troupes that have performed in New World include Tong Chia Soon Hiang Troupe, Tong Sai Thor Troupe, Gek Lay Choon Troupe, Sin Yong Hua Heng and Lao Sai Thor Guan.

潮劇老賽桃源班 在新世界內演唱

一向當任的角色，都是些萬國情關的女郎。不是上文，更是印信安條。

爾台是成功的。富於曲線美的蘇珊嘉波，自從從影以來，點紅。

初六日演：滿園春色。夜演，萬紫叢中一點紅。

孤鴻。初五日演：方世玉。夜演：癡婆尋仔。初六日演：關東小奇俠，夜演：曹子建七步成詩。

目：潮劇老賽桃源班文武生寶珠小姐在霞宮春中之化妝。大世界新龍風節。初一日演，加官進。

日演 三門街 初一日一本 初二日二本 初三日三本 初四日四本 初五日結局

夜演 霞宮春色 初一晚一本 初二晚二本 初三晚三本 初四晚四本 初五晚結局

恭賀新禧 老賽桃源班鞠躬

Performance advertisement of Lao Sai Thor Guan: dated 14 February 1953



The New World

3. Theatre

This refers to Victoria Theatre, which was built in 1905 and in its early years practically all its performances were by Caucasians. Chinese groups first performed in Victoria Theatre when a Youth Association held a carnival in 1923 which integrated music, dance, martial arts, opera and other programmes. Subsequently, Chinese art groups that performed here gradually increased.

What set Victoria Theatre apart was that the atmosphere of its shows was more serious and orderly – different from lively environment and

noise of amusement parks. Audiences concentrated on watching the performances on stage.

After the end of WWII, Victoria Theatre reopened in 1958, and Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association staged the first Chinese play “Retraction of the Hans” there. In 1959, six major amateur musical associations performed on the same stage. More than 100 musicians from Er Woo, Thau Yong, Lak Aik, Chenh Hua and Nanyang Khek Community Guild’s musical department came together for large-scale collaborative performances to celebrate the inauguration of Singapore’s first head of state.



Lau Chia Tian Soon performance

Teochew opera performances during the Japanese Occupation

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and the Pacific War began. On February 15, 1942, just as the Chinese were ushering in the Lunar New Year, the British army officially surrendered to Japan. Thus Singapore began its three-year and six-month occupation by Japan and changed its name to Syonan Island, or "Light of the South".

Teochew opera performances did not stop during the Japanese occupation. According to an advertisement in a weekly Japanese wartime propaganda paper, Great World and New World amusement parks – which are important venues for Teochew opera – were back in business nine months after Singapore fell.

Opera troupe Lau Jit Kee Hiang performed its first play during the Japanese occupation at New World's stage on 19 November 1942. The advertisement at that time wrote that "Lau Jit Kee Hiang is Syonan's

most historical troupe" and praised their actors' vocals and costumes. There were two performances: the day performance was from 1.30pm to 5.30pm, while the night performance was from 7.30pm to 11.30pm. Other troupes that performed in amusement parks at the time included: Lau Sai Thor Guan, San Chia Soon, Gek Choon Hiang, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Gek Lau Choon Hiang and Sai Poh Hong Troupe.

Furthermore, the plays put on that time did not seem to be controlled by the Japanese army's propaganda department. Most of them were traditional Teochew opera plays such as Xiao Duan Meng, Snow in June, Monk Ji Gong, Emperor Liang Wu, Meng Li Jun, White Bone Beauty, Peach-Blossom Village, The Trial at Kaifeng, The White Rabbit Pearl, Tai Hong Deity, The immortal He Xiang, The Old Pagoda.



"Nan Kuang" - a magazine that was published during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore

Directory and map of professional Teochew opera troupes

The “Directory of Associations in Singapore (1982-1983)”, wrote that “the professional Teochew opera troupes operating before and immediately after the war were: Lau Sai Poh Hong, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Tong Jit Kee Hiang, Lau San Chia Soon, Lau Ee Lye Choon, Lau Tong Chia Soon, Lau Poh Soon Heng, Lau Sai Yong Hong, Lau Gek Lau Choon, Sin Yong Hua Heng, San Chia Soon Hiang, Tong Sai Thor Guan, Tong Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Gek Choon Hiang and so on. Subsequently there were troupes like Chit Hoon, Sin Jit Tian Chye Troupe, Teo Goy, Tok Kang, Sin Thor Guan Choon and so on. Finally came Lau Poo Gwee Choon and Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe.

中赛桃源 金炎律71号

新荣和兴 惹兰勿刹255A
惹兰勿刹257-1

老正天香 惹兰勿刹257-1

老赛桃源 吗真巷6号

老玉春香 里峇峇利律59

三正顺香 美芝律353

老一枝香 办事处:纽叻里芝律五十号A
宿舍:如切律459

一天香班
(潮音清唱班) 亚峇街144

三正顺香班
(潮音清唱班) 禧街92号

中正兴班
(潮音清唱班) 禧街118

玉梨香班
(潮音清唱班) 布连拾街168

老宝顺兴班
(潮音清唱班) 兰拉街9号

梅正天香
(潮音清唱班) 呵吗律16

新赛宝丰班
(潮音清唱班) 里峇峇利律39

新桃源春
(潮音清唱班) 亚峇律165A

源正丰班
(潮音清唱班) 惹兰勿刹52

清赛音班
(潮音清唱班) 兰拉街45

劇老一枝香班

劇中取材有益社會
編導歌詞莊諧兼備
表演動作肖妙細膩

拿手好戲

忠精 半面 五花 寡婦 李群 蝴蝶

辦事處：星嘉坡紐叻里芝律五
電話：二一三三
宿舍：電話八一五四

三正順劇團開幕

本團謹訂于公元一九五八年八月九日(星期日)本坡新世界內百老匯劇台獻演(一)六國大封相(二)柴房會(四)絳玉捧釋 恭請楊續文先生剪綵屆時敬請各界仕女惠臨參觀候教附啓八月十日星期日晚表演改良名劇「天仙」影配備立體幻景全團均落力拍演

星洲三正順



花旦·旦花

胡娟·女青

林漢·生武

貞錦·生小

新禧

師及燈光配景名家為本班設計配置各種活動山水景泰雪梅一劇特別配有跳火城之景維妙維俏尤為特色屆時定使觀衆如置身其地難辨真假謂余不信務請親到敝院參觀便知言之不謬

新榮和興

花旦·細細 花旦·珍珠 宵夜·特

翰亞謝丑老

松玉謝丑歌

春炎邱生老



老正天香班

是潮劇後起之秀

老一枝香潮劇團全體藝職員



電光配景

允稱一流

音樂合奏

已臻上乘

絲竹管絃

清脆悅耳

聲色劇藝

載譽南邦

蜚聲梨園

報應壇

保兆林主壇 (造自修專)

壽衣紙料 各色花鳥 修粧佛像 大小燈籠 法門道士 粗幼布燈 特別壽龜 五彩配景

新嘉坡小坡布連拾街一六八
電話：二二零四

兼收大鑼鼓並收音機出稅歡迎賜

班主：周鐵園

Performance advertisements from various opera troupes



英鳳·生小 鍊九·生小

青衣·玉花 青衣·巧嬌 青衣·鍊珠 花旦·玉良

坤海陳生老 基輝陳仔丑

恭賀

本班自近年以來得蒙各界讚許為酬謝觀眾起見且適值年關故不惜鉅資禮聘華南第一流編導名



老一枝香潮劇團

十五週年紀念特刊

雲織潮劇團

演獻園布帆律洛合假 (頭橋廊猪宰老)

農曆新年特別轟出

初二夜演	初一日演	除夕演	農曆日演
濟公活佛頭連	江小鶴七連	青鋒揚威全連	江小鶴六連
			兒女英雄連全
			農曆日演
			初三夜演
			江小鶴八連
			農曆日演
			初四夜演
			濟公活佛三連

名編導林如列精心傑作



特班興和發




全寶奕源

新年特刊

禧新賀恭

出演大盛前空作 員藝名著馬星集

亞西來馬 馬星

團劇潮順正中老

經理：林樹森	馬星西來	馬星西來	馬星西來
馬星西來	馬星西來	馬星西來	馬星西來

本團演員表

潮音

老玉梨香班

「四大特點」

1. 名伶優秀
2. 曲目繁多
3. 歌聲清聽

Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union

To improve the working lives of Teochew opera's professional actors – who were often oppressed by troupe owners – local opera leaders from Sin Yong Hoe Heng including Mr Yeoh Liew Kung formed the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union in 1955. The union hoped to promote cooperation between labour and management, and tap on the combined strengths of the troupes to improve Teochew opera. After its establishment, it bought its own premises in 135, Rangoon Road, supported by many sponsors and members, many of whom volunteered to deduct 5 per cent of their monthly salary to contribute to the construction fund. The Lau Chia Tian Hiang Troupe further contributed by holding a charity performance New World amusement park, donating its net proceeds to the fund.

According to Mr Yeoh Liew Kung when he was the union's chairman in 1955, there were a few troupes under the union – Sin Yong Hua Heng, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau San Chia Soon Hiang, Lau Gek Choon Hiang and Tong Sai Thor Guan Troupe - each of which had to nominate five members as officers for the union, to represent their troupe and actively participate in union activities. By 1957, each group upped its officer numbers to six or seven. In addition to professional troupes, there were members also from Teochew opera choir and film industries. In all, the union had more than 600 members.

The union actively strove for the interest of its members. For example, in its preparation for its second anniversary in 1956, Mr Yeoh proposed to troupe owners that actors should get two days' rest on the 27th and 28th day of the 12th lunar month, because there are no shows on those days anyway, and actors have no rest for the whole year. This proposal received all the members' support and that same year, they used the two-day break to stage a performance of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" involving seven major troupes here. The union also pushed

for salary increases for workers and helps to resolve disputes between members.

Despite the occasional murmurs of discontent, the union's overall cohesiveness was strong, as they were bound by the common goals of improving their lives and the Teochew opera scene. It was also helped by the orderly management of the union leaders, who collectively set up a constitution and structure that allowed full discussion and resolution of issues through meetings.

The union also played an important role when troupes faced crises, such as when an internal dispute at Tong Sai Thor Guan led to the troupe's abrupt dissolution, instantly plunging the livelihood of more than 70 actors into uncertainty. The union held an emergency meeting to discuss solutions, which led to the birth of Chek Hoon Teochew Wayang. Mr Yeoh personally led this new troupe, helping to settle the livelihoods of these 70 actors.

As the Teochew opera trade slowly faded, the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union eventually became the Teochew Drama Association. It continues to shine on Singapore's stage today.



Badge of Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union



Magazine cover of the 2nd anniversary of Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union



Joint performance by 7 opera troupe

潮劇

蘇六娘
曲譜

普救善堂

左良玉妃弟相會(花旦)

一九五〇年元月廿九日抄

拜請了林氏王爺白尔看九印牌到登上高山去了不先
 將子托回家中撫養便了及字科却白叔本叔去叔
 出個周之爺前來位他因此被他走去了不能成位
 官在件位字科白尔南陽園已破一入亦幹不成大事不
 死收兵回朝慶會傳个眾得收兵回朝 尾多件

民國廿五年十月十日吳老蘇德德德德德德德

燒火

歌

編曲

到來那乃忠良之士不免再他談明出商計策翻是
 公已到東寇殊有理公那里知道奴在聖宮內
 不能得報故而啼哭起來白呵科事到如今再
 說奴有一屈為難之事縱然對尔說明不能再我作
 道白只因為着白這个白那白吓真已難
 各悲淚有口難講又恐怕丟大事走漏機關救這
 不可不可三說說起來又恐怕大禍交加二三
 二位娘
 如命
 不
 殺死

血掌印

曲本 旦西皮調

內白米了。科三流唱 適線綉房巧梳粧忽听得堂上南喧揚將身兒表在科
 二堂介白呵科三流唱老爹已發怒為那行是是是來明白了想趁從前
 事一庄好意贈他銀和兩有誰知害他坐監房此事何口終結案老爹
 台前問安康科白爹已在上女兒拜揖科白告堂科白爹已怒氣不息所
 為何來科白爹已女兒許配林家生是林家人死是林家鬼女兒一定要到
 法場祭奠科白老爹吓科倒板唱老爹已說的話口甜心苦科白老爹吓
 科白夜唱王才不為首相貪王爵祿父不該將公子誣告監牢思一思想
 一想良心何足自古道善與惡世人自作陰陽問談一樣豈有糊塗科唱
 父不信十王殿去看冤苦國王爺差來了兩名鬼率行善者過仙橋
 來往無數做惡的奈河橋冤鬼啼哭科三流唱李三娘為劉高磨房受苦
 到後來十八載總見骨肉孟姜女哭倒了長城崩震一心心為的是范郎兒
 夫王寶釧為的是平郎受苦到後來身榮貴駕坐皇都只女兒要學那聖
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年 月 日

西皮調

公滿面 科三板

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盡便了三板 寇珠擦衣忙跪倒拜謝萬歲爵祿高
呵三板 忽听太子哭聲喧且住我今雖然投水一

倘若奸賊到來查看豈不性命難保科白太子爺
也三板 寇珠女心中甚焦燥我不忍太子來商拋開言

一係愚前想無計較科白呵三板 到來說

劇

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曲選輯

楊樹青 記譜：吳錫金

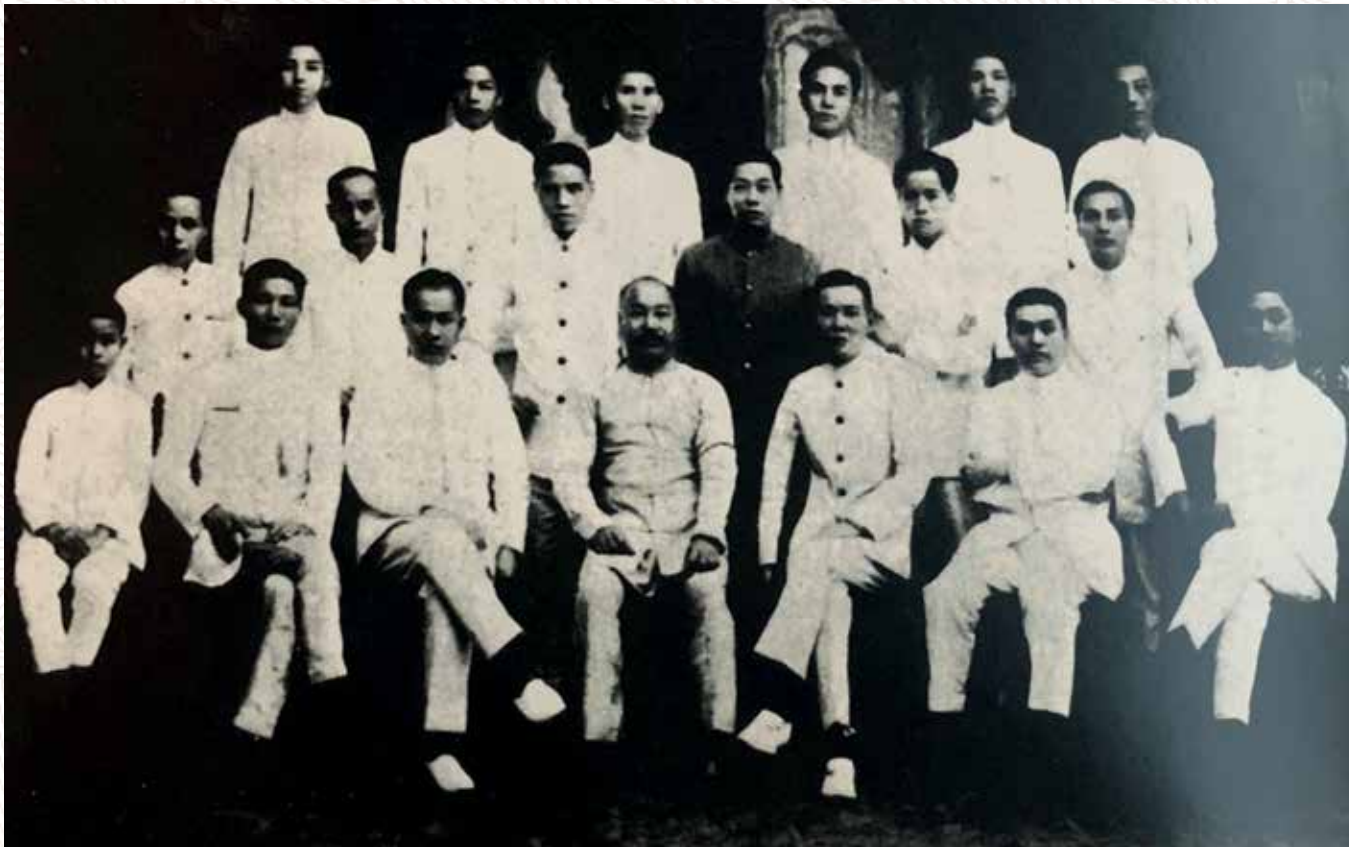
Amateur Musical Associations and Opera Troupes

1. Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association

Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association was Singapore's first amateur music club and was founded by the distinguished Teochew businessman Chen Zili in 1912. At the time, members of such associations all held a certain social status. In those days, most people looked down on professional Teochew opera performers or "xizi". So these members with social status saw themselves as gathering for culture and sang what they deemed as "more classy" *hanju* or Han opera. As a result, the early Teochew founders of amateur musical associations all sang Han opera. Initially, Er Woo had only about 30 members and focused

on singing rather than performing drama. But in 1922, to raise funds for the typhoon disaster that hit the Chaoshan area that year, the members performed drama on stage for the first time. This kickstarted an uptick in their performances and fund-raising activities, slowly turning Er Woo into more of a dramatic association.

Because the members of the amateur musical associations had social standing, such groups had comparatively ample human and financial resources. For its 24th anniversary, Er Woo split its musicians and actors into two different groups, with each performing at a stage in Great World amusement park for three nights running. This was a first for a local musical association. For the three nights, the two programmes were identical. At that time, Chinese society leaders such as Lim Nee Soon, Yeo



Founding members of Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association

Chan Boon, Lee Wee Nan and Tan Chin Hian were all Er Woo members. Tan was in fact an outstanding actor.

The abundance of talent contributed to Er Woo staging “double stage window” performances, where talented artistes would perform simultaneously on stage, in mirror image of each other. This meant you need at least two talented artistes or two groups of artistes who resembled one another to perform.

Besides entertainment, however, Er Woo actively sought to play an active role in society. It first raised money for the Halifax Flood Relief Fund in England. Then it either organised or was invited to perform and raise funds for disasters such as the 1917 Tianjin fire, the 1918 Chaozhou earthquake, the 1922 Chaoshan typhoon, the 1928 Shandong massacre, the Marco Polo Bridge incident and so on. It raised substantial amounts of money for the victims.

When Teochew movies became popular in Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, local audiences clamoured for Teochew opera. This spurred Er Woo to adapt and switch to performing Teochew opera until 1966. It hired experts for guidance and at the same time delved more into stage set design and lighting that would match the show’s plot and make it look more realistic. These were popular with audiences, and some of their work was filmed and broadcast on local television.

Er Woo was not just a gathering of Han opera lovers. In fact, because of the special status of many of its members, it became a group of the society’s Teochew immigrant leaders. Mr Yang Shusong and his family had close ties with Er Woo. Recalling his experience, he said: “Before the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan was formed, gatherings for Teochews would always be held at the Chui Huay Lim Club. Many of Er Woo’s leaders were all members at Chui Huay Lim, so Er Woo became a place where prominent members of the Teochew community would meet and stay in touch.”

Er Woo’s ritual hall was dedicated to Confucius and his birthday is set as the society’s day of celebration. On the 27th day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, Er Woo would always hold a celebration or performance.

2. Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association

Founded in 1929 on the old Chinese principle that “music is one of the six arts”, Lak Aik (which literally means “six one”) was founded by Zhang Laixi, Liao Shaotang, Zhu Jinhong, Lin Meixi, Chen Shangong, Chen Hongda, Zhu Dingguo, Chen Jiangshu, Yao Muchang and others.

Initially, the community of Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association was set up in Thong Tek Che Poh Soh. It later moved to Boat Quay to expand and make a push into the arts. During Lak Aik’s sixth’s anniversary, a spike in its membership resulted in another move to Tan Quee Lan street. In the same year, the association hired a Teochew opera troupe to celebrate the occasion at Tong Le Yuan. When the association turned 10, it held three nights of celebrations in Great World, to allow its members and families to celebrate together. Following that, there were performances to celebrate every anniversary.

As Lak Aik was an amateur group set up by Teochews, most of its actors were Teochew. However, there were a few occasions when Hakka actors – who usually perform waijiang or Han opera – made “guest appearances”. Two such people were Zhang Xiangge and Rao Xueyu. Still, most of their audiences were Teochew, and their tickets were usually given out free. Lak Aik’s first teachers came from Er Woo, which was a more established association.

Like other amateur groups, Lak Aik’s members were mostly wealthy, because their operation required donations. But it was not hard to join Lak Aik, as long as someone brought you into the group. The only condition is that the new member’s entry needs to be made known to all members. If there are no objections, the membership is approved. Members need not pay fees, but were required to donate \$2 a month. The president of the association is elected once every two years, with no term limits. Usually the president is judged by his wealth and need not understand Teochew opera. But members say those who join Lak Aik seldom do so for economic gains, unless deeper friendships subsequently form.





Lak Aik Amateur Musical Association

Unfortunately when Japan invaded Singapore, the massive upheavals in society halted the development of amateur musical associations, and many artefacts and documents during this period were lost.

Lak Aik was concerned about social issues in both China and Singapore. It views disaster relief efforts as its social responsibility, and often organised fundraisers to help victims. When the Marco Polo Bridge Incident broke out, Lak Aik staged a musical event, with reportedly impressive results. Separately, its efforts were documented in the charity performances for the Singapore Bukit Timah disaster relief fund-raising and the fund raising event for the building of Hougang Zhonghua School. In June 1947, when the Chinese on St John's Island went on a hunger strike to protest, Lak Aik was among the first groups to help those on hunger strike with food.

After WWII, Lak Aik joined dozens other Chinese musical associations in a big-scale parade to mark the Allied victory and also celebrate Lak Aik's own recovery. In 1947 it moved to 114 Bencoolen Street and in the same year performed three nights of Han Opera at Happy World to celebrate. In 1950, it moved again, this time to 11 New Bridge Road. In the 1960s, as Han opera increasingly became too highbrow and lost mass following, Lak Aik similarly switched to Teochew opera. It held a couple of public performances, which were well received.



Lak Aik Amateur Musical Association anniversary special issue on the newspaper: dated 25 November 1950

3. Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association

Founded in 1931, Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association's name loosely translates to "cultivate a refined character and harmonise emotions", with the aim of studying music and advocating proper entertainment. When it was first established, its members hired famous *hanju* or Han opera teachers to train them to perform. It celebrated three years of its establishment with three consecutive nights of performances

at Great World amusement park, which played to favourable public reviews. Since then, Thau Yong has dedicated itself to entertaining the public through Han opera.

Thau Yong was also active in assuming social responsibilities. In order to raise funds for disaster relief and other issues, it specially set up a team to purchase musical instruments and train actors to contribute to charity. In 1939, at the invitation of a fundraiser, it staged its first



Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association at the 2nd stage of Great World

performance for three days at the Capitol Theatre. In particular, the play “Weed the country of traitors” won praise and roused widespread feelings of patriotism among audiences. In 1941, during the midst of WWII, Thau Yong staged performances of “The story of Wong Bo-chuen” and “Flooding of the Golden Hill Temple” at Happy World and produced a special publication, in order to raise funds for Chinese and British refugees. In 1947, Thau Yong joined three other amateur musical associations to stage charity performances to raise funds for flood victims in southern China. In 1959, as Malaysia and Singapore were actively raising funds to build Nanyang University, Thau Yong travelled to Kuala Lumpur at the invitation of the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur Teochew Sundry Goods Merchants Guild to stage charity performances.

Subsequently, Thau Yong began switching to perform Teochew opera because of the genre’s increasing popularity. In 1961, it performed its first Teochew opera “So Luk Neung”. Not satisfied with merely performing others’ scripts, Thau Yong tried to create its own Teochew operas as well. At the suggestion of opera academic Chua Soo Pong, it created a four-act, hour-long Teochew opera called “Ramayana”. Written by Chua Soo Pong, composed by Tan Ooh Chye, directed by Lim Soon Hiang, the play marked a milestone for Thau Yong and even travelled abroad for a performance in Germany.

Despite the inroads it made into Teochew opera, Thau Yong never gave up its pursuit and imparting of Han opera. In 1981, it held a Golden Jubilee celebration and performed for four nights at Victoria Theatre, staging both the Han Opera “Bloody palm prints” as well as the Teochew operas “Chun-Cao’s Intrusion at the Court” and “The Fragrant Handkerchief”. Up to 1982, Thau Yong’s celebrations would include Han opera songs and performances.

It is worth mentioning the efforts Thau Yong has made to adapt to the changing times. In 1959, it set up its own Chinese orchestra, led by Yeo How Jiang, Lian Rongshi, Zhang Bingzhao, Li Xueling and Pan Xinjian. The orchestra, which started with about 10 people, grew to more than 40 over time. In its anniversary celebration that year, the orchestra made its stage debut before the Han opera performance, and was loved by the audience. It has performed at what is now Sentosa island for Xinhua School and has played at different locations around Singapore, including Joo Chiat Place and community centres in Changi, Jalan Eunos and Balestier, and so on. Thau Yong’s Chinese orchestra lasted for three years before its directors eventually pulled the plug, on the grounds that having an orchestra went against the mission of the association.

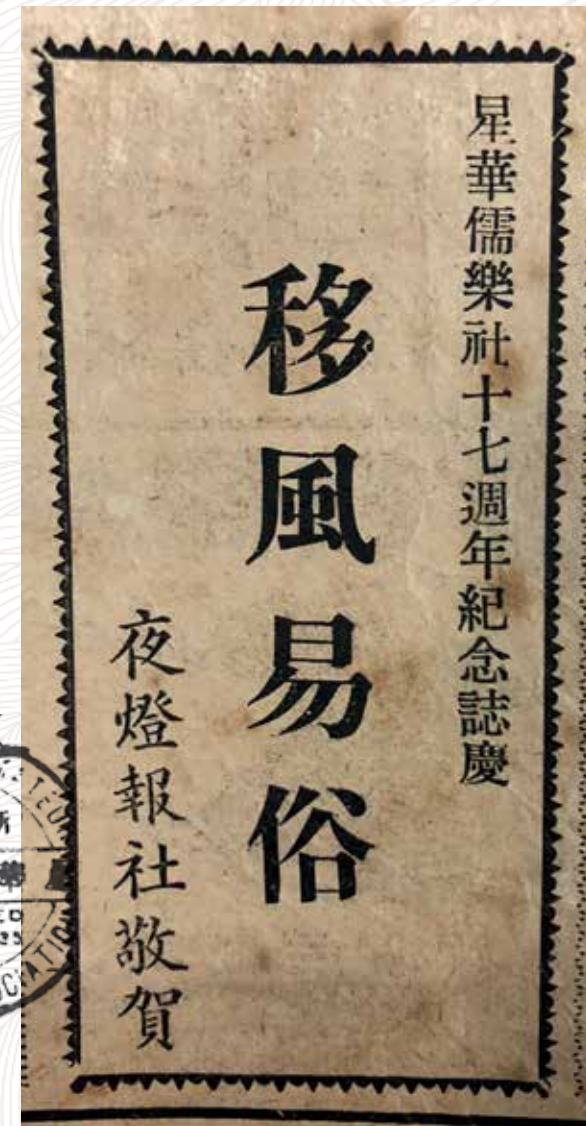
4. Chenh Hua Amateur Musical Association

Founded in 1935, the Chenh Hua Amateur Musical Association was started by Han opera enthusiasts. Initially it rented a site at Bencoolen street, but following the association's expansion, it moved to New Market Road in 1940. Led by Li Musheng, Chen Huahui, Li Songdao, Chen Mingjin, Chen Mucheng, Mo Huanzhi and Lin Zhende, the association hired Thau Yong's Chinese opera instructor Yu Zhidong to guide them and Chenh Hua's development. In 1941, it moved again to 15 Carpenter Street, in the city centre. The central location attracted people to actively participate in their activities, spurring its growth and development. In the same year, it staged a celebratory performance in its hall, which was well received by the audience.

The outbreak of WWII, however, caused Chenh Hua's development to stagnate. Only after the war, in 1946, did it begin to rebuild under the leadership of Chen Huahui. He put in place a new team of leaders, re-opened its clubhouse and hired teachers. It even organised a grand gathering for its members and staged Happy World's first post-war stage performance. The association also moved to 26 Carpenter Street. All its rejuvenation activities were in full swing and in September it joined hands with Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association to stage a performance to celebrate the surrender of the Japanese one year earlier, attracting a large audience. In 1948, Chenh Hua also performed at Happy World. In 1949, it performed at a makeshift stage in front of its own quarters, playing for three nights in a row to celebrate its 14th anniversary.

Chenh Hua was the last of the four major amateur musical associations to be formed here, but the first one to be dissolved. According to interviews, this was because the association had relatively fewer members, with even its president having to double up as an actor. With fewer activities than other amateur groups, some of its members moved to join Lak Aik instead. Eventually their members lost interest in Han opera, leading to the group's demise.

Chenh Hua's
stamp



Congratulatory message for Chenh Hua Amateur Musical Association: dated 14 October 1952

Prominent Teochew opera performers

1. Lim Joo Liak (1906-1981)

Lim Joo Liak is an all-round talent in Singapore's Teochew opera scene. Born in 1906, he came to Singapore at the age of 12 with a troupe. His father acted in "chou" or clown roles in Teochew opera and so he grew up with a deep understanding of the art form and was able to play copper instruments for his old troupe. But on arriving in Singapore, he joined Lau Sai Yong Hong Troupe as a child actor and became the troupe's main xiaosheng or young male role.

What set Lim apart was his ability not only to act, but to write, direct and teach. He had an innate understanding of musical tones and by the age of 19 had already become an outstanding young director. Teochew opera directors often had to handle scriptwriting, score composition and manage rehearsals. During the performance, they then have to assume the role of a stage manager to pace the development of the plot. Anyone who is not adequately professional or technically skilled will not be able to bear the responsibility – but Lim had already stood out from a young age. Lim was not satisfied with merely staging performances based on existing materials. When silent black-and-white movies first appeared, he adapted and presented them with vibrant colours on stage, capturing the hearts of the public in shows such as "Beauty Iron Tree", "The Revenge" and "Fate After Disaster".

At the age of 22, Lim returned to China and taught at the Lau Chia Tian Hiang Troupe, then directing the plays "Preventing a Divorce", "The

Pearl Pin" and "The Wrong Couple". A year later, he accompanied Lao Yi Li Chun Ban to perform in Thailand and other countries, directing many famous plays such as "Heng Kim Leng" and training several outstanding Teochew opera actors, such as Xu Rongxian, Zheng Guangchang, Chen Ruxian, Xie Yuxiang, Wu Songsheng, Huang Shunqiu and Chen Yuan.

In 1934, Lin assumed the role of director at the Tong Jit Kee Hiang in Bangkok. The troupe soon became very famous in the capital. A few years later, at the age of 35, he was visiting relatives in Hong Kong just as the Lau Chia Heng Troupe was being formed. He thus joined them and directed "Chui Fan Mansion", "The Story of Ne-Zha" and "Third madam gains immortality". Later, when war broke out against Japan, he left Hong Kong and returned to China. Due to his reputation, he was soon recruited by the Lau Gek Lye Hiang Troupe and went on to direct plays like "Sweeping the Window" and "The Red-Haired Steed". The play "The Red-Haired Steed" also known as "Heng Poh Chuan" was particularly popular all over the Chaoshan region.

After the end of World War II, Lin returned to Singapore and settled here. He became the director at Lao Sai Thor Guan, San Chia Soon Hiang and Chit Hoon. Lin's technical mastery, coupled with his own years of study and practice, resulted in a perfect blend of writing and production. Commenting on his philosophy of creating plays, he once said: "The lines must be concise, the music natural, the opening lively, the middle compact and the ending exciting."

2. Yeoh Liew Kung (1912-2004)

Yeoh Liew Kung is a musician, well known for his playing of the lead fiddle. Born in 1912 in Fujian's Chunan County, Yeoh was already the musical leader of a Teochew opera troupe at the age of 19. When he came to Singapore in 1937, he was employed in the same role in a troupe here. At the same time, he got married and started a family. His contribution to Singapore's Teochew opera scene was not just through his outstanding musical talent, but in his advocacy for the welfare of Teochew opera workers and his dedication to reforming the Teochew opera industry.

Yeoh initiated the founding of the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union in the 1950s. According to his oral history, the roots of the union's birth was the vicious competition between the two countries' troupes at the time. Furthermore, many in the industry smoked opium. It was felt that such a union could bring Teochew opera workers from both countries together, to reform the industry and improve the lives of its workers. This initiative gained traction easily and led to an unprecedented coming together of seven large troupes and their popular actors, to perform together on the same stage, without fighting for lead roles or concern about top billing. The two consecutive performances staged at Rangoon Road was not just a stirring spectacle for the audience – it also raised a sizeable sum for the union to buy their own premises. The play that was staged – “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” – was a special effort by renowned Teochew opera playwright Lim Joo Liak. Combined with the effort of the seven troupes, this won strong support from the audience. Subsequently, the efforts of the union ensured that Teochew opera workers all received considerably improved pay, working hours, medical benefits and leave.

In the second year of the union's formation, the members proposed at its general meeting to build a Teochew opera New Village where workers can reside, with its own shops, houses and schools. This will take care of the workers and their families in all aspects of life – a form of “logistical support” for their future. Describing the situation at the time, Yeoh said there were seven opera troupes, more than 600 workers and – if their families were included – more than 1,000 people. Everyone was brimming with confidence about the fund-raising and building of the New Village, and Yeoh worked hard to try and bring this to fruition. But it was not to be. The disbanding of Tong Sai Thor Guan left many people out of jobs. This became the main concern, and the New Village plan had to be shelved. “If the Teochew Opera New Village was built, their lives would have changed, the education levels would have been raised,” Yeoh recalled. “The history of local Teochew opera would have been significantly re-written.”

Nevertheless, Yeoh continued to work for the interests of Teochew opera workers. He stitched the broken San Chia Soon Hiang Troupe with the disbanded Tong Sai Thor Guan Troupe to form Chek Hoon Teochew Wayang, resolving the predicament of many workers. He also assumed the leadership of the new troupe. Yeoh not only sought to improve the Teochew opera art form, but also set up literacy classes in his spare time to upgrade the standards of actors through a better understanding of their script. With Yeoh as its head, Chek Hoon continued to improve Teochew opera. It performed all over Malaya, including New World's Broadway stage, and built a reputation as a renowned troupe in both countries.

联合早报 报日之NOW

缤纷 Multiplex

2004年4月19日 星期一 05



福建人领导潮剧团

文化名人杨柳江灿烂一生

文/莫美娟

潮剧职工联合会成立的第一年(1955年),便把313名来自7个潮剧戏班的员工团结起来。



日州元年五九九一影留念礼礼立成会会联工职剧潮亚末马



为潮剧的发展鞠躬尽瘁的杨柳江。

不久前以91岁高龄逝世的杨柳江,在潮剧界是个响当当的人物,不但闻名本地潮剧界,在中国潮剧界也相当有名望,中国戏剧出版社出版的《潮州音乐人物传略》中,就收了他的传记。

这位潮剧界闻人却不是潮州人,而是原籍福建省诏安县,一个福建人怎么与潮剧结下不解之缘,并为潮剧尽心尽力,相信大家都有兴趣知道。

两个月前新加坡潮剧名人杨柳江,因病逝世,享年91岁。

对一些人来说,杨柳江也许是一个陌生的名字,但在潮剧界却是个响当当的人物,不但闻名本地潮剧界,在中国潮剧界也相当有名望,并被列入中国戏剧出版社出版的《潮州音乐人物传略》中。

福建诏安人爱看潮州戏

杨柳江一生致力于本地潮剧运动和推动潮剧发展,但他不是潮籍人士,而是原籍中国福建省诏安县人。他如何与潮剧结缘,并为潮剧尽心尽力,相信大家都有兴趣知道。为了进一步了解杨柳江的往事,记者专程访问了他的女婿杨秀钦和女儿杨惠敏,两人在潮剧界活动。

福建诏安与潮州的陆平只有一衣带水,离福建其他县城更遥远,因为特殊的地理因素,向来自来诏安人与潮州人交往密切,诏安人也爱看潮州戏和演潮剧,一些诏安人还到汕头的潮剧团工作,今天的依然如此。

杨柳江跟潮剧的缘分自动便开始,19岁便已是汕头一个潮剧班的头手,他能冲黄多种潮剧乐器。

1937年来南后继续受聘担任戏班的头手。

发起组织潮剧职工联合会

百多年前潮剧艺术随先民南来在本埠落地生根。英国殖民地时代,劳苦特透是潮,潮籍演员在不合理的待遇下为雇主大会欺欺欺欺。

半年效班一天要演3场戏,从上午10时演到午夜,而班一年365天,天天都要上台,没有公假,也没有病假,班班上台是家常便饭。

上个世纪的50年代,新马两地人民要求康康殖民统治,争取独立、自由与民主的呼声日益高涨,在这股政治思潮的冲击下,潮籍职工也组织起来以争取合理的待遇。杨柳江当时带头发起组织马来亚潮剧职工联合会(那时新马还是一家),以改善潮剧同人的福利,联谊还以改良潮剧为宗旨。

实现潮剧大团结的创举

1955年潮剧职工会一成立,就有会员313名,他们是来自当时本地的7个潮剧戏班,这也是本地潮剧职工首次团结在同一旗帜下。两年后,各班演员还抛开同行如敌国的思想包袱,合作公演了一出大型的舞台剧《卧虎藏龙》,这是本地潮剧界的大突破。



1986年潮剧联谊社庆祝成立两周年时公演潮剧《马姑娘》的剧照。



1979年香港新天彩潮剧团来新加坡访问,受到潮剧职工联合会与织云潮剧团的热烈欢迎。

时“织云”阵容之强大,可以媲美50年代数一数二的潮剧戏班新荣和兴及老赛楼班班。

突破障碍

职工会成立后,在主席杨柳江的带领下,潮剧职工的地位得到了改善,包括加薪、取消早戏、缩短收场时间等,同时建立了互助、恤老、恤幼等福利制度,每逢佳节,还设置欢聚,把潮剧职工会变成跨行上班的家。

1983年政府颁布新的职工会法令,那时潮剧职工会的许多理事因身兼艺员和戏班班主,职工会面临解散或重组为民间社团的抉择。为了不让付出近30年的心血付诸东流,以杨柳江为首的发起人决定把职工会改组为潮剧联谊会,欢迎潮剧专业人士和业余爱好者参加,共同为发扬潮剧而努力。当时杨柳江当选为社长,1986年退休让贤后,被推举为永久名誉社长兼顾问,继续为潮剧出力。

创办织云潮剧团汇集名角

除了积极参与职工会活动,杨柳江还创办了织云潮剧团。

1988年,中黄城前班因故解散,导致会休70多名员工生活顿失依靠。为解决这批艺人的困境,杨柳江就欣然答应艺人们的要求组织一个新的潮剧团,这就是织云潮剧团了。

织云潮剧团的设立不但保留了70多名潮剧艺人的饭碗,对发扬潮剧也发挥了积极的作用。

当年杨柳江是职工会的领导,威望高、人缘好,许多当时著名导演和演员纷纷投奔“织云”,包括导演洪林如烈、文武生那林春、乌脸方顺林、青衣陆能清、女丑李荣科、丑角朱三弟等。杨秀钦说,那

公演《苏六娘》轰动一时

50年代到60年代是织云潮剧团的黄金时代,剧团几乎天天演出,当最轰动的莫过于60年代演出的《苏六娘》了。

杨秀钦说,“织云”继中国潮剧电影《苏六娘》在本地戏院上映后,也仿电影,首次把《苏六娘》搬上舞台,在新世界的戏院公演3天,每天两场,场场爆满,邻近的戏院老板也特地赶来观看。过后其他剧团纷纷效法,在本地掀起演出《苏六娘》的热潮。

杨柳江担当织云潮剧团团长期间,还为剧团树立了新风尚,要团员遵守中国汕头潮团的六条班规:一、生活作息要准时;二、戒除抽鸦片陋习;三、不赌博;四、不说脏话;五、团员之间互相关切互相学习;六、练字、学华语。这也是当初杨柳江答应成立织云潮剧团的一个重要条件。今天“织云”仍是新马舞台上一个相当活跃的潮剧团体。

担任多个社团领导职务

杨柳江在“织云”担任团长3年后宣布退休,以便专心于他经营的大东亚私人有限公司的业务,不过他并没有放弃他所钟爱的潮剧,除担任余晖俱乐社名誉社长外,还协助教会搞潮剧。去年巴里里省卫生公会第一次把潮剧带进教堂去,杨柳江便是该次演出的赞助人。

此外,杨柳江也热心社会公益,他曾是诏安会馆主席,也是新加坡解药厂商公会主席。1975年获得我国总统封赠公共服务奖章(PBM)。

3. Li Laili (1916-1981)

In the 1920s and 1930s, the opera industry had a saying: “Bei Mei Nan Li”. “Bei Mei” (northern Mei) referred to Peking opera legend Mei Lanfang, one of opera’s “Four Great *dan* (or female opera role)”. “Nan Li” (southern Li) referred to renowned Teochew opera *dan* Li Laili. This saying came about because Li performed in Shanghai with a Teochew opera troupe when he was 16, winning the admiration of Mei, who presented him a calligraphy with the words “Bei Mei Nan Li”.

Li Laili was born in Chaoyang county but moved to Chao’an due to his father’s work. The head of Chaoshan’s Lau Gek Lye Troupe spotted Li’s talent and had to continuously persuade his father before he agreed to let him join the troupe as a child actor. Li did not suffer the plight typical of other child actors – he was neither scolded nor beaten, and in fact was often accompanied in class by his older brother. With his natural talent and under the careful guidance of his teacher, Li blossomed and soon became its star performer. Lau Gek Lye Choon would become famous all over Chaoshan because of Li.

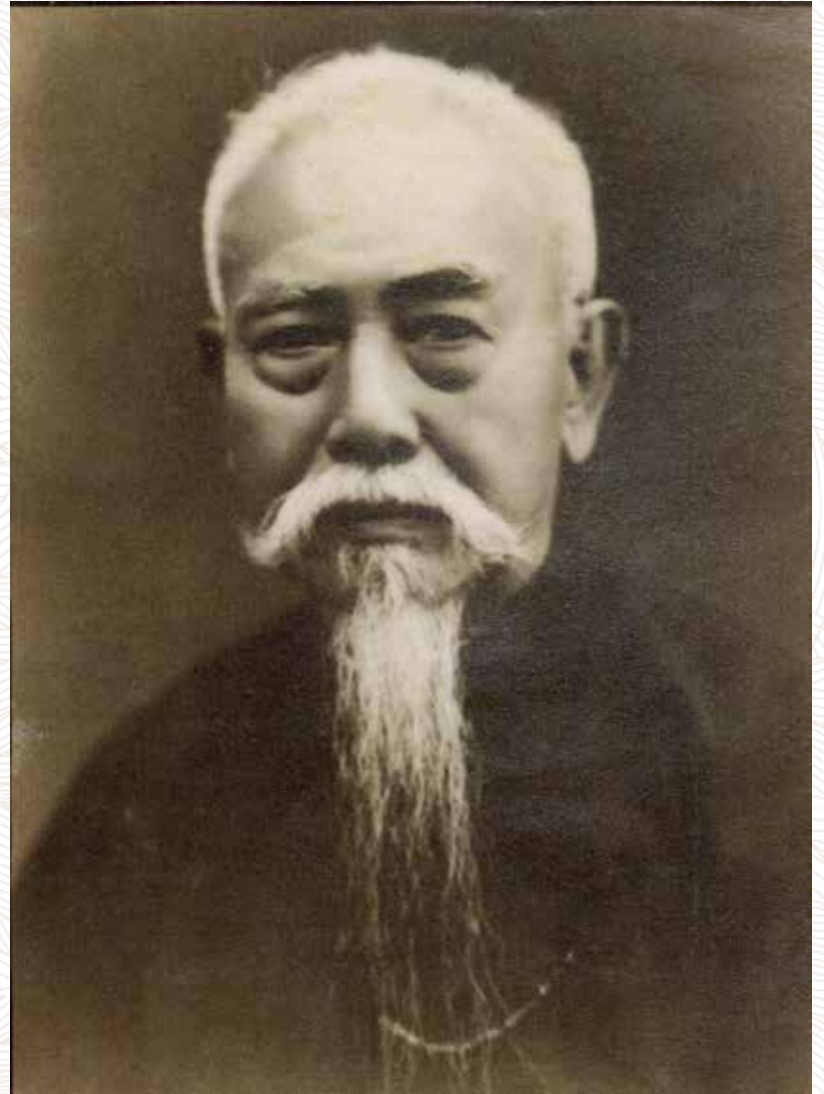
At 19, Li came to Singapore and joined Lau San Chia Soon Troupe. He switched to acting as the clown role and became famous for it. His portrayal of famous movie character Su Liu Niang’s wet nurse caused a stir in the Teochew opera scene in Malaya and Thailand. He even had fans from China. Li later on served as Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union’s general secretary and treasurer, as well as the head of Chit Hoon. Eventually he handed over Chit Hoon’s reins to his son-in-law Ou Chaofa, exhorting him to persevere with the troupe.

4. Chen Zili (year of birth and death unknown)

Chen Zili was from the village of Jinsha in Chao'an. He enjoyed music since young, and had an outgoing personality. He also used to practise music with his friends, and his abilities became very good over time. In his musical pursuit, he demanded the best of himself. He especially admired Hong Peichen's *guqin* technique, and became his disciple. At that time, Hong Peichen was a very famous teacher, and counted *touxian* player Zhang Hanzhai and *pipa* virtuoso Wang Zeru as his students. However, in the south, Hong Hong seldom taught the *guqin*. Other than Tang Tingwei, Chen was the only student of Teochew origin who got the chance to learn *guqin* from the legendary master.

Chen migrated to Singapore at the age of 20. In 1912, he set up Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association together with his friends, as a way to play music recreationally. In the association, Chen was one of the leads for the guban, and he was also in charge of the acting and social affairs aspects. However, two years after Er Woo was founded, Chen had to return to China, and the association was handed over to Chen Yangwu to run. Chen Zili eventually passed away from illness in the 1940s.

Chen Zili was not only the founder and leader of Er Woo – he was also the one who gathered numerous scripts for the association and even took part in the recording of the association's albums. Outside of the association, he was a good entrepreneur, venturing into both tea and wine businesses.



Chen Zili

5. Xie Zifan (1923–)

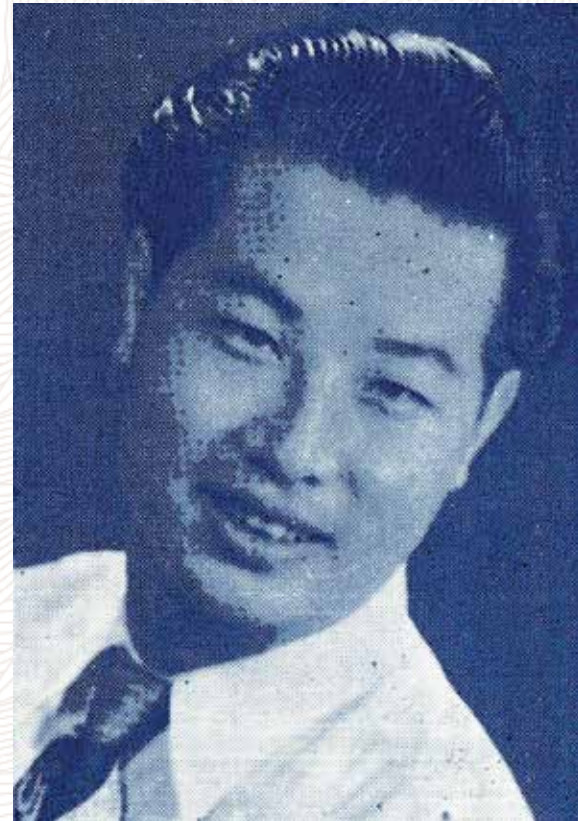
Xie Zifan was born in China, and his ancestral home is in Chenghai. He came to Singapore at a young age, and in the 50 over years he served in Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association he held various positions, including that of the president. Xie's ties with Lak Aik are inseparable.

In the 1960s, Lak Aik was more well-known in China compared to the other Singapore amateur associations. It was also the first to bring in professional instructors from China. Xie recalls: "Lak Aik was the first among the four amateur associations to bring in professional instructors from China. In fact, I myself went to Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe in China to personally engage the instructors. The first time, we didn't get a director from Shantou, but got the actress Xie Shuzhen and actor Cai Jinkun. The second time, Cai Jinkun was too old to travel, and we instead got the drummer Ding Zengqin. After that, the other amateur associations followed suit. When I invited the instructors from the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe, other performers from the professional troupes in Singapore even came to learn too. After all, the overseas instructors had an immense impact on the local performers. The Singapore government allowed them to stay for one month each time, provided that we paid a deposit of \$5,000 per instructor. If the instructor didn't return to China, the deposit would have been forfeited."

In 1954, Lak Aik shifted to premises and thanks to Xie's intervention, the association was allowed to move in although the building originally allow for music practice. Thereafter, when the government required opera groups to be registered, the paperwork was also done by Xie.

During the time that Xie was president, he also led Lak Aik's fund raising campaigns. Every year, the sum raised amounted to several thousand dollars, the equivalent of tens of thousands today. Xie had also been invited to be the vice president of the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, but he declined because he did not think that he had the right social standing.

In 1994, when Xie stepped down as president of the association, he recommended Chen Bingxi for the role, not knowing that Chen would have been the association's very last president. Although Xie had stepped down, he was still very concerned about the progress of the association, often helping the new president plan for the future. It was a pity that the association had to be closed down eventually.



Xie Zifan

6. Yeo How Jiang (1928-2017)

Yeo How Jiang was a legendary figure in the Singapore Chinese music scene. He was instrumental in the formation of Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association's Chinese orchestra, which was Singapore's first complete Chinese orchestra. He was also especially adept at playing the *sanxian*, *guzheng* and *pipa*. Even Zheng Chaoqi, the president of the Singapore Chinese Music Federation and the music director of City Chinese Orchestra, learnt the *sanxian* under Yeo.

Yeo was born in Chaozhou in 1928, and started learning Chinese music at age 11 under the influence of his father. He played his first song on the *yehu*, and later on also learnt to play the *sanxian* and *guzheng* from his father, and the *pipa* from Chen Qimao. After that, Yeo's music genius took flight, and he paved himself an illustrious music career.

In 1959, Yeo, together with Lian Rongshi, Zhang Bingzhao, Li Xueling, Pan Xingou and others, blazed the trail to start Thau Yong's Chinese orchestra. One of the group's members Li Zhenyu recounts, "Among everyone, How Jiang deserved the most credit. He not only put in effort and money, he even took care of the group and led the members with such dedication. Under his leadership, the group grew from just 10 odd people to more than 40 strong." The formation of the group also made the year extra special for Thau Yong. As Singapore's first Chinese orchestra, it became very popular among music loving youths in Singapore. Yeo How Jiang's performance of Lunar New Year tune on the *suona* was especially pivotal in shaping the way Chinese music was performed in Singapore and raising its standards.

Other than being active in the Chinese music scene, Yeo also acted on stage. As early as 1957, he acted in "The Story of Qing Qiong", together with Ding Zhangyi, Ma Hongzhi and Lan Zengwei. In the 1960s, to raise funds to build the National Theatre, Thau Yong staged a performance of "Sending off Jing Niang" at the Victoria Theatre. Zhang Zhaoying who played "Jing Niang" and Yeo who played Zhao Kuangyin both gave outstanding performances.

In 1963, Thau Yong's Chinese orchestra eventually disbanded, leaving a brief but deep imprint in the history of Singapore Chinese music. Even then, Yeo continued to persevere on his own, and in 1973, together with Lian Rongshi, Zhang Bingzhao, Gao Zhiqiang and a few other good friends, formed Zhong Yi Traditional Orchestra, starting yet another chapter in his life. Even up to his eighties, Yeo continued playing the *pipa* and *sanxian*, just like he did at Thau Yong.



Yang Haoran

Early record productions

The production of Teochew opera records came in tandem with the invention and maturity of recording technology and broadcasting. In 1877, the invention of the gramophone allowed sound to be preserved, kickstarting the development of the record industry. As the technology for radio broadcasts and record productions matured, businessmen smelt a business opportunity. They pushed out albums to the public, which became popular. At the beginning the records were 120 rpm, then they became 78 rpm and smaller in size. They also progressed from being single-sided to two-sided. Production companies were all from overseas.

Experts deduce that Teochew opera records existed before 1905. In the 1920s and 1930s, more companies such as Shanghai's Pathe Records produced Teochew opera records. Most foreign record companies hired an agent to go to China for the recording, while post-production work was done in other countries. The records were eventually sold back to China. But during the same time, many Teochew opera records were also made in Hong Kong, Thailand and Indonesia, while some *waijiang* opera records were produced in Singapore. Opera veteran Yeo How Jiang recalled meeting opera instructor Wei Songan at Thau Yong Amateur Music Association the end of the 1930s, and Mr Wei was trying to make records of *waijiang* opera.

At that time, because vinyls were a novelty and many people liked listening to opera, many records were produced. Since each vinyl could only record six minutes over two sides, many records are needed for an opera play. It was likely that Teochew opera records were produced in the tens of thousands.

"The 1930s was a golden era for Teochew opera. At the same time, recording technology entered a relatively mature stage and were able to produce better sounds. Audiences similarly demanded more and radio stations needed more of these records to broadcast. As such, this period produced many records. Southeast Asia's most prolific record-producing market was Yaowarat in Bangkok – Thailand's Chinatown. All good Teochew opera troupes at the time seemed to descend on Yaowarat, with many famous actors residing long-term, or returning every six to 12

戏班	名伶	行当
老赛桃源	蔡宝珠	小生
	李秀兰	花旦
	黄玉珠	小生
	黄兰香	乌衫
	泽豪	女丑
	林呈祥	老丑
	陈杨桃	花旦
	林碧心	乌衫
	陈大白	老丑
	朱三弟	老丑
	刘春河	老生
	谢钦良	乌面
	李城池	老生
	陈作喜	武老生
	明珠	小生
金装	乌衫	

戏班	名伶	行当
织云	林喜武	老生
	方碧云	
	余莫姑	小生
	陆艳清	乌衫
	潘中玉	老丑
	李来利	女丑
	张玉英	小生
	大妹	小生
	秀钦	小生
	秋兰	花旦
	惜贞	小生

戏班	名伶	行当
老一枝香	林葫芦	老丑
	吴婵娇	小生
	蔡巧娇	小生
	林淑珍	花旦
	何芝来	老丑
	叶庆熙	女丑
	张锡利/张习利	乌面
	罗凤娇	乌衫
	王月李	小生
	林秋玲	老丑
	吴如兰	乌衫
	林赛兰	乌衫
	李三兰	花旦
	吴绿兰	花旦
林若兰	小生	
蔡丽贞	乌衫	

戏班	名伶	行当
新荣和兴	黄细细	花旦
	陈巧娇	青衣
	蔡九妹	小生
	良育	花旦
	凤英	小生
	福基	丑角
	黄廷耀	老丑
	唐远楚/唐仰楚	乌面
	许敬城	老丑
	谢玉松	女丑
	张锡利/张习利	乌面
	谢玉泉	老生
	林绍南	老丑
	宝珍	花旦
阿花	花旦	

戏班	名伶	行当
战前演员	范阿倪	老丑
	乌笔	老丑
	尼姑	老丑
	如松	老丑
	仁正	老丑
	杨朝清	老丑
	阿荣	乌面
	陈景丰	乌面
	钱师父	老生
	杨老生	老生
	振坤	软丑
	孙素娇	小生
	郑广昌	小生
	兴顺	小生
	郑汉娥	乌衫
	陈水仙	乌衫
陈大婢	乌衫	
凸头	乌衫	
沈朝成	花旦	

戏班	名伶	行当
战后演员	林赛凤	小生
	林振发	乌面
	陈木强	乌面
	钟喜坤	老生

months. Before World War II, the renowned troupes that were residing in Yaowarat were: Lau Sai Poh Hong, Lau Ee Lye Choon, Tong Jit Kee Hiang, Lau San Chia Soon, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Tong Chia Soon as well as Lau Poh Soon Heng, Lau Jit Kee Hiang. Many of them made records in Thailand, with Lau Chia Tian Hiang producing the most.

Teochew opera plays staged at the time had many acts, so the number of records produced is almost beyond imagination. At the same time, troupes that made records in Shanghai were considered good, while troupes based in Singapore such as Lau Yong Hua Heng, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Sai Poh Hong, Lau Sai Poh Hong, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Ee Lye Choon and Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon recorded albums as well.

An industry was built out of Teochew opera records, as agents, distributors and retailers entered the market. Early records were made in Calcutta, India and shipped here for retail sale, and one opera troupe can have more than one recording company release their albums.

During World War II, this production chain was broken, with no new records released. Production resumed only after the war. China restarted its record production late – only after 1956. Thailand began earlier, around 1949, but fewer troupes went to Thailand post-war to produce records. Instead, many of them did it in Singapore, including Lau Sai Thor Guan, Sin Yong Hua Heng and Sin Thor Guan Choon.

The production network expanded after the war as well. By the 1960s, many albums were recorded in Hong Kong, then produced in Singapore, before they are pressed in Australia. One prominent new company was Roxy Record Company, which was formed in 1961 with the mission of promoting Teochew opera. It handled the entire supply chain process, from production to distribution and retail, underlining its confidence in the vibrancy and potential of the Teochew opera recording industry at the time.

Records gave audiences another avenue through which to appreciate Teochew opera – one which was more intimate. It allowed one to repeatedly listen, feel and learn, thus extending the experience and influence of Teochew opera.



Listing of Pagoda Records





Chapter 3 Silver Screen 1959-1963

- The earliest movie dubbed in Teochew and Teochew opera movie screened in Singapore
- Struck by Chinese Teochew opera movie fever
- “Chen San and Wu Niang”, a film to gain an advantage and seize the market
- Hong Kong Teochew opera movies reignited the fever
- The directly competing, duplicating and remaking phenomenon of Teochew opera movies
- “Appeal by White (Blank) Paper”, Malaya’s only Teochew opera movie
- “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl”, the lost pearl in the history of local Teochew opera movie

There are two distinct golden periods in the entire development of Singapore and Malaysia Teochew opera. The first period of prosperity was from the 1920s to the 1930s. During this period, there was an increase in the performances by Chinese Teochew opera troupes in Singapore. Some well-known Teochew opera artists even settled in Singapore and established new troupes locally to promote the development of local Teochew opera. These troupes that stayed to develop will not encounter shortages in manpower, as there is a strict actor training system back in China, and good-quality actors will be assigned to Nanyang. Therefore, the famous Singapore Teochew opera troupes would have more than 100 members. Big troupes include Lau Sai Thor Guan, Lau Sai Poh, Tong Chia Soon and Lau Gek Lau Choon. They have an opera performance every day, and as mentioned in the previous

chapter, the theatres and the amusement parks are the two major performance venues at that time. In addition, they also frequently went to various places in Southeast Asia and even went to China and Hong Kong to perform.

The second golden period was from the end of the 1950s to the early 1960s. This is due to the so-called “Teochew opera movie fever” that began in 1959 and pushed the local Teochew opera to another prosperous period. The so-called “Teochew opera movie fever” refers to the first Chinese Teochew opera movie “The Burning of the Riverside Tower” that was screened in Singapore in September 1959, and people began to look forward to Chinese Teochew opera movies. “So Luk Neung”, “A woman sues her own husband”, “Chen San and Wu Niang”, “Swallows greet the Spring”, “Hang Kang Huay Ser Kim” and “The Story of Lau Meng Chu” were brought to Singapore in the next five years, and they have been very well-received. As a result, everyone was impressed by the art of Teochew opera.

Not only did the above-mentioned “Teochew opera movie fever” affected the entire Teochew opera industry in Singapore, it also played an influential role in promoting the development of Singapore’s local Teochew opera industry, bringing the local Teochew opera community into another period of prosperity. The local traditional Teochew opera troupes began to imitate Teochew opera movies by performing them onstage. Not only did local amateur troupes switched to perform Teochew opera, amateur troupes like Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association came into being under this environment. This Teochew opera movie fever not only affected the operation of local traditional troupes and societies, it also led to the vigorous development of the Teochew opera movies in the region, which led to a series of Teochew opera movies being screened locally. These have created a golden period in which the “spotlight” was cast

upon the post-war local Teochew opera industry.



“The Burning of Riverside Tower” movie flyer

The earliest movie dubbed in Teochew and Teochew opera movie screened in Singapore

In fact, there were already 8 Teochew language films and 8 films dubbed in Teochew that were released in Singapore before the premiere of "The Burning of the Riverside Tower" in Singapore. The Teochew dubbed film "Quest for a long-lost husband" which was first introduced in the 1950s, was released in Singapore on 6 June 1951. The film publicity stated, "Teochew audience view it as a rare treasure." Originally a Mandarin film, the film was adapted from the famous play by Zhongyi Wutai and starred Luo Wei and Wang Danfeng. The director is Tan Youliu. Tan Youliu was also the director who filmed the Teochew opera movies "Hang Kang Huay Ser Kim" and "The Story of Lau Meng Chu" later in the 1960s.

At that time, the filmmakers dubbed the originally Xiamen dialect, Taiwanese dialect and Cantonese movies into Teochew films, especially the opera films. They hired the artists of the Teochew opera industry as voice actors and adapted the original songs in the film to Teochew

songs and dubbed the actors' lines to the Teochew dialect. Therefore, these movies were well-received by the overseas Chinese when they were screened in the Southeast Asian region. However, the discerning audience would be able to tell that these are what they call "pseudo-Teochew opera movies" or "non-authentic Teochew films".



"When the bride becomes the groom" movie flyer



"All mixed up" advertisement

Therefore, the filmmakers had the thought of filming “authentic Teochew films”. In 1955, Tou River Pictures, a joint venture by a Chinese Thai, Chen Shaoyun and others, and filmed the first authentic Teochew movie “Heng Kim Leng”, which was screened in Singapore in January of the following year, starring Xia Fan, Xiao Ming and He Yizeng; directed by Chen Huanwen, music accompaniment by Tao Shi Musical Club and distributed by Kong Ngee Film Company. Following the screening of the first “Authentic Teochew Films” in Singapore, more than 20 film companies that produced Teochew films were established and these include companies such as Tuo Ying, Tang Swa, Ling Dong, Wan Sheng, Eng Wah, Hua Wen, Tai Lan, Lian You, Hong Tu, Kong Ngee, Teo Ngee, and Shaw. These companies began to shoot Teochew films and screened them in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Most of these films are distributed by Shaw, Kong Ngee and Eng Wah because they have many

cinemas in Southeast Asia.

However, these so-called “authentic Teochew films” produced by Hong Kong in the second half of the 1950s, such as “Heng Kim Leng”, “Lady of Lute” and “The Scissors”, are performed in an opera dialogue style with only two or three Teochew songs, and not exactly the way operas are performed. At that time, some people wrote in the newspapers, saying that “the authentic films” filmed by Hong Kong in the past are all in the form of dialogue with some lyrics. There seems to be a desire for an all-singing, stage-style performances according to screening record and the needs of the audience. Therefore, when the documentary movie on the stage art of Teochew opera in partial colour “The Burning of the Riverside Tower” premiered in 1959, it brought to the audience a refreshing and jolting experience.



劇悲裝古 品出司公業影江蛇

第一潮語巨片

主演潮州人

不僑潮來全
看可胞籍亞馬

支多曲插唱主姐小帆夏
奏伴串客社樂僑適陶名著煩特

中國影壇的
創舉。潮州
人士的榮耀

鮑妓一往情深。公子千金買笑
鴛母騙財有術。書生窮途潦倒
義妓神廟贈金。公子發奮讀書
蘇三慘遭橫禍。含冤無從申辯
三司會審奇案。沉冤終告大白

故事雖通俗
演出極細膩

越看越好
百看不厭

夏帆
蕭鳴

陳煥文
劉榕

陳少雲
蔡雄

風流小生
最美明星

最動人的民間故事
哀艷纏綿愛情名劇

領銜主演

HENG KIM LENG

“Heng Kim Leng”
movie flyer

Teochew films that were screened locally before the Teochew opera movie fever

Teochew films

Date of premiere	Title	Director	Main cast
18/01/56	Heng Kim Leng	Chen Huan Wen	Xia Fan, Xiao Ming
18/12/56	Lady with the Lute	Wong Tim Lam	Xia Fan, Li Qing
09/07/58	The Scissors	Huang Jie	Xia Fan, Lan Tian
09/07/58	Master Feng Mourns Yuerong	Chen Yi Qing	Liu Dai, Xiao Ming
21/07/58	The Ill-Fated Flower	Huang Jie	Xia Fan, Lan Tian
15/08/58	A Smile for a Amile	Chen Huan Wen	Xiao Ming, Shi Dai
15/11/58	Twin Jade Fish	Huang Jie	Xia Fan, Lan Tian
28/01/59	Story of the Jade Hairpin	Huang Yao	Xia Fan, Lan Tian



"Lady of Lute" movie flyer



"A smile for a smile" movie flyer

Films dubbed in Teochew

Date of premiere	Title	Director	Main cast	Remarks
	Quest for a long-lost husband	Tan You Liu	Wang Danfeng, Luo Wei	Mandarin
23/02/57	Tiger Wong seizes the bride	Bi Hu	Lu Fen, Ruyi	Amoy
14/09/57	All mixed up	Bi Hu	Lu Fen, Ruyi	Amoy
28/11/57	Meng Lijun	Bi Hu	Lu Fen, Jiang Fan	Amoy
29/01/58	The female ghost pleads her case		Ai Ku Mei, Zhu Yu Lang	Taiwanese
09/02/58	An'an searches for his mother	Wong Tim Lam	Xiaojuan, Huang Ying	Amoy
10/07/58	Twin Phoenix			
05/10/58	The romance of a hairpin	Li Cheng Feng	Zi Luo Lan, Zhang Huo You	Cantonese
11/12/58	A fairy brings a son	Wu Hui	Luo Jian Lang, Luo Yan Qing	Cantonese

Struck by Chinese Teochew opera movie fever

Yang Xiuqing wrote in the article “15 Years of Local Teochew Opera”, stating that: After the screening of the first Chinese Teochew opera movie “The Burning of the Riverside Tower” in Singapore in September 1959, people began to look forward to Chinese Teochew opera movies. “So Luk Neung”, “A woman sues her own husband”, “Chen San and Wu Niang”, “Swallows greet the Spring”, “Hang Kang Huay Ser Kim” and “The Story of Lau Meng Chu” were brought to Singapore in the next five years, and they have been very well-received. As a result, everyone was impressed by the art of Teochew opera. In the Teochew opera industry, a phenomenon surfaced. Those learning the role of *hua dan* started to imitate Yao Qiuqiu and Xiao Nanying; those learning the role of the female *chou* character studied Hong Miao. In addition, Fan Zehua, who performs in the *wuyi* role, Zhang Changcheng, who performs the role of *laosheng*, Huang Qingcheng, who plays the role of *xiaosheng* and Li Youcun, who acted in the role of *laochou*, each have their own unique performances, and have become the subject of imitation. In this way, Chinese Teochew opera movies have awakened people’s misconceptions about the art of Teochew opera, and aroused people’s general attention and discussion, and brought the local Teochew Opera art scene to a new era.

Due to the sensation and craze caused by the “Teochew opera movie fever” in Singapore, Teochew operas became hugely popular at that time and the movie box office was also sold out. Among them, “So Luk Neung” set a record of a total of 107 shows in the first week of its screening alone, with audience numbers exceeding 100,000 people, the four cinemas were crowded daily. The full income for the week broke through the \$100,000 mark, which outshone other films in the fall movies industry. In the end, “So Luk Neung” broke the record for the bestselling Chinese and Western films by screening 593 shows over 72 consecutive days between 1960 to the beginning of 1961. The movie made its comeback in July 1961 with the slogan “movie audience will never forget” and officially launched its grand opening and midnight shows for a second time, which is unprecedented in the history of Singapore Teochew films. In addition, newspapers also pointed out that in the past year after the film was released, industries such as education, opera, societies and charitable institutions used the film as a blueprint to rehearse and perform. (For a detailed analysis, please refer to the article “Liu Niang Fever” in the appendix “Viewpoints”.)



Collage of China Teochew opera movie



廣東潮州傳統劇目
舞台藝術紀錄電影

全園第一等優秀演員
姚璇秋 洪妙
郭石梅 蔡錦坤 吳麗君 陳麗華 陳馥聞 陳永和 吳林榮
聯合主演

潮州觀眾一定歡喜
各地觀眾一樣歡迎

子親 討
江邊相會

蘇六娘

So Luk Neung

全部片上
七印全
彩對白
唱詞部有

加精工印 全新拷貝
！佳更光聲！好更彩色



蘇六娘
在星首輪
獻映盛況

四大戲院聯映
場場狂滿！戲
票常在數日前
即預售一空！！

首輪連映
七十二天
五九三場
突破紀錄

有一觀眾連
看五十七次
看三十四次
者不知凡幾



"So Luk Neung" movie flyer

六期星本
場半夜

兩大戲院

華金
場葉好

發行公司有限光藝

彩精曲曲：戲大場場

蘇六娘

介簡情劇

蘇六娘寄讀舅家，與表兄郭繼春相戀，豈知六娘之父郭伊許配師爺之子楊子良，六娘嚴拒，楊家前來追親，二老一味拖延，族長以六娘私訂終身，敗壞聲譽，欲正族法，把六娘沉江，二老無奈，祇得強迫女兒成親。六娘急令婢送訊，向郭求救，三更過後，婢仍未歸，決投江殉情，留書離家，幸婢陪郭趕到，舵公仗義相救，暫匿待機逃走。兩家陪族長發現遺書，追至江邊，將岸出繡鞋，衆皆大驚，子良及族長均卸責任，恨恨而逃，六娘與繼春終成眷屬。

妙洪·秋璇姚·君麗吳
中片「娘六蘇」在

主演生動出神大

Printed by Nanyang Printers Ltd.

7 Chinese Teochew Films during the Teochew opera movie fever



Advertisement for products using popular opera actress as model

7 Chinese Teochew Films during the Teochew opera movie fever

Date of premiere	Title	Director	Main cast
27/9/1959	The Burning of the Riverside Tower	Zhao Yishan	Yao Lishan, Wu Chanzhen, Weng Miaohui, Wu Fulai, Li Yuanjuan, Chen Shugui.
12/10/1960	So Luk Neung	Luo Zhi Xiong	Yao Xuanqiu, Chen Lihua, Hong Miao, Chen Fugui, Cai Jinkun, Guo Shimei.
19/7/1961	A woman sues her own husband	Luo Zhi Xiong	Lin Shunqing, Ye Qingfa, Zhang Changcheng, Chen Shuzhuang, Wng Miaohui, Yi Xishen.
1/3/1962	Swallows greet the Spring	Luo Zhi Xiong	Xu Huifen, Ji Shuzhang, Guo Yijie, Luo Lili, Chen Bangmu, Zheng Zhengyan.
28/3/1962	Chen San and Wu Niang	Zhu Shi Long	Yao Xuanqiu, Huang Qingcheng, Wu Lijun, Xiao Nanying, Xie Suzen, Li Youcun.
16/10/1962	Hang Kang Huay Ser Kim	Tan Youliu , Lu Ge	Zhang Changcheng, Zhu Chuzhen, Weng Miaohui, Lin Mingcai, Ke Lizheng, Ma Jingying.
26/8/1965	The Story of Lau Meng Chu	Tan Youli	Fan Zehua, Zhang Changcheng, Zhu Chuzhen, Weng Miaohui, Hong Miao, Li Tingbo.

“Chen San and Wu Niang”, a film to gain an advantage and seize the market

Produced by Hong Kong Da Peng Movie Company, directed by Zhu Shilin and starring Yao Qiuqiu, Huang Qingcheng and Xiao Nanying, “Chen San and Wu Niang” premiered in Singapore on 28 March 1962. The film was filmed in Guangzhou and performed by a member of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe. After seeing Yao Xuanqiu’s superb acting in “So Luk Neung”, Singapore audiences finally got to see her works again after sorely waiting for more than a year.

In fact, however, a “Tan San Ngo Neo” directed by Chen Yusheng had already been released in Singapore on 22 January 1961. The whole film was filmed using the recording of “Chen San and Wu Niang” when

the original Guangdong Chaozhou Troupe was performing it in Hong Kong. To seize the market, Thailand New Goble Movie Company, the company that produced the film and Singapore Eng Wah Organisation, the distributor of the film, found Hong Kong Cantonese opera actors to perform in the new film, accompanied by a recording of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe artists. Therefore, the film’s Wu Niang was played by Yao Yujuan and sang by Yao Xuanqiu; Chen San was played by Li Qifeng and sang by Huang Qingcheng; Yichun was played by Xue Fen and sang by Xiao Nanying.



“Tan San Ngo Neo” lobby card

However, this “Tan San Ngo Neo” that combined the resources of China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Singapore that advertised “dedicated to fellow Teochew countrymen in Singapore and Malaysia”, was dropped a few days after screening at King’s Theatre, Hoover Theatre and Happy Theatre, cinemas under Eng Wah Theatres in Singapore. After all, the eyes of Singaporean audiences are sharp, and there is a certain degree of love and appreciation for Teochew opera movies. This so-called “pseudo-authentic Teochew opera movie” filmed to capture the market has always been unable to gain the audience’s acceptance.

Similarly, the version of “So Luk Neung” by Dongshan Teochew Opera Arts Society led by Fang Qiaoyu was also launched in a rush in January 1961 to seize the Malayan market of “So Luk Neung”. The Tai Lan Movie Compan also spent a lot of money and got famous Hong Kong actors such as Li Yihong to film the so-called “orthodox” “So Luk Neung” that was released in a flash in February 1961 in Thailand just before the Chinese New Year. Three different versions of “So Luk Neung” were actually released by three different film companies in just 4 months, but the “original” Yao Xuanqiu version of “So Luk Neung” was the most sought after and praised nonetheless.



“So Luk Neung” movie flyer

“So Luk Neung” album cover



Hong Kong Teochew opera movies reignited the fever

The quick-thinking filmmakers saw the huge market in Singapore and Southeast Asia and began to strongly support Hong Kong film companies to film Teochew opera movies. For example, local companies such as Shaw Brothers, Kong Ngee Film Company, Eng Wah Organisation took over the rights to screen, produce and distribute these films. Among them, Kong Ngee also added the Teochew language production group, and later set up the Teo Ngee Company to film Teochew opera movies. In the late 1950s, Eng Wah, which produced a large number of Xiamen-language films, also set up its own Teochew opera film production group, and invited Luo Zhixiong, the director of "So Luk Neung", as the director of the group. With the strong support of filmmakers, nearly 200 Teochew opera movies appeared in the first half of the 1960s. Among

them, Tang Swa and Sing Tian Chye were the main performing troupes of these films, forming a duopoly that almost monopolised this market.

Other than "Sing Tian Chye" and "Tang Swa", who were the major players in the Hong Kong Teochew opera movie camp, there were also some other troupes that entered the market and wanted to share a slice of the pie, including the Singapore Film Company. Singapore Film Company specially engaged Hong Kong Kwong Wah Film Company to film the Teochew opera movie "Four Red Nose Clowns" that premiered in Singapore on 7 August 1964. It was directed by Kuang Zuguang, starring Li Yuhua, Chen Shuming and members of the Art Star Teochew Opera Troupe.



"Four red-nosed clowns" lobby card

As the red-hot Teochew opera movies spurred the thriving local Teochew opera records industry, record companies specialising in Teochew opera records seized on the prospects to extend their reach to the production of Teochew opera movies. Among them, Xing Xing Film Company produced the Teochew opera movie "Throwing Coins at the Fairy Maidens" which premiered in Singapore on 22 April 1964. A joint venture between Hong Kong Tang Swa Film Co. Ltd. and the record company, Tang Nan Ah Record Company, Xing Xing Film Company was to film Tang Nan Ah's best-selling record to Teochew opera movies.

China indirectly provided new operas to film for this new fever after its reform of the opera. Many newly reorganized operas by the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe were not personally filmed by the

group. Instead, these Hong Kong Teochew opera groups filmed them into films successively. Among them include "Unchanged hearts" and "The Selfless Women General" which were produced by Hong Kong Sin Tian Chye based on these operas. Many later Teochew opera movies also loved to advertise themselves as possessing "mainland standards", which shows the impact of Chinese Teochew opera movies on the production of later Teochew opera movies.

Another noteworthy point is the so-called "Teochew opera movie star" effect of Teochew opera actresses Tan Chor Hwee and Chng Sok Kiang. To a large extent, the reason why Hong Kong Teochew opera movies sold well in Southeast Asia is also the so-called "star effect". The charm of Tan and Chng has swept many audiences, which has increased



"Throwing Coins at the Fairy Maidens" movie flyer



"Unchanged hearts" movie flyer



"Farewell to a Warrior" movie flyer

the popularity of Teochew opera movies and Teochew opera. This is another whirlwind after Yao Xuanqiu's "So Luk Neung".

Among them, Tan Chor Hwee, who is known as the "King of Teochew Opera *Xiaosheng*", filmed 60 new Teochew opera movies in the span of six years from 1960 to 1966, an average of 10 films a year. These films have been released locally, such as "The story of Chun Xiang", "The misplaced love-token", "Unchanged hearts", "A common scholar", "The Red-Haired Steed", "Black Judge" and "Madam Lan Ching". Each film achieved excellent box office results. The words "Tan Chor Hwee"

became a guarantee for box office in both Singapore and Malaysia. Chng Sok Kiang is another female actress who plays the role of *xiaosheng* that is on par with Tan Chor Hwee. She debuted earlier than Tan Chor Hwee, and her first work was "A pair of carved jade". She is the lead *xiaosheng* of Tang Swa Film Company and she has starred in more than 30 Teochew opera movies. These include films such as "Strange visitor", "Twin charms", "The pearl and the sword", "The innocent", "The jade fish" and "The story of splashed water" which were are deeply loved by the audience.

The directly competing, duplicating and remaking phenomenon of Teochew opera movies

Due to the popularity of Teochew opera movies, viewers flocked to the cinema to watch the movie, which prompted the filmmakers to shoot numerous Teochew opera movies in such a profitable situation. The so-called directly competing, duplicating and remaking phenomenon began to appear. With regards to the above-mentioned examples of “So Luk Neung” and “Chen San and Wu Niang”, the most classic example would be of the two giants, “Sin Tian Chye” and “Tang Swa” directly competing with each other in the production of “Lo Lim Hooi”. On one hand was the production by Wan Sheng Film Company, starring Ding Chuqiao, Zhuang Xuejuan and Xiao Lin, and the other was the production by Tuo Ying Film Company, starring Zeng Shanfeng, Zhang Yingyan and Tan Chor Hwee. The two “Lo Lim Hooi” premiered on the same day, 21 September 1960. In the premiere advertisement, Kong Ngee even came up with the slogan “special concessions made to present



Competing Teochew opera movie - “The innocent”



this movie in a blitz” to resist the Shaw Brothers. In a rare move, Shaw organisation also published a “performance message” in the premiere advertisement, which shows the emphasis on this “direct competition”.

As a matter of fact, a “duplicate” situation had already occurred once on 9 July 1959. “Master Feng Mourns Yuerong”, starring Liu Dai and Xiao Ming, was screened on the same day as “The Scissors”, starring Xia Fan and Lan Tian. The movies tell the similar story of Jieyang County’s magistrate, Feng Yuanbiao, and his concubine, Huang Yuerong. Even more coincidentally, the same play was remade by Wan Sheng Film Company into “The Scissors” starring Zeng Shanfeng and Zhang Yingyan after a few years. The following table lists some of the Teochew opera movies that were screened in Singapore that faced the directly competing, duplicating and remaking phenomenon.



Competing
Teochew opera
movie -
“Love torn”



Title	Date of Premiere (Singapore) / Actors / Title		
"Jian Yuerong"	9/7/1959 Liu Dai, Xiao Ming "Master Feng Mourns Yuerong"	9/7/1959 Xia Fan, Lan Tian "The Scissors"	21/1/1965 Zeng Shanfeng, Zhang Yingyan "Love torn"
"Shuang Yuyu"	15/11/1958 Xia Fan, Lan Tian "Twin jade fish"	7/4/1966 Chng Sok Kiang, Shi Ling "The jade fish"	
"Zhenzhu Shan"	12/3/1960 Liu Dai, Lin Lan A Merchant Divorces His Wife"	4/4/1964 Zeng Shanfeng, Zhang Yingyan "The pearl-strewn jacket"	
"Lulin Hui"	21/9/1960 Ding Qiaochu, Chng Sok Kiang "The Innocent"	21/9/1960 Zeng Shanfeng, Zhang Yingyan "A Wrong Daughter in law"	22/2/1962 Xu Huifang, Ji Shuzhang "Swallows greet the Spring Meet in The Woods"
"Sao Chuan Hui"	4/5/1961 Tan Chor Hwee, Zhang Yingyan "Unchanged hearts"	5/6/1962 Liu Xlying, Lin Chanji "Appeal by White (Blank) Paper"	
"Ci Lang Zhou"	23/6/1961 Zeng Shanfeng, Zhang Yingyan "The Selfless Women General"	4/12/1976 Xiao Nanying, Ding Min "Farewell to a warrior"	
"Gao Qinfu"	19/7/1961 Lin Shunqin, Ye Qingfa "A woman sues her own husband"	5/4/1962 Png Kar Gek, Yang Min "Suing her own husband"	
"Nao Kaifeng"	4/11/1962 Zhang Chang Cheng, Zhu Chu Zhen "Without Fear"	8/6/1963 Ding Chuqiao, Wu Zhe "The Incorruptible Judge Tries an Official's Wife"	
"Meng Lijun"	13/8/1963 Chng Sok Kiang, Shi Ling "The Prime Minister in Male Disguise"	9/7/1964 Tan Chor Hwee, Zhang Yingyan "Prefect Lady"	

"Appeal by White (Blank) Paper", Malaya's only Teochew opera movie

When Singapore and Malaysia was regarded as one family in the early 1960s, "Appeal by White (Blank) Paper", the first Teochew opera movie that was produced and filmed in Malaya, appeared among the many Teochew opera movies filmed in China and Hong Kong. The plot of "Appeal by White (Blank) Paper" is based on the "Sweeping Window" an opera reorganized by the Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre. It premiered on 5 June 1962 at the Oriental Theatre, Palace Theatre and Grand Theatre of the Shaw Brothers Theatre in Singapore.

"Appeal by White (Blank) Paper" was produced by Kuala Lumpur Merdeka Film (also known as Independent Film Company), directed by Lin Muyuan, and performed by the famous Teo Goy Dramatic Troupe. The actors who participated in the performance included Liu Xiying, Lin Chanji, Lin Yueqin, Li Jin'e, Huang Yama, Chen Chang'e, Xie Jiwu, Li Yakao, Chen Liangfa, Jian A' song and Huang Liangshun. Unfortunately, this is the first and the only Malaya Teochew opera movie till date.



"Appeal by White (Blank) Paper" movie flyer



Teo Goy Dramatic Troupe banner



“The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl”, the lost pearl in the history of local Teochew opera movie

On 13 July 1963, the Nanyang Siang Pau published an article in page 19 entitled “Discussion on the ongoing filming of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl”. It was mentioned that the in view of the filming of several Singaporean Chinese movies in Singapore at the time, including “Lion City” and “Black Gold” produced by Cathay-Keris and Movie Era Co. Ltd, and the upcoming filming of the “Moon Over Bentong Hill” by Malaya Films and Investments Ltd, therefore the newly established Singapore Movie Production Company announced the intention to prepare for the filming of the Teochew film “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl” in colour.

In the 14th issue of “TV and Radio” on 19 August 1963, in an article titled “Why should the Teochew musical ‘The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl’ be filmed?”, the main reason for the filming was explained. It is because since the release of “So Luk Neung” in Singapore, the audience’s interest in Teochew movies has become increasingly strong, and some people who have never been interested in Teochew movies in the past have now become loyal supporters. Therefore, after watching movies such as “So Luk Neung”, “Swallows greet the Spring” and “Chen San and Wu Niang”, they strengthened their confidence in the art of Teochew

爲什麼要拍攝潮語歌舞劇

「牛郎織女」?

桑田

我們——新加坡電影製片公司——擬定要拍攝的第一部電影是伊士曼七彩潮語歌舞劇「牛郎織女」。如果有人問：爲甚麼你們要有這樣的決定？那麼，我們將分幾方面來回答這個問題。

(一)「牛郎織女」是一部古裝的戲劇，需要各式各樣古色古香的佈景，道具和服裝，像這樣的戲劇，採用彩色攝製，是遠較拍成黑白片更爲適合的；因爲這樣一來，佈景、道具和服裝的五顏六色可取的特點才能夠被儘量的發揮，從而增加觀衆對這部電影的喜愛。同時，馬來亞的電影事業，在近一兩年來雖然呈現蓬勃的氣象，但是，彩色電影的攝製，都前所未見，所以，我們打算開風氣之先，拍攝一部彩色電影，以一新觀衆之耳目。

(二)自從潮劇「蘇六娘」一片在本坡上映之後，觀衆們對於潮語電影的興趣日益濃厚，連一些在過去對潮語電影從不問津的人士，現在居然也成爲此道的忠實擁護者，關於這一點，是不會沒有原因的。據我們所知，近年來所攝製的一批潮語電影，如上列的「蘇六娘」和「乳燕迎春」「陳三五娘」等，在各方面都是比過去大有進步的，這無形中加強了我們對潮劇藝術的信心，也激起了我們去研究與改良它的熱烈的興趣。我們深信：潮劇是富有極大的藝術潛力的，換句話說，潮劇的優良傳統，正有待於我們去作進一步的繼承與發揮，使它開出更美好的花朵來。

(三)我們將「牛郎織女」這部電影稱爲歌舞劇，顧名思義，其中

當然着重在歌曲和舞蹈，而爲數不多的對白，只成爲貫串整個劇情的工具，因而它與過去曾經被搬演過的潮劇「牛郎織女」不同。在歌曲方面，它將完全是新創的。每一首的歌曲，都是我們的創作，絕不剽襲模仿，而在風格和韻味上，又使之不失潮語歌曲的本來面目。在舞蹈方面，也是出於我們自己苦心孤詣的設計，它將是中國古典舞和西洋芭蕾舞的有系統有原則的結合。總之，一切的舞姿，是遵循着我們的需要而產生的。至於配樂方面，我們也將捨棄傳統上所採用的樂器大鑼和大鼓，而只在需要的時候將它們作爲一種效果。我們所注重的樂器，將是絃樂器和管樂器如古箏、琵琶、大小胡、洞簫、笙、笛等，這些樂器，有時會是以一種獨奏的姿態出現的。

(四)在爲數衆多的潮語戲劇中，我們獨情有所鍾，選擇了「牛郎織女」這一齣戲，其原因是這齣戲歷史悠久，家喻戶曉，婦孺皆知，很容易討好觀衆。同時，這齣戲雖然充滿了神話的氣氛，但是，其中的現實意義，却是千古不渝的：西王母的蠻橫霸道，牛郎與織女之間愛情的聖潔堅貞，鵲鳥的急公好義，維護真理，都能激起我們的憤慨和讚歎。我們相信嫉惡好善的觀衆們，一定會欣賞這樣的一個劇本。

總而言之，我們是預備以一種簇新的姿態，將「牛郎織女」呈獻到觀衆的跟前的，至于我們所能做到的究竟有多少，那就有待於他日觀衆的批評了。

opera and it inspired their enthusiastic interest to study and improve it. They were convinced that the Teochew opera is full of artistic potential, therefore they decided to film the first Teochew opera movie in Singapore.

It is reported that the planner for this project is the famous local Han opera actor Zeng Zhenduo. Actors who participated in the performance included Cui Ying, Shu Xiu, Yu Ting, Hong Tao and Qiu Guang. To achieve perfection, the production team has carefully designed both costumes and singing and dancing. The Singapore Movie Production Company even partnered with Ma Lian Movie Company to perform the show at Victoria Theatre between 24 to 26 February 1964 to collect more feedback for improvement before the official filming. They moved to the Gay World Stadium to continue their performance on March 12 of the same year. However, there has never been any news of the official start or end to the filming of the movie and there were no records of the movie being officially released. Therefore, this became the lost pearl in the history of local Teochew opera movie.



"The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl" movie still





Chapter 4

Historical Footprints

1963-1979

- The development of Teochew opera since Singapore's independence
- Teochew opera series in Singapore
- An overview of professional opera troupes
- Performances by overseas troupes
- Birth of Nam Hwa Opera
- The Debut
- Public-spirited and serving the community
- New opportunities with Teochew television drama hits
- Rise and fall

The development of Teochew opera since Singapore's independence



A notice by Malayan Theatrical Association in August 1964

In 1969, under the leadership of Dr Goh Keng Swee, the first open-air theatre was set up in Chinatown to promote the development of local opera. Known as the People's Theatre, it became the venue for many Cantonese opera performances, as well as Fujian opera, Teochew opera, and Hebei opera. As a cultural art form, Teochew opera developed along with Singapore. It flourished as a result of social stability and support from the local government.

It is worth mentioning too that for both the professional Teochew opera troupes as well as the amateur groups, their focus seemed to shift from seeing China as the motherland, to serving the needs of Singapore post independence. An example would be Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association's attempt to help the then Singapore Arts Council raise funds to build the National Arts Gallery and Academy of Arts in 1967.

Nevertheless, there were challenges as the number of performance venues gradually declined over time and the appeal of professional Teochew opera troupes waned. Yet, Teochew opera continued to hold on to its footing, bringing outstanding performances to audiences across the island.

On the other hand, the popularity of amateur opera groups seemed to be on the rise. Amateur performers did not have to fret over their livelihoods, but could instead focus their energies on improving their artistic skills. The government had also implemented schemes to promote the arts, contributing to the rise of amateur groups and ushering in a new era for Teochew opera in Singapore.

It is worth mentioning that in the 1970s, under the Radio Television Singapore, the popularity of Teochew opera movies continued to flourish. During this period, with the participation of professional and amateur opera groups, 65 Teochew opera series were produced and broadcasted. They not only enriched the lives of many Singaporeans, but formed an important part of the history of Teochew opera movies in Singapore. To this day, many people still recall the wonderful memories they have of watching their favourite Teochew opera series on television.

Culture reflects not only the sentiments of the people, but the ideologies and state of the country. Since Singapore's independence, the government has played an important role in developing the culture as well as shaping the people.

Chapter 4 Historical Footprints
1963-1979

Collage of opera audience during street performance



During this time, Teochew opera troupes in Singapore also collaborated with their overseas counterparts, including troupes from Malaysia, Thailand, and other parts of Southeast Asia. Even Hong Kong's Sin Tian Chye Troupe, which counted the immensely popular Tan Chor Hwee among its cast of actors, also performed on numerous occasions with local troupes, causing a stir every time.

However, things took a turn in 1979, with the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The use of Mandarin was favoured over dialects, and Teochew opera was no longer shown on national television. The saving grace was, this was also the year that Singapore and China began to build stronger relations, following mutual visits by leaders from both countries in 1976 and 1978. More frequent exchanges between the two countries began to take place, including cultural ones. In fact, under the invitation of Singapore's National Theatre, the famous Teochew opera actress Yao Xuanqiu and her troupe Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe came to perform, causing yet another wave of Teochew opera fever in Singapore. It was said that all 30,000 tickets to the show were snapped up, even before the programme lineup was announced. The implementation of different national policies drew the audiences out of their homes, onto the streets and to the theatres once more.



Magazine of Guangdong Chao Zhou opera troupe performance

Teochew opera series in Singapore

Television Singapura, the first television station in Singapore, was launched on 15 February 1963 to bring even more entertainment options to the people. As a result, Teochew opera was brought to the television screen as well. It was another way for fans to enjoy the art form in the comfort of their homes. In this respect, the amateur groups led the way. According to research by Koh Eng Soon, the first TV series to be produced and shown on television was the Teochew opera The “Assassination of Liang ji” by Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association. From 1963 to 1979, the station produced and broadcasted 65 Teochew opera series.

電視台展開龐大計劃
攝製地方戲劇一百六十套
集我國十大潮劇閩劇戲班演出精彩劇目
大胆把傳統的民間藝術從街頭帶上電視

Report of production of Teochew opera plays on TV



← 潮語電視劇：
「刺梁驥」

The first TV Teochew Opera plays - “Assassination of Liang Ji”

A Teochew opera series produced by amateur groups from 1963 to 1979

Year	Performing Group	Title
1963	Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association	Assassination of Liang Ji Chen San and Wu Niang
1965	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association	The Trail of Qing Eng
1966	Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association	Toast to Reunion
	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dra-matic Association	Embedding Love in Drama
1967	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	The lotus lamp
1968	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	Lee Sam-neung
	Yeo Chu Kang Road Cun Min Mutual Benefit Society	Jin Hua and Liu Yong
	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dra-matic Association	Meeting at Nan Shan
1969	Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association	Chen San and Fifth Madam Part 2
	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	Wang Zuo Severing His Own Arm
	Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association	The Fighting of Eight Gods in the East sea
1970	Yeo Chu Kang Road Cun Min Mutual Benefit Society	The case of shui lao
1971	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dra-matic Association	Explore Butterfly Dream Three Times
	Yeo Chu Kang Road Cun Min Mutual Benefit Society	Revenge of Princess Fei Long
	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	Pearl pagoda
1972	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dra-matic Association	A Drizzling Rain
	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	Zhu Yulian Hua Jian Zhuan
1973	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	The story of Wong Bo-chuen
	Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association	Qin Yuan Chuang Dao
1974	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	Yi Min Ce
1978	Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dra-matic Association	The Gift of a Sword from Princess Baihua
1979	Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association	General Xue Ren Gui

The television station not only invited amateur Teochew opera groups to collaborate, professional troupes were involved as well. In 1968, the station pushed for the production of a local opera series consisting of both Fujian and Teochew opera. It gathered six professional Teochew opera troupes including Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe, Lau Gek Choon Hiang, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Sai Thor Guan and Lau San Chia Soon with each troupe performing four episodes out of the 24-parter series. This inadvertently caused some friendly rivalry between the troupes. Each tried to up their game by intensifying their training and sharpening their technique, so as to give their best performance. They even got creative in their costume and set designs, enlivening and making the series even more entertaining.

This particular series not only got the attention and involvement of various opera troupes, it garnered the support of the Teochew societies and local authorities as well. During the ceremonial wrap party, both the representatives of the Teochew opera artistes and the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, Liu Hansong and Xie Qisun respectively, made an address

to those in attendance. The then Minister of Culture also gave three suggestions regarding local opera and the performers. Firstly, shorten the programme and streamline the story. Secondly, drop the feudal ideas in the storyline. Thirdly, improve on the costumes, props, and sets to keep up with the times. The acting director of the television station himself also revealed that the series had been acquired by a foreign distributor, which was a testament to the high standards of local opera.

Needless to say, the series was also very well-received by the fans. Some audience members had even written to the press to say that they “welcome the idea of bringing Teochew opera to the screen, and being able to watch it from the comfort of the living room”.

In this series, each of the 24 episodes lasted more than three hours. The episodes were then further divided into four parts, with each part lasting an hour. They were broadcasted between 29 June 1968 and 4 March 1969, with repeat telecasts from 24 March 1969 to 20 October 1969. The segments put up by the respective troupes are as follows:

Teochew opera series produced by professional troupes (as part of the local opera series)

Performing Group	Title	Performing Group	Title
Chit Hoon	The princess falls in love	Lau Jit Kee Hiang	The golden arrow
	Justice Bao and Emperor Zhao		Lang Guo Zhen Yan
	Women's shoes		Ba Nie Yuan Yang Part One
	The reluctant bridegroom		Ba Nie Yuan Yang Part One
	Liu Hai meets fairies		
Lau Gek Choon Hiang	Hidden Dragon Part One	Lau Sai Thor Guan	Saving the orphan
	Hidden Dragon Part Two		Chaos in Kai Feng
	Lu An Zhou		Four appeals
	The Prefect Match		The Lotus Lamp
	Double Treasure Fan		Justice Bao
Sin Yong Hua Heng	Farewell to a warrior	Lau San Chia Soon	The Golden Sword I
	A heroic romance Part One		The Golden Sword II
	A heroic romance Part Two		The Golden Sword III



Collection of reports on Teochew opera TV series



劉海趕往神壇搭救金童玉女。



鍾善坤 余莫姑 方碧雲
徐光弟 謝明琴 方順林
高玉花 陳玉燕 朱三弟

演員表

蓬萊山上，有九朵蓮花，年久成精，山下小村，均是貧苦百姓，每日都是上山砍柴，有一樵夫，名劉海，待母至孝，因受惡霸錢通迫債，一日上山砍柴，九蓮仙名蓮玉，深深愛慕劉海，孝感動天，化成鄉女，邂逅路上，傾訴愛意後，劉海帶回家中，結成夫妻，同時在山上石蟾蜍成形，無惡不作，專與九朵蓮仙作對，後被蓮仙合力除去，為地方除大害。

該劇定七月廿、廿一、廿二、三由第五波道播出。

「劉海遇仙記」

織雲潮劇團

Besides the 24 episodes, other programmes were produced and shown during this period as well, such as "The Traveller & The Ghost" by Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Trope and "Qing Hiang Noi" by another opera troupe. Overseas troupes were also invited to take part. When Thailand's Sin Tong Chia Soon Hiang Teochew Opera Troupe came to Singapore to perform in 1968, they too were asked by the local station to record "Tiger Wang snatches the Bride" and "Qing Hiang Noi". This shows the immense popularity of Teochew opera series at that time.

Nevertheless, as quickly as the series gained popularity, it also ended when the TV station reshuffled its personnel. The Fujian-Teochew opera series was never able to accomplish its original intention of broadcasting all 160 plays. In spite of this, the professional and amateur troupes were still able to complete a few other opera series before the Speak Mandarin Campaign was implemented.



Report on Teochew opera movies

Teochew opera series produced by professional troupes from 1970 to 1977

Performing Group	Year	Title
Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe	1970	The fairy and the Man Fu Ren Cheng
	1971	Lady General Mu Guiying
	1972	Yang Liushi beheads his son
Lau Sai Thor Guan	1972	Zhen Nv Xue
	1975	The grand homecoming
Lau San Chia Soon	1973	Qiu Jia Diao You
	1974	Suitors for the king's sister
	1977	Throwing coins at the fairy maidens (first time on colour TV screen)
Sin Teo Goy Opera Troupe	1973	The sword
Sin Jit Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	1973	Borrowing of the Sword
	1974	The Two Princes

Even though the demand for locally produced Teochew opera series was growing, the television station was showing fewer of such programmes. In an issue of the Nanyang Siang Pau published on 8 November 1973, a reader had written in to say that he shares the sentiments of other readers, that “there are just too few Teochew opera series on television. Yes, even though the station says it is going to show Tan Chor Hwee’s “Fairy and Man”, but what about other local plays and actors?”

It was clear that local Teochew opera had a following in 1970s Singapore. There was a demand for Teochew opera series not only from

the public, but clan associations such as the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, who in 1970 also requested for the TV station to show more Teochew opera series, for the sake of the audience. Nevertheless, in view of nation building, there were other priorities and the heyday for Teochew opera series was almost over.



Tan Chor Hwee and Png Kar Gek

An overview of professional opera troupes

Since Singapore's independence, professional opera troupes no longer performed on fixed days in the theatres. Instead, they performed on the streets and during religious ceremonies. Even then, the demand for opera was still good, and at one point, there were as many as 20 professional troupes in Singapore. According to the records, there were 15 Teochew opera troupes under Singapore Theatrical Association in 1974, including Sin Yong Hua Heng, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Chit Hoon, Lau San Chia Soon, Lau Tong Chia Soon, Sin Yong Goy, Lau Chia Lye Choon, Sin Goy, Sin Heng, Lau Chia Tian Hiang, Lau Sai Poh Hong, Lau Jit Tian Chye, Tok Kang and Sin Teo Goy. In addition, there were other troupes like Lau Gek Lye Choon, Sin Ma Sin Tian Chye, Gek Lau Choon and Tong Jit Tian Hiang, bringing the total number of professional troupes to 20. In fact, in the 1960s, at the peak of Lau Sai Thor Guan's heyday, the troupe was 103-member strong. However, as audience members dwindled, many of the troupes only came back to

perform around the seventh month of the lunar year. During the other months of the year, they travelled from place to place.

In the first two years since Singapore gained independence, many rules and regulations were still not clear, and Singapore Teochew opera troupes could still perform freely in many Malaysian states. After the official rules were put in place, the troupes had to apply months ahead in Kuala Lumpur for a permit to perform in Malaysia. At that time, the troupes even had to fork out a considerable amount of money to obtain the permit. Even then, it was still difficult to get the permit, and the troupes had to shuttle back and forth. Most of the performers were based in Singapore, which made the travelling extra hard for them. Over time, the troupes performed less and less in Malaysia, and this inevitably affected their income.



A street opera performance by Lau Tong Chia Soon troupe

Teochew opera troupe in post independence period



新榮和潮劇
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劇之大偉長來以劇潮有自
連六五四

戲良溫錯
盜羅鏡千

票價
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劇中
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四五
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金鑾子
小

類已四五六

新加坡
新榮和興潮劇團
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四十年來第一次榮譽征泰
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雷萬聲 羅天劇

小生：蔡瑞蘭 老生：林國成
花旦：黃雅娟 烏旦：林振發
青衣：陳巧嬌 童生：楊春興
童生：黃雅娟 烏旦：林振發
童生：楊春興

劇情曲折
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裝樂動聽
服裝鮮艷

牡丹綠葉
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新榮和潮劇
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演獻重隆內場藝遊界世大順安在

劇之大偉長來以劇潮有自
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地點：檳城新世界遊藝場

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A collection of opera troupe performance flyers in the 1950s

Back in Singapore, the seventh month, also known as the Hungry Ghost month, was considered a busy period for Teochew opera troupes. It is believed that on the first day of this month, the gates of the netherworld are open, and hungry ghosts roam this world, where the living would appease them with offerings and rituals. At the month's end before the gates close, the spirits would return to their realm. According to a record in 1978, "this is the month where the Chinese in Singapore would be celebrating the Ghost Festival, with elaborate rituals and ceremonies. They would take to the streets and roads with incense and drums. In the city and in the suburbs, the ceremonies number in the dozens every day."

Some of the smaller housing estates would group together to hold their celebrations, while the bigger ones would split themselves up. In 1976, several bigger troupes, including Sin Goy, Gek Lau Choon, Chia Tian Hiang, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Sin Tian Chye and Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe, got together to form Singapore Malaysia Teochew Opera Union Association in order to raise the standards of Teochew opera as well as to make better sense of the business. It was also decided that from August of 1977, the company would manage all of the religious performances directly. Singapore and Malaysia Teochew United Company's office was located at 6, Merchant Lane, and was staffed by professional workers.

星馬潮劇聯合啓事

啟者，敝同業等為求適應當前環境需求，提高潮劇藝術水準並調整戲劇業務，決定組織聯營公司於星馬各地照常營業，自即日起所收各界明年年度由丁巳年八月份起一切神戲皆由敝公司直接負責。特此登報週知。

星馬潮劇聯合公司 下屬

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(林清發)	(蔡梓清)	(周鐵國)	(劉漢松)	(謝映明)	(蔡細源)	(李來利)

啓

附註：敝公司經委派外交人員負責星馬各界洽商戲業事務如下：
 委任，楊燕招為東馬及南馬外交。陳錫泉馬振平為中馬及北馬外交。
 星洲外交由劉漢松蔡細源李來利謝映明負責
 馬來西亞：辦事處威省大山脚火車頭街門牌八十七號，電話一二六號。
 馬來西亞臨時經理：林清發君
 新加坡：辦事處星洲嗎真寧門牌六號，電話七二二三三號
 星洲臨時經理，劉漢松君
 一九七六年十一月十六日

A notice of Singapore Malaysia Teochew Opera Union Association

Nevertheless, as times progress, and entertainment habits change, people started to invite getsais to perform instead. These live entertainment performances began to dampen the demand for Teochew opera troupes. Furthermore, urban redevelopment also affected the operations of the troupes. For example, new car park regulations made it difficult for the troupes to set up temporary stages for street opera.

Even though the audience numbers were in decline, there were still opportunities as well as other markets for the professional opera troupes to venture into. Two of the troupes, Lau Sai Thor Guan and Lau Jit Kee Hiang for instance, were not only roped in by the Singapore television station to produce opera series, they were also invited to perform in an air-conditioned theatre, which was a first for Teochew opera in Singapore. In 1973, Lau Sai Thor Guan performed "Stealing the Golden



Street opera performance at a carpark

Blade" at the Singapore Conference Hall, and took part in the Chinese Cultural Festival organised by the Ministry of Culture. In 1975, when the ministry organised a series of cultural galas to celebrate National Day, Lau Jit Kee Hiang was invited to perform "Luo cheng challenges his father" on the opening night at the Victoria Theatre. These go to show that the professional opera troupes were still highly regarded at that time.

However, as society progressed, there were also more and more cultural art forms for people to choose from. As a result, local opera lagged behind other more contemporary and inventive art forms. The local government also recognised that in implementing certain policies, Singaporeans became increasingly influenced by Western culture and thinking, which contributed to the decline of traditional culture in Singapore.

In order to preserve traditional culture, and to promote local opera so that it would become part of Singapore's unique cultural heritage, the Ministry of Culture and the Singapore Tourism Board jointly organised a showcase of Chinese opera, which was held from 1978 to 1984 at Hong Lim Park. Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Sin Yong Hua Heng, Sin Tian Chye, Gek Lau Choon, Chit Hoon and Kim Eng were all invited to perform. To an extent, this helped to attract a sizeable audience and slow down the decline of Teochew opera.

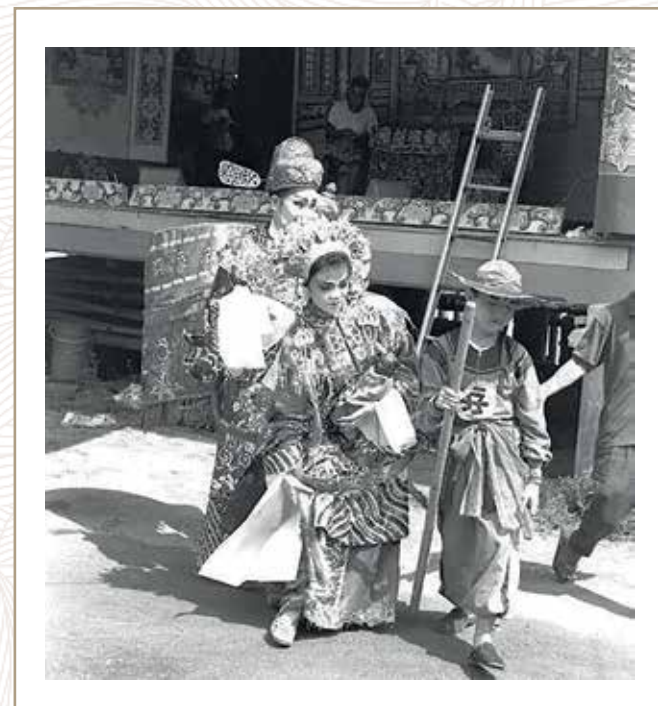
From what was going on in Singapore, it seemed like Teochew opera had gone from serving a religious function to being more of a form of cultural expression and entertainment. Beyond that, it also served to unite the people and shape Singapore's cultural identity. In fact, two new professional opera troupes came to be established. The first was Sin Jit Tian Chye, which gave their first performance at the New World Amusement Park's Canton Stage in 1968. After that, even though the troupe stayed quiet for a period of time, when they relaunched in 1973, they still had about 50 members. The second troupe to be established was Lau Gek Lye Choon in 1972, which held their opening performance at the New World Amusement Park's Broadway Stage to raise building funds for the Chung Hwa Medical Institution. They brought together famous names, and delivered a wonderful performance.

During this time, the professional Teochew opera troupes were also very involved with Singapore's social services. For instance, in 1968, Chit Hoon put up "The Princess falls in Love" at Gay World Amusement Park's stadium to raise funds for the National Arts Gallery, Academy of

Arts and National Art Troupe. In 1972, Lau Gek Lye Choon also donated the proceeds from its opening show to Chung Hwa Medical Institution's building fund. That year, Tong Jit Tian Hiang also did their part for the Chung Hwa Medical Institution by raising funds during the Hungry Ghost Festival performance in Toa Payoh.

Even though the professional troupes remained somewhat active during this time, there were signs that things were not quite looking up. According to The Teochew Drama Association's honorary advisor He Siming, "Ever since Singapore's independence, the new generation of Singaporeans were mostly English educated. They weren't interested in local opera. At the same time, some of the Teochew opera performers also started to retire. The wages for those still left in the troupes were also very low. No one from the new generation wanted to do this for a living. With no one to take over, Teochew opera went into decline."

With uninventive performances and rigid ways of management, it is not hard to imagine why Teochew opera went downhill from there. It was just not able to keep up with the times or retain the interest of its audiences.



A ritual performed by opera troupes for good luck before their opening show

Performances by overseas troupes

Ever since the first overseas Teochew opera movies were introduced in Singapore, local audiences became increasingly interested in overseas opera troupes. Even local professional and amateur performers looked forward to their overseas counterparts coming over. Between 1965 and 1979, several overseas troupes visited Singapore, including Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe, Sen Goi, Sin Tian Goy, Tong Guan Hua, Swatow Hiang Kang Teochew Opera Troupe from Hong Kong; Sin Tong Chia Soon Hiang, Lau Sai Poh Teochew Opera Troupe from Thailand; Penang Sin Ma Sin Goy Teochew Opera Troupe from Malaysia; and Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe from China.

The first overseas troupe that came to Singapore to perform was Hong Kong's Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe, which visited in 1967 with more than 40 of their members. They first performed at the National Theatre, before going to the Gay World Amusement Park. The performances lasted a total of 36 days. Among all the overseas troupes, Sin Tian Chye performed the most number of times. They were the most popular overseas troupe in Singapore. The troupe's actresses including Tan Chor Hwee and Png Kar Gek were especially well-liked by local audiences. In all, Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe set the record for the most number of days an overseas Teochew opera troupe performed in Singapore, which was 135 days.

The overseas troupes not only brought entertaining performances to audiences in Singapore, they also provided an avenue for amateur groups here to interact with and learn from them, raising the standards of local groups in the process. For instance, when Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe came to perform in 1967, they also visited Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association. In 1975, when three of Hong Kong's most famous actresses Siow Nam Eng, Loh Gui Hong and Ye Lizhen came to Singapore to perform at the Teochew Opera Appreciation Gala organised

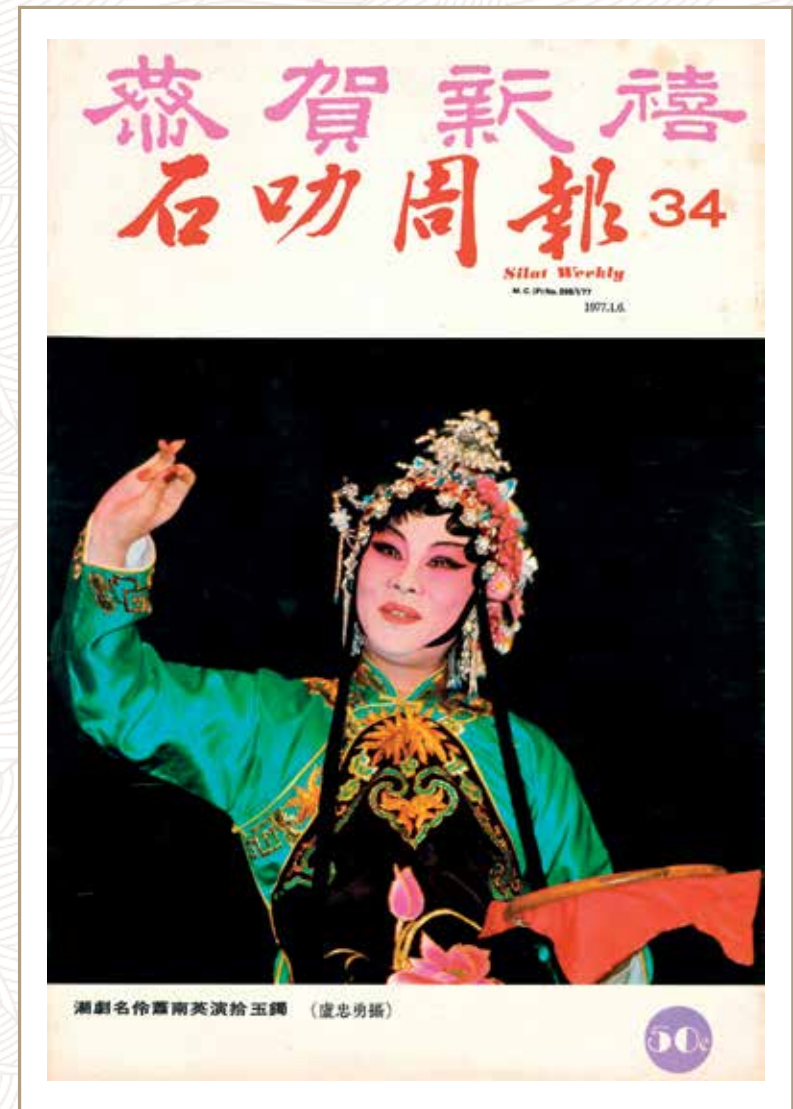
Year	Troupe	Members	Duration of Stage
1967	Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	40+	36
1968	Penang Sin Ma Sin Goy Teochew Opera Troupe	-	-
	Thailand Sin Tong Chia Soon Hiang	-	31
1969	Thailand Lau Sai Poh Teochew Opera Troupe	-	5
	Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	80+	63
1970	Hong Kong Tong Guan Hua Teochew Opera Troupe	60+	50
	Hong Kong Swatow Hiang Kang Teochew Opera Troupe	70+	47
1971	Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe	80+	25
1973	Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	60+	116
	Penang Sin Ma Sin Goy Teochew Opera Troup	-	-
1974	Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	70+	135
1975	Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe	50+	30
1977	Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe	65	103
	Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe	-	88
1978	Hong Kong Sin Tian Goy Teochew Opera Troupe	-	112
	Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe	-	58
1979	Hong Kong Sin Tian Goy Teochew Opera Troupe	-	66
	China Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe	62	16 (show)



Collection of flyers on overseas troupes performances

by the National Theatre, they were accompanied by Singapore's very own Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association. In the same year, Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association also hosted Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe, which was in Malaysia with Siow Nam Eng to visit the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade union. During her visit to Singapore, Siow Nam Eng took part in a charity performance as part of Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association's 46th anniversary celebrations as well as to raise money for Leng Ern Jee Temple's medical fund. The troupe's performance of "The Perfect Marriage" took place at the National Theatre over three nights. The response was so overwhelming that even the police had to be called in to manage the crowd. In 1978, when Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association celebrated its 49th anniversary, it also organised a performance of "The Story of Mao Zipei" and "Taking the Rap" at the National Theatre to raise funds to build the Leng Kee Community Centre as well as to help in an oil tanker accident. One of the scenes of "The Story of Mao Zipei" was even directed by acclaimed Hong Kong director Cai Shalin and the cast was made up of several of Hong Kong's most famous performers including Chng Sok Kiang, Chen Yan Lan, Loh Gui Hong and Chen Wen Xiang.

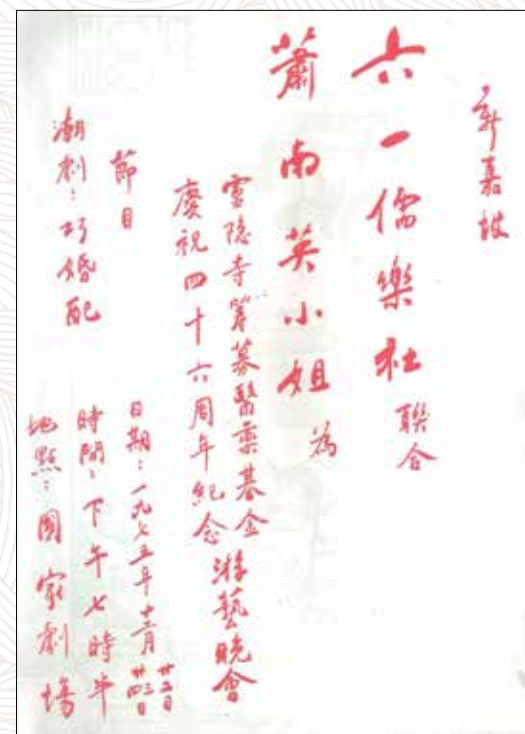
In 1977, Sin Tian Chye visited Singapore for the fifth time. At that time, Sen Goi Teochew Opera Troupe also came to Singapore to perform. There was even some rivalry between the two troupes then. Both troupes held their performances at the same time, each trying to attract the bigger share of audiences with their star acts. In the case of Sin Tian Chye, with its actress Tan Chor Hwee already retired from the public life, ticket sales remained poor for 80 days. In the end, even though the organisers did manage to persuade Tan Chor Hwee to make a charity appearance in "The Precious red book and sword", the audience reaction was also not as enthusiastic as before. The heyday for overseas opera troupes was over, and the signs were there since the 1970s – the repertoire was no



An opera performer on Silat Weekly cover



Picture of local opera troupe and Sin Tian Chye troupe



Magazine cover of Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association



Collection of overseas troupes performance tickets



longer fresh, the performances were not rigorous enough, and there were often mistakes in the songs and dialogue. As a result, the audience started to lose interest, and the Teochew opera troupes from Hong Kong gradually lost their appeal.

It was only in 1979 when the National Theatre Trust invited the China Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe to Singapore to perform its 16 sell-out shows that things took a turn for the better. The press also published several articles and reviews. The troupe performed an entertaining repertoire consisting of "The Romance of Chen San and Wu Niang" Part One and Two, "A Duel at the Border", "The Reunion at the Well", "A Tearful Plea", "Assassination of Liang Ji", "The Lost Hairpin", "Meeting in Lulin", "Holding on to the umbrella", and "Chaos at Kai Feng Court". Other than outstanding performances, the appearance of Yao Xuanqiu also sent audiences wild. They could finally come face to face with their Teochew opera idol. Other than Yao Xuanqiu, the other performers included Li Xueguang, Li Youcun, Cai Jinkun, Wu Lijun, Zhang Changcheng, Huang Ruiying, Zhu Chuzhen, Lin Shunqing, Xie Suzhen, Fang Zhanrong and Zheng Jianying.



Newspaper report on local and overseas troupes performance

Chapter 4 Historical Footprints
1963-1979



Opera performers from overseas troupes



Magazines of Guangdong Chao Zhou opera troupe performance



Birth of Nam Hwa Opera

The China Teochew opera movie “The Burning of the Riverside Tower” was screened in the 1960s to great reception. The acting skills of the actors, music and scenes of the movie were refreshing to the audience, even audiences who do not understand Teochew dialect were able to appreciate the movie and were even able to revel in it as subtitles were added. Thereafter, movies such as “A woman sues her own husband”, “Suk Luk Neung”, “Cheng San and Wu Niang”, “Swallow greets the Spring”, and “Hang Kang Huay Ser Kim” were screened in Singapore successively, and almost every Teochew opera movie during this period were able to arouse the attention and love of Singaporeans that it became a trend. Many people therefore also began to study the performance and production of Teochew operas, the combined opera research group of the Huang Clan Chichang Association came into being under such circumstances, and this was the predecessor of Nam Hwa Opera.

Huang Clan Chichang Association is a Huang Clan group and many of its members are Teochew opera enthusiasts who liked to play music or to sing for leisure. The influence of the Teochew opera movie fever in Singapore prompted them to set up a combined opera research group. They were then jointly working to present “Su Luk Neung” as a programme in their celebration out of their love for Teochew opera, with members such as Ho Ah Seow and others performing. That performance was well received by many people and it even attracted many Teochew opera enthusiasts to join the opera research group.

However, as the combined opera research group of Huang Clan Chichang Association ultimately belongs to a Huang clan group, whose main purpose was to serve Huang clan members. The many different birthplace and surnames of the members in the opera research group was contrary to the development of the Huang Clan Chichang Association.

For this, Huang Clan Chichang Association decided to allow the combined opera research group to form “Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association” separately to seek further and wider space for development. In addition, to allow Nam Hwa to execute its routines more effectively, Huang Clan Association gave a cash sum of \$1,500 as preparatory fund, laying the foundation for the future development of Nam Hwa.

1 of 55 Keywords: Nam Hwa Opera

Nam Hwa’s first steps

The name “Nam Hwa”, which meant Nanyang Chinese, was coined by Chen Yequan, a member of the then amateur musical and dramatic association, in the hope that all Chinese people will qualify as a member, regardless of their birthplace and for like-minded Teochew opera enthusiasts to come together and learn Teochew opera. The words “rujia” has a special meaning in Teochew which can be understood as “a house of grace and elegance”, therefore it means a “graceful and elegant amateur opera organisation”. The registration of Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association was approved on 20th November 1963.



Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association logo

2 of 55 Keywords:

Huang Clan Chichang Association Combined Opera Research Group

The predecessor of Nam Hwa

Huang Clan Chichang Association was founded in 1953 and is one of the ten local Huang Clan associations that is open for all Huang clan members of any birthplace to join and its purpose is to unite clansmen and to show care and concern for each other. The Association established the “Combined Opera Research Group” in March 1962 to actively cultivate performing talents and promote traditional culture and art.



Huang Clan Chichang Association – precursor of Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association

黃氏熾昌聯誼社慶祝

歡會聯祭

地點：新世界百老匯劇台
時間：晚七時半

日期：公曆一九六三年三月卅一日

从“戏剧联合研究组”到“南华儒剧社”

——本社对当地潮剧发展之贡献

社长：利泉

本社创立之后，社务活动乃告全面开展，家乡之谊进一步获得联系与敦睦。一部分爱好潮剧艺术的社员，更常聚集切磋，奏乐清唱，乐在其中，使业余生活平添优雅格调。

上世纪五十年代末至六十年代初期，多部来自潮汕的潮剧电影，如《告亲夫》《苏六娘》《火烧临江楼》及《陈三五娘》等佳作，陆陆续续在戏院上映。由于演技精湛，唱腔动人，顿时掀起一股狂热之风，就连别籍人士也赞不绝口。举个例子说：《苏六娘》一

剧中，丑角秀才一句唱词“欲食好鱼白斗鲞，欲避雅媼苏六娘”，至今仍为人所津津乐道，而反串乳娘的已故名演员洪妙，诙谐逗趣，其扮相令人历久不忘。由此可见，潮剧在当年的确风靡一时，对其日后发展造成深远影响。

基于上述两个因素，本社同人遂因势利导，于一九六二年三月间设立“戏剧联合研究组”，扩大原有班底，积极培养演艺人才，为发扬传统文化艺术略尽绵薄。研究组执委



↑ 1963年戏剧联合研究组在新世界百老汇台演出潮剧，本社全体理事合影留念。

3 of 55 Keywords: Longxi Lee Clan General Association

The first address of Nam Hwa

The Longxi Lee Clan General Association was registered in 1906 and its original name was the Longxi Lee Clan Hall. It changed its name to Singapore Lee Clan General Association in 1976. The Association bought unit 3(B) in the building located at 363 Jalan Besar in 1954 as its new clubhouse and invited a Chinese community leader, Tan Boon Kue (elder brother of Tan Lark Sye), to preside over the ribbon cutting during the new building's completion ceremony in 1956.

The founding president of Nam Hwa then was Huang Hanyang, the vice-president were Zhuang Zhenguang and Huang Chaoliang. Other members include Huang Yibin, Liao Weiqin, Liu Binghe, Chen Huafan, Huang Musong, Lin Xiumei, Huang Rongni, Ho Ah Seow, Chen Fupeng, Shen Wende, Huang Zaixing, Huang Zansong, Huang Hanzhong and Chen Yequan.

4 of 55 Keywords: Huang Hanyang

The first President of Nam Hwa

Mr Huang Hanyang oversaw the general affairs of Huang Clan Chichang Association and its combined opera research group. When Nam Hwa was established in 1963, he became the first president of Nam Hwa and his main duties were to take charge of the society's problems such as its daily routines and finances. Mr Chen Xiba succeeded Mr Huang as president when he left in 1964.



Souvenir magazine of first anniversary of Nam Hwa

南華儒劇社演劇慶祝商會新厦落成

南華儒劇社為慶祝商會新厦落成，特於本月廿四日(星期日)下午七時在該社舉行聯歡宴會。屆時除有全體團員參加外，並有各界人士踴躍參加。宴會中，該社團員表演了多齣精彩劇目，獲得各界人士之稱讚。此外，該社並向該會呈交了一份報告書，報告該社自成立以來之發展及工作。報告中，該社團員對該會之支持表示衷心感謝，並表示將繼續努力，為推廣華劇及提高團員之藝術水平而努力。

南華儒劇社
南華儒劇社自去年十一月二十日獲准註冊之後，便積極推展徵招社員之工作。因該社是一提倡健康娛樂與戲劇等藝術之文娛團體，故受到了各方良好之反應。於短短之時間內，參加入社之社員相當眾多。為了社務之發展及推動戲劇等藝術之活動，特於日前舉行社員大會，選舉一九六四年度職員，並推舉該社之籌委會，使之更能發揮工作效能。初選完成後，並繼續進行選常務理事，其結果如下：正社長黃漢陽，副社長黃潮亮，正總務黃宜彬，副總務陳華藩，中文書：林秀梅，副書：劉炳河，木松，英文書：黃芳尼，正劇務主任：黃芳尼，副劇務：黃芳尼，文：陳扶鵬，鼓板主任：黃漢忠，副黃宜彬。

南華儒劇社註冊獲批准
南華儒劇社已於十一月廿日憲報公佈獲准註冊，社址設於慈蘭勿利門牌三六三號三樓(B)現正積極徵收社員及一切籌備工作。該社之組織，純屬慈善性質，提倡正當娛樂，共同研究戲劇音樂之各種藝術，促進身心之舒快。該社之宗旨，是為推廣華劇之藝術，共同研究，劇之精神，因本邦潮人殊多，對於潮音樂欣賞之興趣，相當有人。為適合潮流，使有與潮劇之藝術，共同研究，樂於一研究，其他戲劇與音樂，可以研究其他戲劇與音樂。

南華儒劇社新職員就職
本邦慈善團體南華儒劇社於日前在該社禮堂舉行一九六四年度第一屆職員就職典禮，並訂定本月廿四日(星期日)舉行聯歡宴會。屆時將請全體團員參加，並有全體團員表演。典禮中，全體團員表演了多齣精彩劇目，獲得各界人士之稱讚。此外，該社並向該會呈交了一份報告書，報告該社自成立以來之發展及工作。報告中，該社團員對該會之支持表示衷心感謝，並表示將繼續努力，為推廣華劇及提高團員之藝術水平而努力。

南華儒劇社
南華儒劇社自獲准註冊之後，便積極推展徵招社員之工作。因該社是一提倡健康娛樂與戲劇等藝術之文娛團體，故受到了各方良好之反應。於短短之時間內，參加入社之社員相當眾多。為了社務之發展及推動戲劇等藝術之活動，特於日前舉行社員大會，選舉一九六四年度職員，並推舉該社之籌委會，使之更能發揮工作效能。初選完成後，並繼續進行選常務理事，其結果如下：正社長黃漢陽，副社長黃潮亮，正總務黃宜彬，副總務陳華藩，中文書：林秀梅，副書：劉炳河，木松，英文書：黃芳尼，正劇務主任：黃芳尼，副劇務：黃芳尼，文：陳扶鵬，鼓板主任：黃漢忠，副黃宜彬。

南華儒劇社昨日成立禮
由葉朝福芳絲開幕

本邦南華儒劇社，昨日在該社禮堂舉行成立禮。屆時由葉朝福先生主持，並有全體團員參加。典禮中，全體團員表演了多齣精彩劇目，獲得各界人士之稱讚。此外，該社並向該會呈交了一份報告書，報告該社自成立以來之發展及工作。報告中，該社團員對該會之支持表示衷心感謝，並表示將繼續努力，為推廣華劇及提高團員之藝術水平而努力。



三社團更改新會址獲准
昨日憲報公佈社團更改其新會址如下
新加坡小販協會
一 衛路州四號B, 南華儒劇社
一 慈蘭勿利三六三B號, 東方國術館
一 大成巷三二五十七號。

Newspaper reporting on the founding of Nam Hwa

5 of 55 Keywords: Ho Ah Seow

One of the founders of Nam Hwa

Ho Ah Seow, formerly known as He Yaxi, loved operas since young, especially Teochew opera. Ho Ah Seow began her inseparable bond with Teochew opera after she joined the Huang Clan Chichang Association combined opera research group. She specialised in performing the role of “qingyi” and she performed as Su Luk Neung in the opera “Su Luk Neung”, Huang Wu Niang in “Chen San and Wu Niang” and Princess Yinping in “The Trail of Qing Eng”. She is also Nam Hwa Opera’s artistic consultant currently.



Mdm He Fuxian – one of the founding member

The Debut

During the founding ceremony of Nam Hwa on 7th June 1964, Honorary President Mr Ye Chaofu said that “There is a difference between the nature of professional and amateur opera societies. Professional opera societies perform for a living whilst amateur ones are the opposite. Nam Hwa is an amateur society formed by a group of like-minded people. Not only do this type of society provide entertainment, it also carries educational significance.”

All along, Nam Hwa has always connected like-minded individuals to research into Teochew music, Teochew opera and all sorts of local operas, to promote the excellent traditional culture of the Teochews and to teach, sing and perform operas as its main activity.

The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) welcomed Nam Hwa Opera to perform its first external performance “Chen San and Wu Neung” in 1964 during the celebration week SCCCI organised in celebration of the completion of its new building. The “Chen San and Wu Neung” performance by Nam Hwa can be described as enchanting as it was well received by the audience. The SCCCI auditorium was full and extraordinarily lively.

This public performance was in fact a repeat of the performance by Huang Clan Chichang Association’s combined opera research group in 1963. The “Chen San and Wu Neung” performance can be described as rigorous, as not only did the actors displayed wonderful performance skills, the stage design and costumes were strictly following the specifications of the classic Teochew opera movie “Chen San and Wu Neung” and the audiences who watched the performance were full of praise.

According to the recollection of Mdm Ho Ah Seow, the actors and her would frequently bring stage props to the open-air cinemas to watch the Teochew opera movie “Chen San and Wu Neung” together. While the movie was screened, they would be holding onto fans or handkerchiefs while trying to figure out on their own and imitating the movements and singing of the actors in the movie. By doing this repeatedly, they hoped to be able to execute a perfect “Chen San and Wu Neung” performance.

6 of 55 Keywords: “Chen San and Wu Niang”

The first opera performance by Nam Hwa on stage

“Chen San and Wu Niang” is also the traditional opera performance “The Mirror and the Lychee”, currently there is a copy of the publication “Xin Ke Zeng Bu Quan Xiang Xiang Tan Li Zhi Ji” (t/n: New publication of the complete dialectal opera Li Zhi Ji with additions) passed down from the xinsi year of the Wanli reign in the Ming Dynasty (1581 CE). This opera was rearranged based on the oral description of the old artiste Xie Yin and with reference to the scripts used by opera troupes. The opera narrates the tortuous love story between Chen San and Wu Niang and was first performed by Zheng Shun Teochew Opera Troupe. The opera was filmed into Teochew opera movie by director Zhu Shilin in 1961 and was wildly popular at the time.



↑ 南華儒劇社演出潮劇：陳三五娘



Performance of “Chen Shan and Wu Niang”

Public-spirited and serving the community

Singapore Chinese in the 1960s were unlike the south-bound immigrants during the early years when Singapore opened its ports. Most of them had already settled in Singapore and their views on national identity had changed and were even more willing to serve Singapore's society. The nature of Nam Hwa's benefit performances was unlike the pre-war Teochew opera troupes and has largely deviated from the nature and concept of early Chinese immigrants or overseas Chinese organisations.

Therefore, Nam Hwa was also actively participating in various charity performances other than its annual public performance. On 28th February 1965, Nam Hwa performed operas such as "Farewell to a Warrior", "Meeting at Nan Shan" and "The Trail of Qing Eng" at the Gay World Stadium for the 3rd Platoon, West Zone, St. John's Ambulance Brigade's fundraiser. The audiences mistook the wonderful performance as one by a professional opera troupe for a time, and this goes to how the outstanding performance by Nam Hwa had captured the adoration and acceptance of most of the audience.



Performance for Singapore Fire Brigade



Performance for St John's Brigade

On the 6th and 7th of June 1965, Nam Hwa performed operas such as the "Story of the White Rabbit", "Farewell to a Warrior", "Explore Butterfly Dream Three Times", "Embedding Love into Drama", "Meeting at Nan Shan" and "The Trail of Qing Eng" at the National Theatre in celebration of its anniversary. Nam Hwa started preparing for the benefit performance that will take place 4 days later immediately after these performances. Nam Hwa was invited by Montfort School in Hougang to perform and to raise funds for the school. This performance was held in the Montfort School's hall, marking the first time Nam Hwa performed in schools.

Good results were achieved during the short span of five years after Nam Hwa was founded, whether in terms of artistic performance, education or public service. During the farewell banquet of Nam Hwa's honorary president Zheng Chunfa before he departed for Europe, he openly praised the excellent results of Nam Hwa's performances and opined that the fundraising performances for St. John's Ambulance Brigade and Montfort School held deeper meaning and were beneficial to the



Charity performance at Monfort School

南華儒劇社
訂蒙英義校演
期訂蒙英義校演
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南華儒劇社
明義演潮劇
為蒙福英義校籌款
本邦南華儒劇社為
慶祝成立週年紀念，業
於本月六日及七日兩
晚假座國家劇場公演潮
劇：一、包公三勘蝴蝶
一、串戲定親一、蝴蝶
一、三哭殿一、南
會一、串戲定親一、蝴蝶
一、三哭殿一、南
配、劇一、串戲定親一、蝴蝶
由合表情喜一、三哭殿一、南
討後，演出和伴奏之情
形下，眾譽識，真切實，情
深獲觀，眾譽識，真切實，情
山人海，盛況空前。怪人，
社負責人，仍不敢自滿。該
希望各界人士賜與善果。
指教，以收良好後果。
茲悉該社經接後
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訂於本月十一日及十二
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潮訂於本月十一日及十二
日兩晚，為該校籌募基

Newspaper report on charity performance at Monfort School

7 of 55 Keywords: National Theatre

The performance venue Nam Hwa most frequently use for its celebrations, a total of 14 times

Singapore attained self-governance on 3rd June 1959. In celebration of this historic year, the then Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam announced plans to build the National Theatre. A combined effort from the government and the one-dollar-for-one-tile fundraising method from Singaporeans then, \$2.2 million Singapore Dollars and three years was spent to build the brand-new National Theatre that was officially opened on 8th August 1963. However, the government, citing the unsafe building structure of the National Theatre as its reason, demolished the National Theatre in 1986, ending its historic mission of 23 years.



Nam Hwa's performance at National Theatre

welfare of society and to the education of the public. He hoped that Nam Hwa would come together to form a united will, to redouble its efforts in improving its opera arts and to serve the people so as not to lose sight of the main purpose of arts entertainment.

The farewell speech by Zheng Chunfa seemed to be the best annotation on Nam Hwa. In the decades that followed, Nam Hwa persevered unremittingly and maintained its original intention to eagerly create, perform and provide all forms of training in opera arts, and continued striving forward and never backing down with the advancement of time.

New opportunities with Teochew television drama hits

Singapore's first Teochew television drama "Assassination of Liang Ji" was broadcasted on television in 1963. This unprecedented move opened a new chapter in the history of Singapore Teochew opera. Thereafter, many Teochew opera troupes were invited to perform on television. Nam Hwa was invited to debut in 1964 by performing the Teochew opera television drama "The Trail of Qing Eng" for the Chinese New Year Special which was telecasted on 5th February 1965 on Channel 5. Not only did the outstanding performance in "The Trail of Qing Eng" captured the adoration and support of the viewers, the television station also received letters from viewers requesting for a repeat telecast, to which the television station specially re-telecasted the show on 14th February in the same year on Channel 8. This goes to show that the performance of Nam Hwa was well received and well loved by many Singaporeans.

Due to the shortage of teachers and the imperfect development of technology then, Nam Hwa's members had to either watch movies or listen to audio recordings to explore and to learn on their own. It was Madam Ho Ah Seow who relied solely on the lyrics and melodies in the audio tapes to outline the contours of Teochew opera performance and design the actors' entry and the formation for the performance of the Teochew opera television drama "The Trail of Qing Eng".

8 of 55 Keywords: "The Trail of Qing Eng"

Nam Hwa's first Teochew opera performance on television

"The Trail of Qing Eng" is a story set in the Zhenguan era of the Tang Dynasty. Prince Consort Qin Eng, son of Qin Huaiyu, accidentally killed the Grand Preceptor, causing an argument between Concubine Zhan Cuiping, Princess Yinpin and Empress Zhangsun in the palace, and the three of them even cried over this. Eventually Concubine Zhan placed affairs of the state before herself and agreed for Emperor Taizong to release Qin Eng.

Televised Teochew opera performances Nam Hwa participated in

Year	Name of Televised Teochew Opera
1965	The Trail of Qing Eng
1966	Embedding Love into Drama
1968	Meeting at Nan Shan
1971	Explore Butterfly Dream Three Times
1972	A Drizzling Rain
1978	The Gift of a Sword from Princess Baihua

Nam Hwa filmed "Embedding Love into Drama", "Meeting at Nan Shan", "Explore Butterfly Dream Three Times", "A Drizzling Rain" and "The Gift of a Sword from Princess Baihua" in the years 1967, 1970, 1971 and 1978 respectively after the production of "The Trail of Qing Eng" during this time. Not only did Nam Hwa significantly improved its popularity, it also caused Teochew opera to slowly enter the masses, allowing fellow countrymen to have a deeper understanding of Teochew operas. Unfortunately, due to the launch of the Speak Mandarin Campaign, Nam Hwa and other Teochew opera troupes started to back out from the Singapore television screens and returned to the stages.

南華儒劇社
潮劇「三哭殿」
 週日電視重播
 定期為聖約翰
 演潮劇募基金

本邦南華儒劇社，此次參加電視台特備新春娛樂鉅獻，演出潮劇「三哭殿」，戲齣，經於五日播映，深獲好評。方愛好藝術觀眾函電催請再映幾次，以滿足視聽之娛，聞已決定在本月十四日（星期日）下午六時五十分由第八波道隆重播送。

本邦聖約翰救傷隊西區第三聯隊素仰該社演劇聲色藝俱佳，馳譽星洲，敦請於本月廿八日晚八時（星期日）假座繁華世界體育館義演潮劇「三哭殿」等名劇，以及三哭殿，而為該救傷隊籌募基金，聞刻正加緊排練，務求再接再厲，以副觀客厚望云。

南華儒劇社
演潮劇「三哭殿」
 電視台第五波道明晚播

本邦南華儒劇社成立以來，為期雖僅一年，但由於社友積極研究之下，藝術日益進步，年應中華總商會邀請慶祝該會大廈落成之「博得」遊藝晚會中演出潮劇「陳三五娘」一戲，近日再蒙電視台重播，已見生色不少矣。

供各界人士欣賞，聞已全部拍攝成功，將於二月初五日（星期五）下午三時廿分，即農曆正月四日（星期五）下午三時，按時收看焉。

電視台明播出
潮劇「三哭殿」

本邦南華儒劇社成立以來，為期雖僅一年，但由於社友積極研究之下，藝術日益進步，去年應中華總商會邀請慶祝該會大廈落成之「博得」遊藝晚會中，演出潮劇「陳三五娘」一戲，已見生色不少矣。

視，近日再蒙電視台重播，邀拍潮劇「三哭殿」，特備賀年迎春鉅獻，聞已供各界人士欣賞，將於二月五日（星期五）下午三時廿分，即農曆正月四日（星期五）下午三時，按時收看焉。

電視台週日再播
潮劇「三哭殿」

本邦南華儒劇社演出之潮劇「三哭殿」已決定在本月十四日（星期日）下午六時五十分由第八波道播映。

本邦聖約翰救傷隊西區第三聯隊亦敦請該社於本月廿八日晚八時（星期日）假座繁華世界體育館義演潮劇「三哭殿」等名劇，以及「嘉賓」為該救傷隊籌募基金。

Nam Hwa's involvement in TV production



星電視台將播潮劇
包公三勘狄蝶夢
由南華儒劇社演出

特於本月八日(星期六)晚上八時四十分播送，由南華儒劇社演出。該劇係由謝其武編劇，謝其武導演。劇中包公三勘狄蝶夢，情節曲折，引人入勝。包公明察秋毫，查得伸冤，案結果向公堂，以法演，十分精彩。



Nam Hwa's performance on National TV

Rise and fall

The vibrant development of Singapore Teochew opera was stimulated by the development of Teochew opera movies in the fifties and sixties. However, Singapore Teochew opera troupes faced unprecedented influence due to factors such as the difference in national policies of Singapore and Malaysia, the urbanisation policy of Singapore, and the changing political situation after Singapore declared independence in 1965.

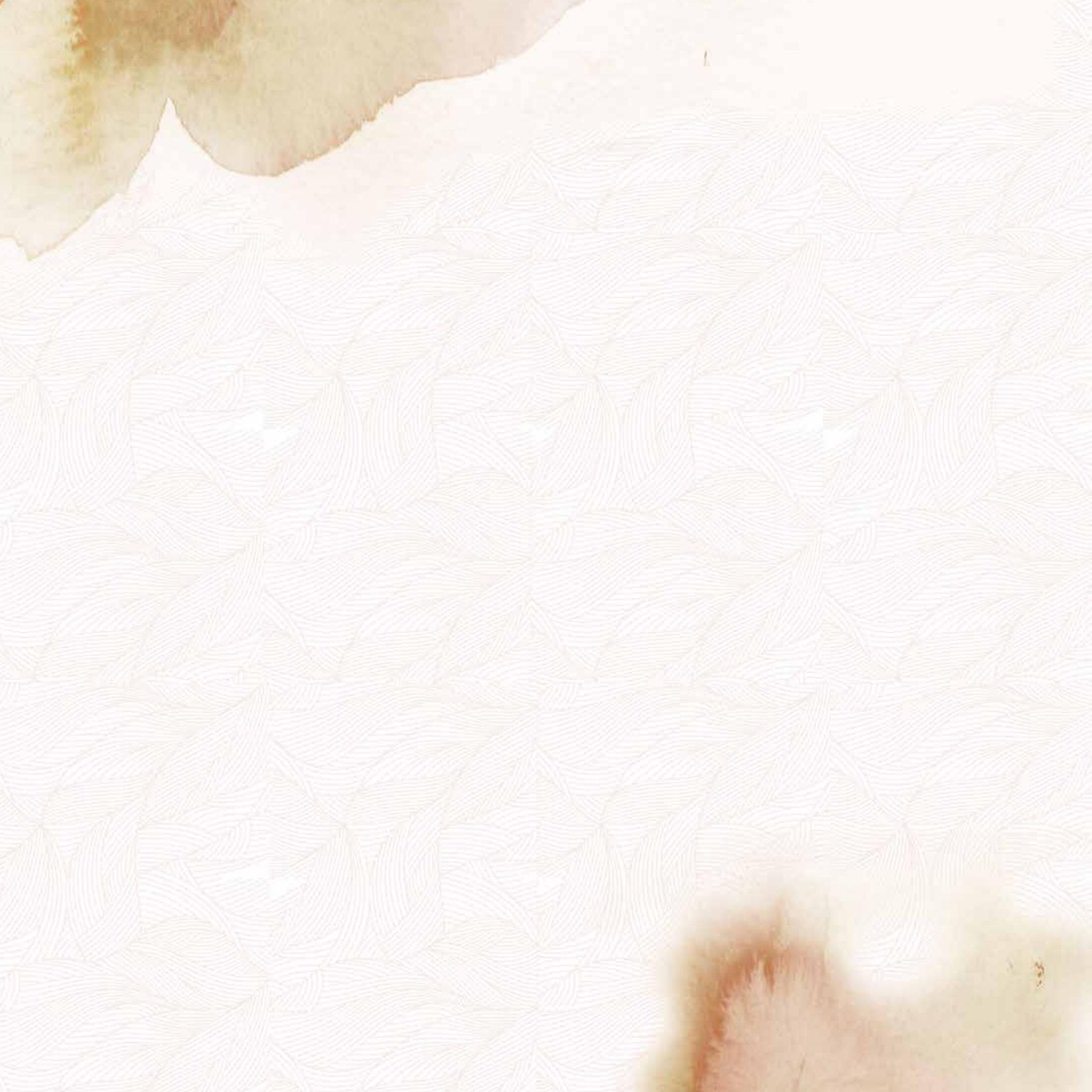
The then Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Environment and Bukit Timah Member of Parliament, Chor Yeok Eng said during Nam Hwa's 16th anniversary celebration that, "It is impossible for a nation without cultural roots to bloom. The most precious resource in every nation is its cultural roots as it can only flourish with roots." He was of the opinion then that based on the state of development of local opera, it would be the responsibility of nongovernmental organisations to promote

local opera in 10 years. Little did Mr Chor knew that the changes to the Singapore professional Teochew opera troupe was proven to be true. Many professional troupes were forced under the greater environment to gradually fade into history, leaving behind a handful of professional troupes. On the other hand, amateur Teochew opera troupes continued to perform to their best on stage, and Nam Hwa was one of them.

As an amateur Teochew opera troupe, Nam Hwa were not under pressure from revenue but continued to stay true to their original intention and passion for the art of Teochew opera performance. Not only did Nam Hwa learnt Teochew opera arts out of pocket, Nam Hwa also took up the work of promoting Teochew opera and became who they are today by taking one step at a time.



A collection of Nam Hwa performance magazines





Chapter 5 **Turning Tides** 1980-2018

- **An overview of Chinese opera's development in recent times**
- **Bucking the trend**
- **Amateur troupes**
- **The role of Teochew clan associations**
- **Overseas troupes that visited Singapore**
- **Staying true to the roots to spread the Art**
- **Reborn like the Phoenix to scale greater heights**
- **Gathering of like minds to preserve the culture**

An overview of Chinese opera's development in recent times



Collage of colourful opera stages

As we entered the 1980s, rapid economic development and technological advancement ushered in a new phase for local opera, which was characterised by two major developments.

Firstly, traditional troupes faced serious decline. After a period of constant struggle, many were finally done in by the unfavourable external environment and operational difficulties. Sadly, even established troupes called time on their trade.

But at the same time amateur groups rose to fill the void, taking on the responsibility of developing and passing on tradition.

“There were two parallel developments in Singapore’s Teochew opera scene in the 1980s,” said Teochew opera veteran Yeoh Liew Kung. “The first was the gradual decline of the professional troupe; the second was the ambition and endeavour of the amateur groups.”

Yeoh saw opera as not just entertainment, but cultural heritage – and one does not draw a line between professionals and amateurs when passing on tradition. As such, he advocated removing boundaries between the two sides, to collectively raise the level of Teochew opera.

But uniting amateur and professional opera groups was not enough to satisfy the expectations of audiences here, given the general lack of talent in the dying trade.

This prompted local groups to establish close ties with overseas Teochew opera troupes. They invited famous overseas groups for exchange and guidance, and also travelled abroad to showcase Singapore’s Teochew opera.

Besides civilian efforts, governmental support also played a crucial role in Teochew opera’s development. The National Arts Council created platforms to encourage performances, such as the “Teochew Opera Appreciation Night” jointly presented by the People’s Association and the Teochew Drama Association. The event toured every Singaporean community centre, which often could provide the right facilities and conditions, including a stage, lights, sound, and audiences living nearby.

The final group of crucial players was the Teochew organisations, such as the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, the Teo Yeonh Huai Kuan, the Kityang Huay Kwan and the Chui Huay Lim Club. They would invite Teochew opera groups from China to Singapore to perform, enriching the local opera scene.

Having been in Singapore for more than a century, Teochew opera is firmly ingrained in our local culture, as well as the collective consciousness and memories of a whole generation. Many will remember watching plays and buying snacks next to makeshift stages as children, or being hooked on Teochew opera films.

The efforts of amateur Teochew opera groups succeeded in getting more people interested in practising the art, resulting in performances that occasionally harked back to Teochew opera’s glory days, reminding everyone of opera’s timeless appeal.

Bucking the trend

In the early 1980s, as there were still numerous villages and temples in Singapore, there was no shortage of venues for street opera and opera performances held for religious thanksgiving. But as urban development gathered pace, temples merged and villages moved. The locales that street opera depended on for survival gradually disappeared and opera performances correspondingly declined.

The decrease in the number of temples, in particular, had cut off an important source of revenue. Without regular income, the running of professional troupes became an arduous task.

Furthermore, it was hard to attract people to join the trade. This resulted in troupes ageing, with no succession in sight. Under these trying circumstances, troupes such as Tong Guan Hua Heng, Lau San Chia Soon, Lau Tong Chia Soon, Tok Kang, Sin Yong Goy, Lau Gek Lye Choon, Lau Chia Tian Hiang and Lau Jit Kee Hiang folded in the 1980s.

According to Lau San Chia Soon child actor Lin Guiying, after the 1960s, the troupe switched to performing street opera and shows for religious thanksgiving. In the 1980s, it often toured Malaysia. In 1987, the troupe still had about 30 people and enough business to survive. But a mere three years later, the number of requests to hire the troupe halved. By 1995, the situation became unsustainable and the troupe folded.

Although this was a bleak period for professional Teochew opera troupes – which no longer commanded public attention – there was one which bucked the trend: Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe.

In 1981, Kim Eng performed at the New World amusement park for more than 10 days, causing a sensation. When it was set up earlier that year, it had about 30 actors, including Deng Daolan, Li Meizhen, Jiang Xiujin, Wu Yuye, Zheng Caiyu, Zhong Muqing, Yude, Liu Yade, Chen Yazhen, Zheng Guangxing, Chen Jiugen, Lin Jintai, Yao Yuye, Wang Xiangyu and Li Huiying.



Opera stage under construction



Lau San Chia Soon opera stage

The troupe boasted many actors from Sin Yong Hua Heng, and their departure to set up a separate troupe caused Sin Yong Hua Heng to fall in difficulties. Kim Eng's leader and founder Cai Fengqi was also a member of Sin Yong Hua Heng and was the troupe's music leader.

Prior to that, he was in Hong Kong and was the music leader in Sin Tian Chye Teochew opera troupe, cooperating with famous actress Tan Chor Hwee.

Later, Kim Eng and Sin Yong Hua Heng would jointly be invited by the Ministry of Culture and Singapore Tourism Board to take part in the 4th Traditional Opera Festival in Hong Lim Park. Both troupes proved equally popular with audiences.

Kim Eng soldiered on until 2007, when it performed its swansong *The Royal Family* at Defu Lane industrial park. In its 27 years, Kim Eng witnessed the gradual decline of professional Teochew opera troupes and inadvertently became part of the industry's "final generation".

Meanwhile, renowned troupe Sin Yong Hua Heng ended operations in 2001, staging a religious thanksgiving performance of "An Everlasting Legacy" as its swansong. After the curtains came down, troupe leader Tan Kah Luan donated Sin Yong Hua Heng's props and costumes to the National Heritage Board.



Kim Eng Teochew opera stage, flyer and photo of performers

Tan had first taken over Sin Yong Hua Heng in the 1970s. Even at that time, opera performers were in short supply and it required a lot of hard work to keep it going, including getting famed actress Zhuang Yuhua out of retirement to perform. Although Tan advertised in the papers for new actors, fresh recruits quit soon after joining.



Farewell performance by Kim Eng Teochew opera

“In the 1950s, opera troupes would make about \$800 to \$1,000 for a day’s work. By living standards those days, this was enough to get by,” Tan once said in an interview. But 40 years on, in the 1990s, opera troupes could make only \$1,300 to \$1,400 daily, she noted. The remuneration simply did not keep up with inflation.

As such, the exodus of actors was inevitable. Compared to their glory days, the situation they ended up in brought a sigh to Tan. “At Sin Yong Hua Heng’s peak, it had a building in Hougang and owned two buses – one for actors, the other for actresses,” she said.

Currently, the only professional troupes remaining are Lau Sai Thor Guan, Sin Sin Yong Hua, Sin Ee Lye Choon and Chit Hoon, which would perform all year in Malaysia.

According to Lau Sai Thor Guan’s seventh leader Xu Yaba, who was the troupe’s music leader in 1986, his salary was \$1,500, significantly higher than the \$280 paycheck he took home during the 1970s when he joined Lau San Chia Soon to learn the suona, or double-reeded horn.

At that time, Lau Sai Thor Guan performed more than 200 days a year. Not only were the shows popular, the troupe could command high fees.

Although societal changes eventually led to a dip in popularity, Lao Sai Thor Guan was unwilling to give up. The troupe maintained authentic costumes and make-up, hoping that the public and the government would pay more attention and allow the troupe to keep its tradition alive.





Opera performance by Sin Sin Yong Hua troupe



Congratulatory messages for reopening of Lau Sai Thor Guan troupe

Amateur troupes

Singapore's amateur troupes went to the masses and grassroots in the 1980s, to perform at places such as the community centres, schools, old folks' homes, markets, libraries and parks. They set up interest groups and training classes in community centres to encourage public participation.

In 1991, the government subsumed the National Theatre Trust under the newly formed National Arts Council (NAC), with the aim of promoting content innovation and dissemination of artistic creations; promoting the internationalisation of Singaporean arts and integrating it with the international arts scene; developing artistic talent and potential; harvesting the resources of the arts and information industry; promoting arts to the public; encouraging participation among youths; and educating Singaporeans to recognise the importance of art.

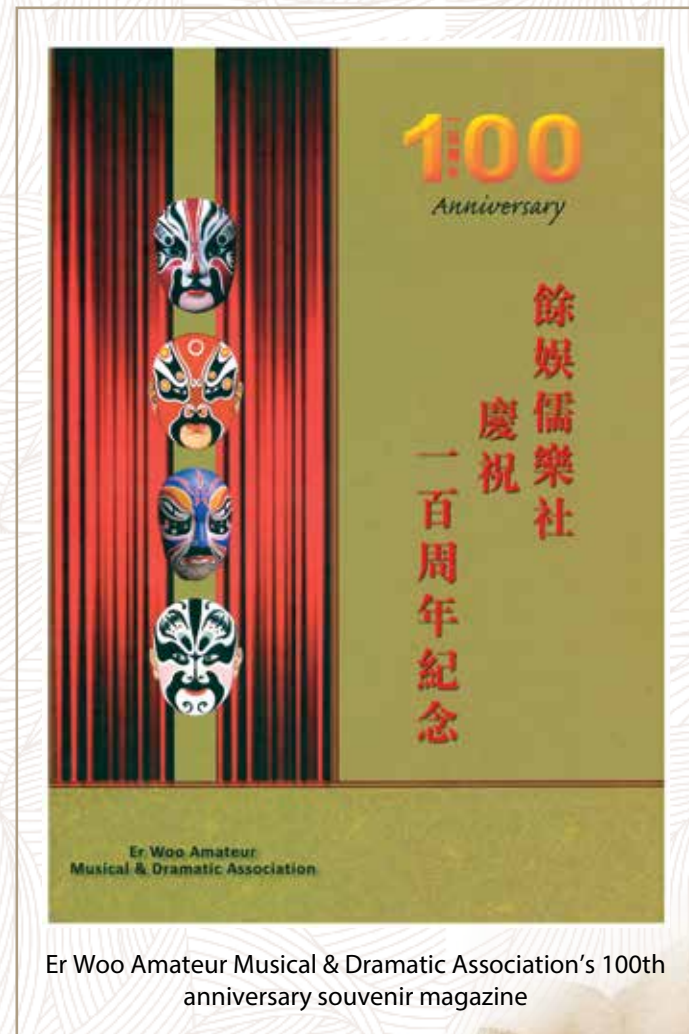
This provided fresh impetus to local amateur troupes, which kept up their efforts to scout for talent and cultivate a new generation of actors and audiences.

To that end, the troupes – with help from the NAC and the Singapore International Foundation (also founded in 1991) – travelled overseas to perform. For example, Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association and Chau Yong Amateur Musical Association both went for overseas exchanges in 1991. Exchanges with foreign Teochew opera troupes helped to gradually raise the standards of Singapore troupes.

In 2001, the Singapore International Arts Festival invited the cream of Singapore's amateur troupes to come together for a production of "The Butterfly Lovers". "This show will be one of the highlights of the Festival", reaffirming the status of amateur troupes and underlining their importance in developing Teochew opera.

Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association

Er Woo is the amateur Teochew opera troupe with the most illustrious history locally, staging numerous performances that were loved by Singapore audiences. In 1980, it staged the play "The Witty Maid" at the Victoria Theatre, using a script by the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe. "The script was lively and exciting, while the acting was witty."



Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association's 100th anniversary souvenir magazine

Overwhelming demand resulted in many Teochew opera lovers being turned away from the packed theatre – underscoring the anticipation towards Er Woo’s play – prompting the association to carry an apology in the papers.

As it developed, Er Woo constantly sought new breakthroughs, including staging its first “customised” play in 1992. This differed from its earlier plays, which used original Teochew opera scripts. The performance was a success.

In the same year its celebration performance of “Dream Under The Peach Flowers” was described as “pushing Teochew opera into a different realm”

Er Woo was keen to attract professionals and young people to join the association and learn from each other. Emerging from their ranks was opera actor Wu Zonggui, who performed for Er Woo at a local opera festival in Hong Lim Park in 1983. Er Woo’s records also showed that many young actors joined the association in 1984.

During this period, everyone trained enthusiastically at Er Woo. Fridays were spent on vocal training. Sunday mornings were spent practising basic stage movements, while afternoons were spent watching opera videos or singing. In the evenings, members would share their experiences of acting over dinner.

While there was a lack of qualified local opera teachers, everyone learnt by watching other plays, rehearsing titles such as “Farewell to a warrior”, “Lady Liu Mingzhu”, “Winter at the Plum Pavilion”, “The Crossroad”, “Assassination of Liang Ji” and “A woman sues his own husband”. Er Woo’s leaders worked hard to create chances and platforms for its members to practise and improve.

When Zhang Liangcai led Er Woo, he was also a member of the National Theatre Trust and was hence able to have access to videotapes from China. He brought the video of “Birthday Congratulations” by Chinese troupe “Xiao Bai Hua” to Er Woo to educate members. Then in 1987, they staged a performance of the same play, proactively allowing younger actors to take the stage.

Indeed, Er Woo prioritised allowing all apprentices equal opportunity to develop their talents, so that they will maintain their passion for the performing arts. The troupe did not fix certain actors only to lead roles – anyone could play any role if it was deemed suitable.

Er Woo’s leadership was instrumental in growing the association. According to its own records, during the 1980s its leader Lin Zhende was pushing for Er Woo to build ties with governmental organisations, so that the troupe could have more opportunities to stage performances regularly, including at community centres, the Singapore Handicraft Centre and the annual River Hongbao.

Er Woo was very active in its interaction with foreign troupes as well. In 1986, it invited famous Teochew opera director Wu Dianxiang from China to direct performances for them. In 1987, famous Teochew opera actress Tan Chor Hwee and Chinese drum master Chen Zhenxi visited Er Woo, with the latter teaching the troupe methods of Teochew drumming.

That same year, Er Woo played host to 58 members of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe. The following year, the association hired renowned director Ding Zengqin from China to help with several performances and train members in breathing and singing techniques, underscoring Er Woo’s efforts to improve the standards of amateur Teochew opera actors here. In 1989, the association invited Shantou Drama School’s Lin Yunyu to provide three months of structured basic Teochew Opera training for its members. In 1993, to celebrate its 80th anniversary, Er Woo specially invited four Teochew opera trainers from China, including Lin, Ding, yang qin (Chinese hammered dulcimer) expert Yang Yingqiang and string instrument expert Xu Weijing. That same year, it collaborated with local Cantonese and Beijing opera troupes in Singapore to perform “The Legend of Madam White Snake”

In 1997, Er Woo pushed their anniversary performances to a new high with the staging of a new Teochew opera play called “Turandot”. Besides having Lin Yunyu as the play’s director, the play’s music was created by Ding Zengqin, with involvement from other renowned performers and teachers from Shantou, and custom-made costumes and props.

In 2005, Er Woo broke the mould of learning only from other Teochew opera groups, by inviting Chen Haolai from Fujian’s Fang Hua Yue Opera Troupe for guidance and new ideas. In 2012, to celebrate its centennial, Er Woo invited a host of musicians from Shantou to perform live music, including Cai Jianchen on lead drums. The performance of “The swallow returns” at the Kreta Ayer People’s Theatre was directed by Huang Miaofeng from Fuzhou.

Indeed, Er Woo has been actively involved in Singapore's culture and heritage scene. In 1986 and 1987, it was invited numerous times by the Singapore Tourism Board to perform at the Singapore Handicraft Centre. Starting from 2000, with the support of National University of Singapore academic Chua Soo Pong, Er Woo collaborated with local drama school teachers such as Li Yun and Zhang Li to stage new Teochew opera plays.

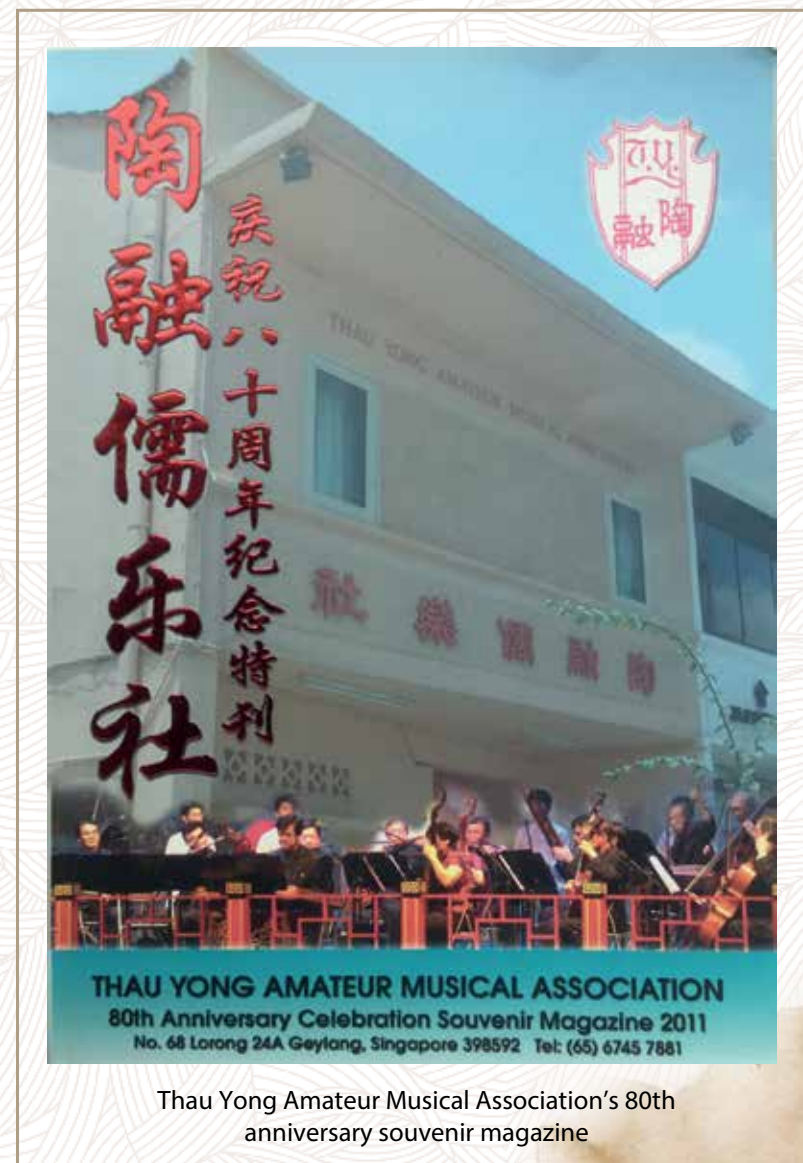
Er Woo started focusing on Teochew Opera after a boom in Teochew opera films. According to figures from 1982, the association's plays staged over its first 70 years. In 1990, the Singapore Tourism Board used a picture of Er Woo's production on its promotional postcards worldwide, citing it as an example of Singaporean culture. A year later, at the invitation of the Sarawak state government, it joined Sarawak's first international cultural festival, with 44 Er Woo members travelling to Sarawak to perform seven play excerpts over two nights.

It was the first time an overseas Teochew opera group performed in Sarawak and it played to full houses. After that, Er Woo started getting more invitations overseas, becoming a de facto "representative" of Singapore's Teochew opera. In 1996, when Er Woo and the Chinese Opera Institute travelled to South Korea for a performance, they wore traditional costumes of Singapore's different ethnic groups to showcase the country's cultural diversity.

Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association

In the early 1980s, Thau Yong performed many play excerpts, such as "Reunion at the Well", "Winter in the Plum Pavilion", "The Tearful Plea", "The Lost Hairpin", "Holding on the Umbrella", "The Broken Bridge", "Trial of Qing Eng" as well as full productions such as "Xu Jiuqing", "The Rescue of a Courtesan". Besides their anniversary performances, Thau Yong participated actively in Chinese cultural festivals and the River Hongbao, and would perform on invitation for clan associations, business groups and community centres. In 1989, on the invitation of the Ministry of Social Development, Thau Yong performed Teochew music at the foyer of Raffles City. In 1990, it conducted Teochew opera training for Punggol Community Centre. In 2007 and 2008, Thau Yong co-organised a "Teochew Night" with Braddell Heights Community Club, inviting artistes from the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe for performances on both occasions.

Thau Yong had exchanges with many overseas opera troupes. In 1983, Guangdong Han Theatre performed in Singapore and visited Thau Yong's premises. In 1986, Thau Yong was invited by Singapore's national broadcaster to record Teochew opera "Winter in the Plum Pavilion" in its studio. In 1986, the Kreta Ayer Community Centre invited Thau Yong for an exchange. In 1987, part of the Guangdong Teochew Opera troupe visited Thau Yong for an exchange. In the mid-1980s, the Singapore government relaxed its rules to allow Chinese citizens to visit relatives in Singapore. In 1987, Thau Yong thus hired a guest director for its anniversary performance. In 1988, it hired famous local Teochew



Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association's 80th anniversary souvenir magazine

opera artistes Huang Xixi, Xu Ruquan and Xu Rixiu to direct one of its productions.

In 1989, Thau Yong invited Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe's Fang Zhanrong for an exchange with its members. In 1994, Thau Yong invited Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe's Cai Jianchen to guide its members in percussion music. From 1990 to 1995, Thau Yong invited Shantou's famous directors and drum teachers to guide to the association's members, in a bid to raise their standard. Thau Yong put up new plays, including comedy, love story and imperial drama.

These were not the only exchanges that Thau Yong had. In 1990, Hubei and Guangdong Han Theatre visited Thau Yong. The troupe has also performed overseas on the requests of other parties, presenting many exciting performances, such as its performance of "Ramayana" in Thailand in 1995. The manuscript was written by NUS' Chua Soo Pong, adapting from the original Indian epic Ramayana. Chen Youcai composed the music for the performance, which was unique for portraying Teochew opera in a different manner.

Besides performances, Thau Yong has maintained its research and learning of music. Since 1959, it set up an impressive orchestra which has performed in many venues and groomed numerous players. In 1983, it even joined the Ministry of Culture's Chinese Instrumental Music Festival to play Teochew music. In 1994, under the leadership of Thau Yong veteran Yeo How Jiang, the orchestra travelled to Kuching, Indonesia and Myanmar to perform Teochew music. Thau Yong even established a costume and makeup research group in 1984, to specialise in these areas.

Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association

Lak Aik's had relatively fewer activities compared to other amateur associations in recent years, keeping public performances to their anniversaries. There are few records of their overseas performances.

Information available shows that from 1980 to 1994, Lak Aik only held eight performances during their anniversary celebrations. The association was dissolved in 1996.

Recalling the management of the association in its later years, former Lak Aik president Xie Zifan said: "Our finances rely on the proceeds from our anniversary performances. Everyone donates when performances are staged. If I'm the president, I will make a bigger contribution. Other deputy presidents and members will donate accordingly as well. We appointed some people as honorary chairmen and they will donate as well for performances. Our proceeds came from the performance, posters and commemorative publications. Advertisements in the publications can bring in around \$20,000 to \$30,000, so if there is money left over, let's say \$10,000, we will keep it in a reserve fund, which we can dip into if we don't have enough money to cover our expenses."

But the association needed funds for rent and staff salaries, so they found that the extra funds from their anniversary performances were not enough to cover a year's worth of expenses.

After Mr Xie resigned, Lak Aik elected Mr Chen Bingxi as its new president in 1994. Before leaving office, Mr Xie was still concerned about the future of the association and so proposed a plan to keep Lak Aik running. He suggested that the president donates \$100 monthly, the deputies \$50, members \$30 and those who come for mahjong sessions \$30. He felt this would have sufficed and that "most people would support my plan".

Instead the curtains came down on Lak Aik after 67 years. Mr Xie said this happened not because of financial constraints, but because the association did not adopt a rescue plan. Eventually, Lak Aik was dissolved following a members' meeting – but without following the established procedures for holding such meetings, such as meeting the quorum, said Mr Xie.

Lak Aik had an illustrious history with many prominent leaders serving selflessly for the association. Although it is no longer around, the historical materials available show that its glorious past achievements will continue to live on.

The Teochew Drama Association

The roots of the Teochew Drama Association lie in the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union. But in 1984, the professional union transformed into an amateur performing association which any Teochew opera lover could join. Teochew opera pioneer Yeoh Liew Kung was the association's first president, and inaugurated its first staff.

To adapt to the times, the association would perform a few times a year in community centres, with the aim of not just preserving Chinese culture, but to broaden its appeal to a wider audience and to attract younger members.

According to an internal survey in 2010, the association's actors were 26 years old on the average, while three-quarters of the actors were aged below 30. It became known as "Singapore's youngest Teochew opera group".

Furthermore, the association also worked hard to grow its audience. A publication commemorating its third anniversary, for instance, had both English and Chinese synopses so as to broaden its appeal to an English-speaking audience. At the same time, it had regular exchanges with overseas troupes, inviting the Guangdong Teochew Opera troupe's director Lin Hongfei to guide them during their third and fifth anniversaries.



The Teochew Drama Association staff in 1986

The role of Teochew clan associations

Teochew clan associations have always played an important part in promoting Teochew opera culture in Singapore.

The Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan for instance, has worked hard to build platforms and create opportunities for local Teochew opera groups. It brought in top Teochew opera troupes and talent from overseas, creating learning opportunities for local troupes, as well as exposing local audiences to top-class performances. In the 1980s, Poit Ip, Ngee Ann Kongsi and the Chui Huay Lim Club sponsored famous Hong Kong director Wu Junhan to conduct Teochew opera training classes here. The training, which lasted several months, was attended by professional and amateur Teochew opera and arts troupes alike, many of whom were delighted with the learning opportunity. During this period, Wu even helped to direct Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association's play "The Witty Maid".

In 1987, Poit Ip took it a step further by combining the five biggest amateur Teochew opera groups in a Singapore to form a "permanent" amateur musical association under Poit Ip. The founding president of the group was Poit Ip's deputy chairman Zhang Liangcai and included leaders from other major amateur groups such as Er Woo, Thau Yong, Lak Aik and Nam Hwa. After its formation, the group held a performance in November 1987, performing plays such as "Toast to Reunion", "The Lantern Festival", "The Lost Hairpin".

In 2002, Poit Ip held a free, large-scale Teochew opera performance, in the hope of boosting interest among all ages and dialect groups. It invited the Shantou Drama School to present new performances. Local Teochew opera troupes participated enthusiastically, including the Chinese Opera Institute, Thau Yong and Nam Hwa. The performances attracted crowds of more than 300 every night and what was initially slated for one day was extended into a six-day performance.

Then in 2014 and 2016, Poit Ip organised a large-scale "Teochew Festival", with its Teochew opera segments attracting many expectant viewers. The overseas troupe Poit Ip engaged was not a professional one, but children from Jieyang's "Xiao Mei Hua" arts troupe, in the process giving exposure to a new generation of Teochew opera talents.



Opera performance by Kit Yang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Troupe



Opera performance by Kit Yang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Troupe

“Xiao Mei Hua” has trained many young, award-winning Teochew opera actors, such as Huang Xiaojia, Wu Zexia, Jiang Chuman and Fang Murong, and recordings of their performances are collected by some Singaporeans. The performance by Xiao Mei Hua was roundly applauded by audiences here, many of them touched by the sight of a young group practising an ancient art.

The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) similarly promoted Singapore’s opera scene. In 1986, it organised gala performances for four nights at Victoria Theatre during Chinese New Year. Er Woo staged the play “Lantern Festival” and played Teochew music pieces “The Lion’s Mischief”, “Red Plum Blossoming in Spring”. In 1987, the SFCCA produced a historical documentary “A Reflection of Our Past” which Er Woo and six other clan association groups participated in.

The Chui Huay Lim Club is one of the oldest Chinese clubs in Singapore and one of the most important groups in Singaporean Teochew circles. As such, it often plays a leading role in promoting and passing on Teochew heritage. Since its inception, Chui Huay Lim has always been the place where Teochew leaders and business tycoons would gather for social and recreational activities. So culture and entertainment became an important part of Chui Huay Lim, regardless of whether the club was an event organiser, or only provided the venue.

In 1979, when the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe visited Singapore for the first time, Poit Ip and Ngee Ann Kongsii invited the troupe to dinner at Chui Huay Lim. In 2010, the club stated that its long-term plan for culture and education included inviting foreign Teochew opera troupes, whether amateur or professional, to perform in Chui Huay Lim.

In 2011, to celebrate its 166th anniversary and the opening of its new premises following renovation, the club invited famous Teochew opera actors such as Yao Xuanqiu, Fang Zhanrong, Zhang Changcheng, Zhang Yihuang and Liu Xiaoli for performances here. The strong cast played to sold-out crowds and rave reviews for eight shows over six days at the Kreta Ayer People’s Theatre.

The main purpose for the club in organising these activities was to foster ties and get the Teochew community in touch with their roots. Chui Huay Lim hoped this performance would “strengthen the cohesiveness of local Teochews, promote the passing on of Teochew

culture and deepen the friendship between Singaporeans and Chinese”.

In 2015, Chui Huay Lim celebrated its 170th anniversary and 50 years of Singapore’s independence by holding its first “Voice of Teochew” singing competition, modelled after the popular “Voice of China” reality TV programme.

The contest sought to promote Teochew opera and was divided into two categories: singing and acting. It invited famous local and foreign artistes to judge the contest and guide the performers. “Voice of Teochew” was held again in 2017 and expanded to include Teochew pop songs as well. The same year, Chui Huay Lim set up a Teochew song and opera research group, which included 30 experienced Teochew opera veterans, actors and directors. The group will also perform at Chui Huay Lim’s charity events.

“Teochew opera has been increasing in popularity in Singapore and there is a demand for more research by opera workers,” said the club’s first vice-president Ng Hoy Keng. “As a leading Teochew organisation, Chui Huay Lim has decided to take on the responsibility of forming a research group.”

Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan formed its own Teochew opera troupe in 1995, inviting professionals from Chaozhou to train actors. A year later, the troupe held its first public performance at Kallang’s Golden Theatre, staging the play “The Wronged Red Silk”. After that, the troupe performed during the association’s anniversary every year or two. In 1999, the troupe travelled to Shantou to perform the play “The Spirit of Artists” at Shantou’s international food expo and Teochew festival. It also held performances for charity, including a staging of “The Pearl Pagoda” for VWO Metta Welfare Society in 1996. Sadly, Kityang’s troupe was disbanded in 2010.

In the 21st century, the Teo Yeonh Huai Kuan thrice invited Teochew opera groups from China to perform in Singapore. Most notably it invited the Chaoyang Teochew opera troupe from China to hold 10 performances at the Kreta Ayer People’s Theatre, for the purpose of “preserving traditional culture”.

Overseas troupes that visited Singapore

Singapore officially established diplomatic relations with China only in 1990, but during the early 1980s, trade was already carried out. In December 1979, the two countries signed a trade agreement that provided a broad framework for increased trade and economic cooperation. In June 1980, a bilateral agreement was signed to establish reciprocal commercial representative offices in Beijing and Singapore. Staff enjoyed diplomatic privileges and could process business visas, thus enhancing economic and social ties.

So while Teochew opera troupes from other countries have performed in Singapore for decades, the first one from China only came in 1979, arriving to much fanfare. Sino-Singapore cultural exchange then grew closer from the 1980s due to a mix of policy influence and public demand.

In 1980, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan hired Hong Kong opera veteran Wu Junhan to impart basic skills to local amateur Teochew opera troupes at Chui Huay Lim Club. The seven-month training was well-received and kickstarted a trend of amateur troupes inviting foreign trainers to guide their performances and build friendships with troupes overseas.

Since then, overseas Teochew opera troupes that have visited Singapore include:

From China:

Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe

Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupes 1, 2 and 3

Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe

Jieyang Teochew Opera Troupe

Puning Teochew Opera Troupe

Chaoyang Teochew Opera Troupe

Jiexi Teochew Opera Troupe

Zhaoan Teochew Opera Troupe

Fujian Yunxiao Teochew Opera Troupe

Guangdong Shantou Opera School

Guangdong Baihua Teochew Opera Theatre

China Shantou Teochew Opera Troupe 2

Besides those from China, other Teochew opera troupes that have staged exciting performances in Singapore include Hong Kong's Chen Chuhui Teochew Opera Troupe and Thailand's Taizhong Opera Troupe.



Collection of magazine of the China Teochew opera troupes performances





“Staying true to the roots to spread the Art”

The Ministry of Culture collaborated with the Singapore Tourism Board for the first time in 1978 to promote local opera and traditional culture. They jointly organised the Singapore Chinese Local Operas (SCLO) and arranged for 12 Min opera and Teochew opera performances at Hong Lim Park, with two performances every fortnight. Not only were professional Teochew opera troupes invited for these opera performances, other amateur troupes such as Nam Hwa and Er Woo were invited to perform as well.

Opera activities organised by the Singapore government

The inaugural SCLO attracted many people as not only were the audience residents from the Hong Lim area, there were also people who travelled via buses to see the show. Some of the audience were even foreign tourists. Before every performance, there will be an introduction to the plot and a demonstration of some of the costumes and props used by Chinese operas.

The Ministry of Community Development organised the first Traditional Opera Festival in September 1986, thereby ending the long-running opera activities held in Hong Lim Park and bringing open-air opera performances into the well-equipped and elegant Victoria Theatre.

However, these official opera activities were unable to reverse the fortunes of the ailing professional troupes. However, this was a rare opportunity for Nam Hwa to hone itself. This series of opera activities indirectly improved the line-up and administrative ability of the members, and Nam Hwa developed into an active amateur Teochew opera troupe during this period.



Nam Hwa performed at various performance venues in Singapore

Collaboration with other local Teochew opera performing groups

Teochew opera groups were also formed by some Teochew community groups and community centres or community clubs under the People's Association during the late 1980s. Nam Hwa also collaborated for several times with these Teochew opera groups to perform in many classic operas during this period. Members were therefore able to absorb a lot of performing experience and enriched Nam Hwa's charm on stage.

Boon Teck Community Centre founded their Teochew opera research group on 20th May 1988 and specially invited Nam Hwa Opera to jointly perform the Teochew Opera "The Phoenix Crown" at the air-conditioned Victoria Theatre the following year. The performance was to raise funds for the expansion of the community centre and to promote local Chinese dramas and traditional culture.

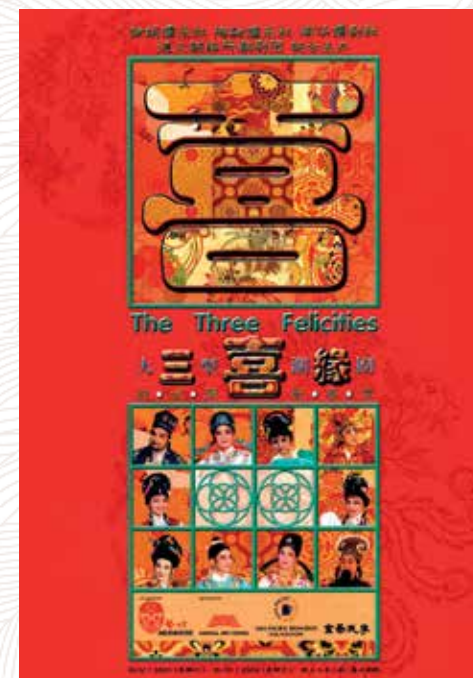
Thereafter, Nam Hwa also received invitations to perform from many community centres and clubs. Nam Hwa performed in places such as Hougang, Punggol, Chong Pang, Eunos, Pasir Ris, Ang Mo Kio and Nanyang Community Club in the 1990s, leaving behind many footprints.

Nam Hwa, together with Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association, Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association and Teck Ghee Community Centre Teochew Opera Troupe, jointly organised and performed in the large-scale Teochew opera, "The Three Felicities". This performance was initiated by a group of Teochew opera enthusiasts and they mobilised more than a hundred actors and staff from both within and outside of the main organising troupes and formed the preparatory, artistic and working committees. With the unity and support of the staff members, "The Three Felicities" achieved impressive results. Nam Hwa also benefitted greatly by participating.

9 of 55 Keywords: "The Three Felicities"

Nam Hwa's first collaboration with Er Woo, Thau Yong and Teck Ghee

"The Three Felicities" is a major event in the local Teochew opera industry with its breakthrough performance. One of the reasons was that it was the first combined performance of Er Woo, Thau Yong, Nam Hwa and Teck Ghee. In addition, Xiang Ling Musical Society provided all-round support in terms of planning and ticketing sales. This could also be said to be a model for cooperation in the Singapore opera industry. "The Three Felicities" is an opera that originated from the liuzi xi of Shandong, China. The organiser also successfully invited the director of the original Shandong Lü opera script, Wang Shiyuan to direct this play. Therefore, local Teochew opera troupes were also given an opportunity to learn more about the artistic styles of this type of opera.



"The Three Felicities" performed by Nam Hwa, Er Woo, and Teck Ghee Community Club Teochew Opera Troupe

The Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan organised a six-day Teochew opera extravaganza starting from the night of 28th November 2002 to get more young people acquainted with Teochew opera and to promote the development of this traditional art. The Chinese Opera Institute, together with more than a hundred actors from five other amateur Teochew opera troupes such as Thau Yong, Nam Hwa, Kityang, Teck Ghee and Er Woo, participated in these performances to present traditional or modern adaptations of selected operas

Ngee Ann Cultural Centre responded to the government's call to create a graceful society after detailed, meticulous planning and with the enthusiastic help and support of people from all walks of life, held the inaugural "Singapore Teochew Opera Festival" in July 2001. Amateur Teochew opera troupes that participated in the performance include: Er Woo, Thau Yong, Nam Hwa, Kityang, Teochew Drama Association and Teck Ghee. A combined performance from the six major amateur Teochew opera troupes was also the first of its kind in Singapore.

Opportunities brought by the Chinese economic reform

Singapore and China enjoyed friendly relations since the start of the 70s and many cross-border exchange activities began between the two countries. This also prompted the exchange and observation between Chinese Teochew opera troupes and local Teochew opera troupes. Since then, it has also brought different stimulation and development to the local Teochew Opera Troupe.

China Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe first visited and performed in 1979. Their performance was superb, and they brought to the audience an unprecedented visual feast with their performance, the way they dealt with the character's image, the rendering of the atmosphere of the scenes, the arrangement of the lighting and the musical accompaniment. Once again, interest in Teochew opera picked up and it even caused many Teochews to wonder about other possibilities in

terms of Teochew opera performances, and indirectly influenced the views Nam Hwa had of Teochew opera performances.

Nam Hwa also started to seek the participation of foreign directors, and even went to Shantou to engage in the exchange of Teochew opera cultural arts. Thereafter, Nam Hwa invited troupes from different operas to perform in Singapore in the hopes that it can learn from the direction of professional directors and the performances of excellent Teochew opera troupes so that Nam Hwa will be able to perform well on Teochew opera stages in future.

• Hiring overseas professionals for guidance

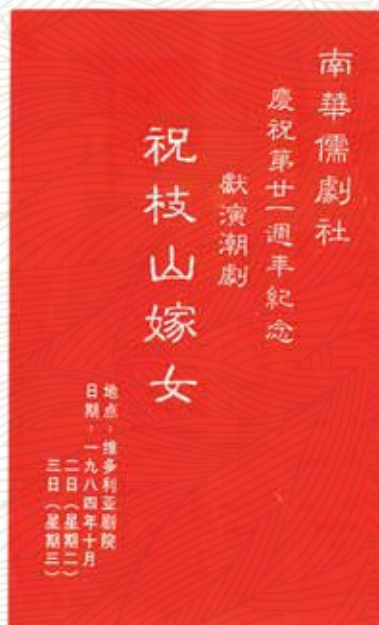
Since Nam Hwa was founded in the 1980s, members had to engage in independent learning with virtually zero teachers and directors. During those times, members either had to watch and imitate movies repeatedly to memorise the lyrics and tunes or to look for experienced members and to practise under their guidance. This learning model of "following suit" was sustained for over 20 years.

Nam Hwa first invited a guest director from China in 1984 to boost the actors' performances and all aspects of stage performance. Chen Jiabao, from the Fujian province of China, assumed the role of director for the opera "Zhu Zhishan married off his daughter" and was wholly responsible for the scene arrangement, set design, and for the actors' movements on stage, acting and expressions. The opera "Zhu Zhishan married off his daughter" was performed in celebration of the 21st anniversary of Nam Hwa and Tay Chew Mong, a veteran actor of Nam Hwa, played the role of Zhu Zhishan. The plot in this performance was compact and the interlude was very smooth, giving people the sense that it was a smooth viewing. Whether in terms of movement design, stage arrangement or stages art, these caught the eyes of the audience.

10 of 55 Keywords: “Zhu Zhishan married off his daughter”

Nam Hwa’s first opera directed by a guest director

“Zhu Zhishan married off his daughter” is a classic Teochew opera, and narrates the story of how the daughter of Zhu Zhishan, Zhu Yuehua, heard that her future husband, Lü Ren, is a dim-wit and Zhu Zhishan asked Lü Ren to come personally to marry his daughter to find out the truth about his son-in-law. Lü Ren’s mother asked her eldest daughter, Lü Wanzhen, to disguise herself as her brother to marry Zhu Yuehua so as not to let the cat out of the bag. Little did she know that this indirectly cause a misunderstanding between the Lü and Wen families, and a clash between the two families ensued, and the two families landed in court, creating a scene. The magistrate was unable to come to a decision and had to seek help from Zhu Zhishan to resolve this farce.



“Zhu Zhishan Married off his daughter”

《潮劇祝枝山嫁女》 演員表(照出場序)

導演：陳家保	
劇中人 (飾演者)	劇中人 (飾演者)
周 子：許雲卿	祝枝山：鄭秋蓮
祝月華：王柳健	家 院：鄭玉泉
徐 芷：余惠華	呂 梅：李添福
呂婉珍：林慧琳	家 院：王添生
呂婉珠：陳巧香	齊太守：王添英
曹 壽：林蘭亭	婢 女：黃如輝
陳 壽：蔡煥成	差 役：曾祝斌
祝文生：林愛宇	差 役：林和亭
文高住：楊德香	差 役：鄭華旋
呂美人：謝佩琳	差 役：沈佩生
呂 和：曹國社	
呂 興：蔡祝明	

11 of 55 Keywords: Tay Chew Mong

One of the most outstanding lao chou character in Nam Hwa

Tay Chew Mong joined Nam Hwa when it was founded in 1964 and had been appointed as an employee in the past. He played the role of lao chou frequently due to his unique voice. The roles that he played in were well-received by the audience, and these include Pang Hu of “Pang Diao Hua”, Wang Hu of “Tiger Wang snatches the Bride” and Zhou Lu of “A Family of Three Scholars”. Tay Chew Mong took on the role of Vice-President of Nam Hwa from 1987 and contributed to Nam Hwa greatly, sparing no effort.



Tay Chew Mong

Nam Hwa invited Wu Dianxiang to be its guest director in 1986. Director Wu comes from the China Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre and he directed the "The Puzzling illness", the opera in celebration of Nam Hwa's 23rd anniversary. Under his delicate training, there was an improvement in the members' overall performance. In addition, the design of the stage set was bright, colourful and beautiful but not overwhelming; simple, yet able to illustrate the historical context of the plot. In terms of make-up, the actors switched to using naturally faint and elegant facial make-up that allows the character's image to stand out. Instead of using the "san kuai wa" method of dividing the face into three with red and white colours, audiences felt more comfortable with the faint and elegant make-up, and the make-up was also able to highlight the subtle expressions on the actors' face.

"The Puzzling illness" is a play transplanted from the "huaguxi" (lit.: "flower drum opera") that originated from Hunan province. The story is about four imperial physicians who diagnosed the unmarried princess as pregnant. The physicians who became fearful, started resorting to lies and deceit to avoid complications. However, this soon caused a mighty uproar in the palace. "The Puzzling illness" is Director Wu's first opera in collaboration with Nam Hwa, and the plot could be described as bizarre and full of ups and downs, humorous, witty and thought-provoking.

南華儒劇社
慶祝廿三週年紀念
呈獻潮劇



御前脈案

*The 23rd Anniversary
Celebration Of*

Nam Hwa Amateur Musical &
Dramatic Association
presents Teochew Opera

"The Puzzling Illness"

(戲曲中英文幻燈字幕說明)
With English and Chinese Sub-titles

日期：一九八六年十一月二日
(星期日)
十一月三日
(星期一)

時間：晚上七時三十分
地點：加龍劇院

Date: 2-11-1986 (Sunday)
3-11-1986 (Monday)

Time: 7.30 p.m.
Venue: Kallang Theatre



Nam Hwa Opera 23rd anniversary souvenir magazine

12 of 55 Keywords: Wu Dianxiang

Overseas director with the greatest number of collaborations with Nam Hwa

Wu Dianxiang's masterpiece, "The Romance of the Dragon Princess" rocked many Singaporean audience and Nam Hwa also invited Director Wu to direct its operas because of his work. Director Wu is an all-rounded director who is also boldly innovative and makes every effort in seeking breakthroughs. Not only are his plays exquisite, its form and style unique, they are also refreshing to the audience and left lasting impressions.



Wu Dianxiang making up for a performer

Many plays broke the traditional opera setup of "one table and two chairs" since Director Wu joined Nam Hwa as a guest director. Thereafter, Nam Hwa stage set became more exquisite, and many stage settings were handed to Shantou for production. In addition, Nam Hwa had

13 of 55 Keywords: Kallang Theatre

Teochew opera troupe that performed in the Kallang Theatre

Kallang Theatre's predecessor in the 1970s was Kallang Cinema, the largest cinema in Singapore then. The government bought the lot of land in 1981 and spent \$12.8 million to renovate and revamp it into the Kallang Theatre. Since its opening in 1986, the Theatre has seen countless musicals and concerts, including the famed Broadway musical *Les Misérables* and *Cats*.

However, since the opening of Esplanade in 2002, the usage rate of Kallang Theatre plummeted. The National Arts Council closed it in April 2007, leaving it empty for the next four years till 2011 when the Singapore Land Authority launched a tender.



Kallang Theatre was closed in 2007

performed mainly traditional operas all along. Since Wu Dianxiang took on the role of director of Nam Hwa, Nam Hwa started to use many transplanted plays, bringing elements of innovation and reform into performances. These were well-received by most of the audience.

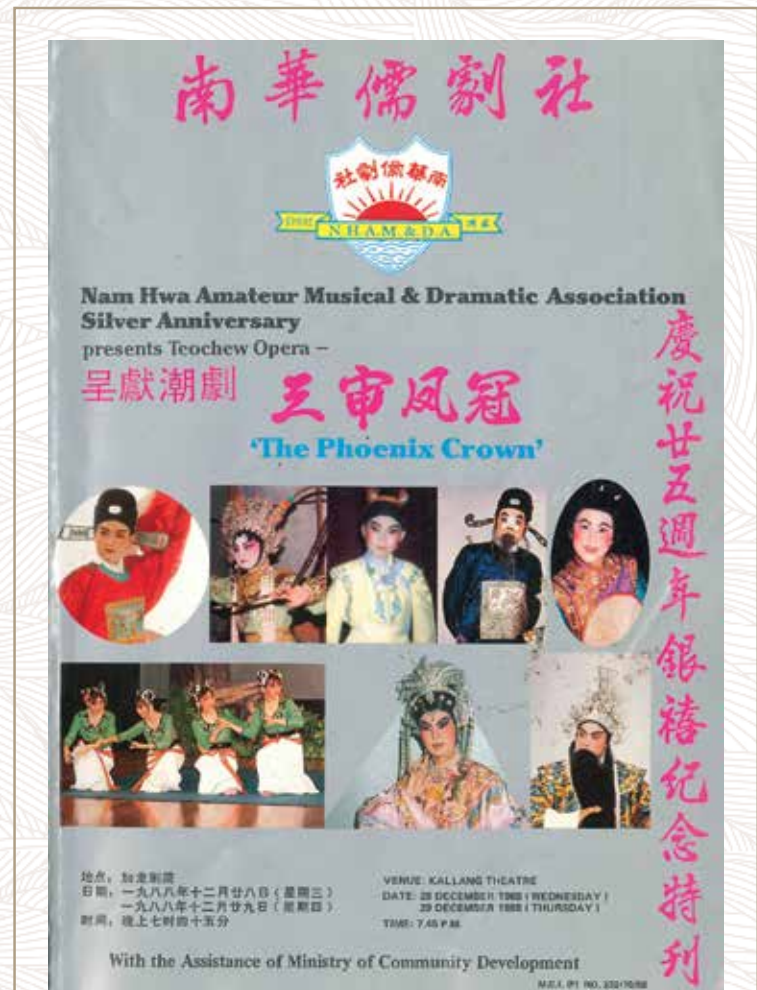
14 of 55 Keywords: "The Phoenix Crown"

Nam Hwa's first ticketed performance

"The Phoenix Crown" is performed in celebration of Nam Hwa's 25th anniversary and is also its first ticketed performance. Nam Hwa has always provided its performances to audiences for free, but this "The Phoenix Crown" performance was to raise funds for Nam Hwa's activities. Nam Hwa's growing confidence in its performances can also be seen from this move.



"The Phoenix Crown" in the newspaper



Nam Hwa Opera 25th anniversary souvenir magazine -
"The Phoenix Crown"

15 of 55 Keywords: “The Imposter Imperial Uncle”

Nam Hwa’s first major palace-themed performance

“The Imposter Imperial Uncle” is a creation by Wang Jinglan from the Jinjiang district of Fujian province, China. Nam Hwa boldly performed this large-scale palace-themed Teochew opera for its 27th anniversary performance in 1990 and was well received. Wu Dianxiang had always been a director who dared to experiment and break norms, coupled with the fact that Nam Hwa had already collaborated with Director Wu to produce countless successful performances, both Director Wu and Nam Hwa were more than happy to “The Imposter Imperial Uncle” inside and outside the opera. It is worth mentioning that Director Wu also had a cameo in the opera, playing the role of the hilarious carriage-bearer!



Praises for Nam Hwa’s performance of “The Imposter Imperial Uncle”



Nam Hwa 27th anniversary souvenir magazine, “The Imposter Imperial Uncle”

16 of 55 Keywords: Yao Xuanqiu

Nam Hwa's first overseas artistic consultant

Nam Hwa performed the opera "The Fight" as a benefit performance for the Singapore Lions Club Katong Mandarin and invited the renowned Chinese actor Yao Xuanqiu to perform as a guest performer. The 1995 "The Fight" opera was Nam Hwa's 32nd

anniversary performance and the plot was interesting; the fight scenes were quite exciting, and the scene was spectacular. This was a performance with a high degree of difficulty as one actor had to play the role of twin brothers with vast differences in character.



Nam Hwa invited Yao Xuanqiu to Singapore



Yao Xuanqiu debut performance for Nam Hwa

Other than inviting Director Wu, Nam Hwa also invite numerous professional Teochew opera directors and the quality of Nam Hwa's performances gradually became more brilliant and ingenious. As various performance exchanges followed, Nam Hwa started to move towards a wider and further artistic path in the 1990s.

• Went Shantou to watch international Teochew operas

Shantou and other local and overseas Teochew chambers of commerce, Teochew clan associations and Teochew opera troupes jointly organised the inaugural International Teochew Opera Festival in 1993 to promote Teochew opera, the exchange and cooperation of local and overseas Teochew opera music, Chinese culture and to allow Teochew opera enthusiasts all over the world to bond together and better understand each other.

Nam Hwa was invited to participate in the International Teochew Opera Festival that year. The then president, Tay Yang Ming, went to Shantou with other members such as Lin Huizhu and Li Shiyao and performed "The Royal Tragedy". They were given the opportunity to perform with veteran actor Zhuang Guikun of Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre and benefitted greatly from it.

Besides the participation in the first International Teochew Opera Festival, Nam Hwa were once again invited in 1999 and 2012, and the operas performed during those times were as follows:

Performances during the Shantou International Teochew Opera Festival

Year	Opera	Venue
1993	"The Royal Tragedy"	Swatow Performing Theatre
1999	The Mistaken Match"	Chenghai Theatre Art City Theatre
2012	"Qiuhu and his wife" "Fan Lu and Xishi" "The Trial of Qing Eng"	Hui Ru Theatre

Not only did the performances at the Shantou International Teochew Opera Festival widened the horizons of Nam Hwa, it also opened a new chapter in Sino-Singapore Teochew opera arts exchange, and Nam Hwa had also on multiple occasions, even invited professional Teochew opera troupes from China to perform in Singapore.

Not only did Nam Hwa brought more traditional opera arts to Singapore, it also enriched its quality of performance by observing different artistic styles from different types of operas. In doing so, Nam Hwa was able to become more inclusive, innovative and produce various types of interesting and exciting Teochew operas. Nam Hwa also displayed vibrancy in the Singapore Teochew opera scene and became one of the major organisations in the Singapore Teochew opera performance industry.



Nam Hwa attends the 4th International Teochew Opera Festival

17 of 55 Keywords: Tay Yang Ming

Nam Hwa's longest-serving President

Tay Yang Ming took on the role of President of Nam Hwa Opera in 1986 and served a total of 13 years until 1998. During Tay Yang Ming's tenure as President, he referred many Teochew community leaders to take on the role of honorary president of Nam Hwa with his numerous contacts as a businessman. This way, Nam Hwa was able to gain more financial assistance and could invite more overseas professional troupes to perform and produce larger performances.

Tay Yang Ming's heart was still with Nam Hwa despite stepping down. In 2010, despite being stricken with liver cancer, he was still concerned about the "The Yin-Yang Ridge" performance and was unable to attend the rehearsals of "The Yin-Yang Ridge" as he was seriously ill. Regrettably and unexpectedly, President Tay passed away on the first night of the performance of "The Yin-Yang Ridge".



Tay Yang Ming

Arrival of "Ru Yan Ying Chun" in Singapore

The Teochew opera documentary "*Ru Yan Ying Chun*" (lit. baby swallows welcome spring) in the 1960s introduced the campus life of China Shantou Opera School comprehensively, and their methodical performance skills and posture left a deep impression amongst the audience in Singapore. Twenty years later, Nam Hwa became acquainted with the China Shantou Opera School when Nam Hwa was invited to participate in the 1993 Shantou International Teochew Opera Festival. Thereafter, Nam Hwa invited the young actors from China Shantou Opera School to come to Singapore and perform in Nam Hwa's anniversary performance and to allow the Singapore audience to relive their memories of these cute "baby swallows" on stage.

The young actors of China Shantou Opera School came to Singapore on 25th May 1994 under the lead of their famed actor and principal, Fan Zehua, and began their 10 days performance at the Singapore Golden Theatre, starting from the 27th. China Shantou Opera School has always been known as the "Cradle of Teochew Opera" and has always been an educational institution that specialises in producing Teochew opera talents. The age of the actors that they brought along for this performance ranged from 12 to 15 years old and are excellent actors who had underwent professional training. Even though these actors may be young, their performance and singing were both cute and exciting, and they were also able to convey the emotions in the opera very well.

The performances by the youths from China Shantou Opera School in Singapore was well-loved and highly sought after by local audiences as almost all their performances were completely sold out. The press covered the performances extensively and it became the story in everyone's lips. In addition, Nam Hwa donated the proceeds of \$10,000 from this performance to the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute as its opera activities fund.

During this public performance, many actors fell sick either due to the busy schedule or that they were unable to adapt to the surroundings. This was one of the more memorable hiccups of the public performance

organised by Nam Hwa. For example, the “Wu Song and Madam Sun” and “At the Crossroad” had to be changed to “Double Inn Happiness” and “Tao Hua crosses the River” at the last minute as Cai Bin, the young actor playing the character Ren Tanghui injured his wrist and was unable to perform and had to change to “Double Inn Happiness” instead. In addition, the main character in “Wu Song and Madam Sun”, Xu Bin injured his right hand and was not performing at his best in the rehearsals and had to change to “Tao Hua crosses the River” at the last minute. Despite the many twists and turns in this performance, the 10 days anniversary celebration drawn to a close with thunderous applause from the audience.

18 of 55 Keywords: China Shantou Opera School Youth Teochew Opera Troupe

The first overseas Teochew opera troupe Nam Hwa invited

The child actor system existed in Teochew opera right from the beginning. The “child actor system” refers to the unique performance system whereby child actors would play all the characters other than the role of jing and chou. This is because the Teochews favoured the sweet voice child actors have when they sang. However, most child actors are sold to these troupes by the poor and they learnt under their masters’ whip, forming an inhumane working system. However, the young actors from the China Shantou Opera School Youth Teochew Opera Troupe learnt Teochew opera in a complete education system, thereby preserving the unique singing found in Teochew opera whilst allowing these young actors to retain their study lives. The troupe had already held its public performance in Hong Kong before coming to perform in Singapore and they only started the 10 days of public performance in Singapore after completing the Hong Kong itinerary.



Shantou Opera School Youth Teochew Opera Troupe

• Performances by Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe

Nam Hwa invited Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe to perform in Singapore in 1997. Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe was known in both China and overseas as "The Flower of the Famous City". The troupe was known to be young, professional, fundamentally solid, perform with delicacy, had many brilliant operas and was awarded the title of "National Advanced Collective in Cultural Work" by China. The operas they brought to Singapore include "Portrait of Five Ladies", "The Amber Love" and "The Virtuous Lady", adaptations from Yue opera; "Sister Jiang", an adaptation from the operas; "Imperial Garden Reunion", an adaptation from Xiang opera; "Justice Prevails Over Time", an adaptation from the eponymous Hebei Bangzi opera script; "Turbulence at the Chu Palace", an adaptation from "Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms" and "The Chu Place"; "The Winter's Tale", an adaptation from Shakespeare's works; "The Revenge", an adaptation from the traditional opera "The Story of Xue Jiao"; "Romantic Encounter", an adaptation from the eponymous movie; and "Five Sons of General Liang", an adaptation from traditional scripts.

The actors from Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe for this performance include Tang Longtong, Xu Shuwan, Zheng Shunying, Li Yulan, Yang Qijie, Chen Chaoqing, Cai Xiaoling, and they were all outstanding Teochew opera actors known to Singaporeans. Some of these actors were popular amongst Singaporean audiences as they had participated in the Singapore television drama "The Teochew Family".

The opera "Sister Jiang" is an adaptation from the revolutionary novel "Ode of Red Plum" set in the year 1949 in Chongqing during a war between the spies of the Communists and the Nationalists. The opera sings the praises of a revolutionary who embraces truth and is unafraid of death. In addition, the opera "The Winter's Tale", an adaptation from Shakespeare's, tells a story on palace secrets filled with blood, hate and love. Other than the performances by the Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe, Nam Hwa also set up an exhibition to showcase the costumes, props and details and photographs of Nam Hwa's past performances over the years.

Nam Hwa invited Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe again in 2001 to perform for its anniversary celebration. The performances this time were operas of a different style, such as "Princess Gaoyang" and "White Hair Lady". In addition, there were also performances such as

the "Zheng Shunying Arts Special" and Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe's award winning "Playlet Special Series" that include *zhe zi xi* (excerpts of plays).

There was a huge number of actors that came during this second visit by Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe. Not only did these include a batch of outstanding newcomers such as: Xu Jiana, Zhong Jinwei, Xu Zemin, Huang Qiuxian, Ding Peihong, Chen Xiaoxia and Qiu Shaorong, they also brought along renowned actors such as Chen Chongzhen, Cai Xiaoling, Chen Chaoqin, Pan Peiming, Tang Longtong, Xu Shuwan, Zheng Shunying and Li Yulan and they brought a wonderful performance for that anniversary performance.



Chao Zhou City Teochew Opera Troupe

19 of 55 Keywords: Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe

The overseas Teochew opera troupe Nam Hwa invited that performed for the greatest number of days in Singapore

Established in 1956, Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe was invited to perform at the Kallang Theatre in 1990 by the Singapore National Theatre Trust prior to Nam Hwa's invitation to perform. Chaozhou City Troupe had also participated in the Guangdong province's Fourth Art Festival and toured Thailand, Hong Kong and Macau on multiple occasions. Their performance at Shanghai in 1995 received rave reviews from local and overseas audiences. They were invited by Nam Hwa to perform in Singapore for 12 days, marking it as the greatest number of days of public performances in Nam Hwa's history.

20 of 55 Keywords: "Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe"

The first troupe of a different opera type that Nam Hwa invited to perform in Singapore

Founded in 1986, Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe is the only all-female Yue opera troupe in China. Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe was invited by Nam Hwa on three occasions to perform in Singapore. The Troupe had always brought a good show to the Singapore audience whenever they performed. Yue operas are generally slightly poetic, and all its plays are generally characterised by singing and acting and uses talented scholars and beautiful ladies as its theme mainly. However, Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe differs from the other Yue opera troupes as they can both sing and act and perform acrobatics, a reversal of the established image of Yue opera being graceful and beautiful.

• **Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe in Singapore**

Nam Hwa first invited the "Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe" to come to Singapore to perform in 2002 for its anniversary celebration. Singapore had been urbanised and westernised for a long time and many of its younger audiences had gradually lost interest in traditional operas. As such, Nam Hwa hoped to attract young people to buy tickets to watch the operas through "Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe", and thus had took special care in selecting the plays to be performed. One of the plays selected was "General Ma Long", the Yue opera adaptation of Shakespeare's psychodrama, "Macbeth", in the hope that it will attract different audiences to come and watch the opera. This is the first broad-based artistic collaboration between Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera

Troupe and Nam Hwa benefitted greatly from it. This also caused the two troupes to collaborate again for Nam Hwa's anniversary performance in 2005 and 2011.

Wu Fenghua, Chen Fei and Wu Suying, actors from Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe that came to perform in 2011, had already been awarded the "Plum Blossom Prize", China's highest theatrical award, and Wu Fenghua received her second Plum Blossom Prize in 2010. Other than the brilliant actors from Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe, Nam Hwa also spent \$350,000, making this performance as one of the most important to Nam Hwa.



A collection of performance magazines

Absorbing nutrients and getting ready

Nam Hwa has invited Shantou Opera School Youth Troupe, Chaozhou City Teochew Opera Troupe and Shaoxing Xiao Bai Hua Yue Opera Troupe to come over and perform over the years to promote opera arts and to raise the quality of Nam Hwa's performances. As such, Nam Hwa elevated its Teochew opera performances and successfully utilised different performance activities such as large-scale combined karaoke concerts and various forms of large-scale performances as a platform to showcase Nam Hwa's improvements.

Large-scale Teochew opera karaoke concert

Nam Hwa organised a series of karaoke concerts to enhance the relationship between local and overseas Teochew opera enthusiasts. These concerts attracted participants from China, Malaysia and Thailand and were well-received by the audience. In June 2000, Nam Hwa Singing Class organised the unprecedented large-scale Teochew opera songs concert, "Nolstagic Hometown Songs" which was sold out. In celebration of Nam Hwa's 40th anniversary in 2003, veteran Nam Hwa actor, Li Shiyao, self-composed and self-directed the "40 Years of Nam Hwa", a combined performance of Teochew opera songs at the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre and achieved great results once again, and tickets were extremely difficult to come by.

Large-scale combined Teochew opera performances (Karaoke concert)

Year	Programme	Venue
2000	"Nolstagic Hometown Songs"	Kreta Ayer People's Theatre
2003	"40 Years of Nam Hwa"	Kreta Ayer People's Theatre
2009	"Nolstagic Teochew Arts"	Kreta Ayer People's Theatre
2012	"Reminiscent of Teochew Opera"	Kreta Ayer People's Theatre



Nam Hwa performs Teochew songs in Karaoke fashion

21 of 55 Keywords: Karaoke

First to open Teochew dialect karaoke singing class

Nam Hwa started to head to China to look for specialists in recording Teochew opera music into karaoke in the 1990s to keep up with times and mainly to play this recorded music in place of live accompaniment. Not only do the use of karaoke Teochew opera music give actors flexibility arranging rehearsals, it also allowed actors to have more space for practise and reduce the additional

costs for live accompaniment. In addition, Nam Hwa set up its karaoke singing class in 1997 and many Teochew opera enthusiasts joined Nam Hwa in response. Karaoke recordings brought new opportunities for performance and karaoke concerts were thereby spawned and was well received by Teochew opera enthusiasts both locally and globally.



Nam Hwa celebrates 40th anniversary

22 of 55 Keywords: Tan Kok Lye

Winner of Nam Hwa's "Outstanding Performer Award"

Tan Kok Lye made his debut on stage in 1986 and specialises in playing the role of laosheng. In 1989, he was instructed by two teachers from China Shantou Opera School, Lin Yunyu and Zhu Shaochen, therefore his acting and singing skills improved tremendously. Chen participated in many Teochew opera performances, including playing the role of Liu Zhiyuan in "A Tearful Plea", Guan Yu in "Guan Gong and Diao Chang" and Zhang Wenyuan in "A Family of Three Scholars".



"A Family of Three Scholars"



Tan Kok Lye

Nam Hwa organised the "Teochew Opera Golden Classics" at the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre once again in 2007 and the audience's response remained warm. Nam Hwa held the unprecedentedly grand "Nostalgic Teochew Arts" in 2009 and performed many splendid excerpts of operas and plays, winning applause from the audience repeatedly. In 2012, Nam Hwa successfully invited veteran actors from China Shantou City, Chaozhou City, Fujian Yunxiao, Thailand and Malaysia to perform

the "Reminiscent of Teochew Opera" with fellow Nam Hwa members at Kreta Ayer People's Theatre. The elegant taste of Teochew opera and music influenced the audience and advanced the exchange of arts and traditions between the participating countries. At the same time, Nam Hwa members vastly improved their acting skills through this series of performances.

23 of 55 Keywords: “Reminiscent of Teochew Opera”**First combined Teochew opera performance between Singapore, Malaysia, China and Thailand**

Nam Hwa once again organised a performance at Kreta Ayer People’s Theatre in 2012 after successfully holding Teochew opera karaoke concerts previously, and invited veteran actors from China Shantou City, Chaozhou City, Fujian Yunxiao, Thailand and Malaysia

to perform with fellow Nam Hwa members. These operas include “The Butterfly Lovers”, “Xishi and Fan Lu”, “Taking the Rap”, “Qin Xian Lian” and “Justice Bao meets Empress Li”.



Reminiscent of Teochew Opera

Making a splash in large scale operas

Other than grand karaoke concerts, Nam Hwa also had excellent displays in Teochew opera performances. Apart from Director Wu, Nam Hwa also hired many famed directors in the Chinese opera industry successively to conduct rehearsals. Whether in stage design or script adaptation, Nam Hwa strove to achieve breakthroughs, innovations and to bring what they thought as the best Teochew opera performance to everyone.

In addition, Nam Hwa also actively collaborated with local Chinese orchestras. In fact, Nam Hwa had already invited Chinese orchestras to participate as early as 1988, but there were only 5 people then. Nam Hwa managed to invite Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited and Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company Chinese Orchestra to assist in the performance of "The ill-fated Beauty Xishi" and "The Yin-Yang Ridge" in 2000 and 2010 separately. Their assistance added much colour to these performances.

Nam Hwa collaborated with Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited first for the "The Yin-Yang Ridge" performance in the year 2000. This collaboration is a commendable achievement in the history of accompaniment in Singapore. This opera was produced in celebration of the 37th anniversary of Nam Hwa and is adapted and directed by Director Wu; its main cast were Nam Hwa members Lee Sze Yau, Chua Ai Peck, Jean and Wang Hanying. In addition, bold changes in lighting, stage setting, costumes and make-up were attempted to bring the best visual and auditory experience to the audience. This "The Yin-Yang Ridge" performance won the plaudits of both local and overseas audience and were deemed to be a rare performance of high standards.



"The ill-fated Beauty Xishi", Lee Sze Yau



"The ill-fated Beauty Xishi"

24 of 55 Keywords: Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited

Nam Hwa was the first Teochew opera troupe to collaborate with Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited

Singapore Chinese Orchestra Company Limited is the local flagship arts group and is the only national professional Chinese orchestra. Since its debut performance in 1997, the more than 80-member strong orchestra group shouldered the responsibility of passing on traditional culture and the heavy responsibility of

its development and innovation. In 2013, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra once again partnered with Nam Hwa to present the “Tunes of Teochew”, bringing many Teochew opera classics to Singapore fans.



Singapore Chinese Orchestra

25 of 55 Keywords: Lee Sze Yau

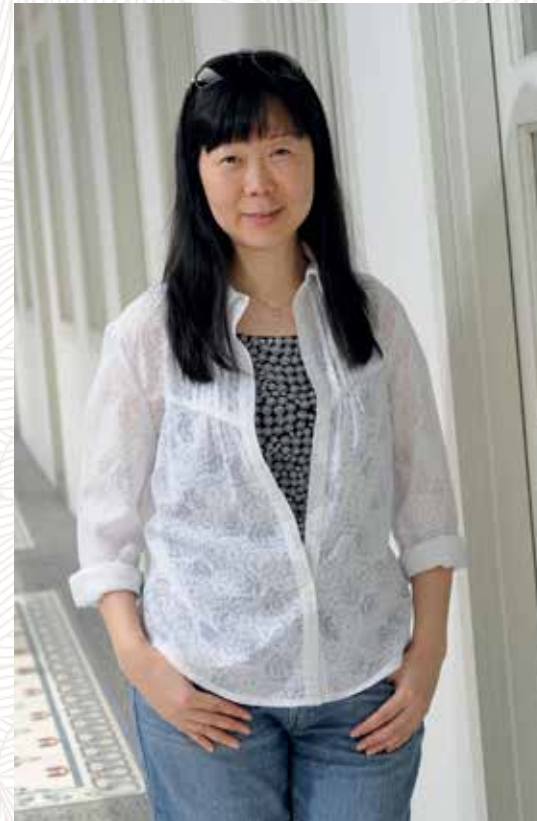
Winner of Young Artist Award

The Chinese Opera Institute recommended to the National Arts Council for Lee Sze Yau to be awarded the Young Artist Award after her performance in "The ill-fated Beauty Xishi" in 2000. She was the first amateur opera worker to receive the prize then. After winning the award, Lee took four months unpaid leave to follow many fellow

opera practitioners such as Director Yang Xiaoqing, Zhang Jingxian, Madam Yao Xuanqiu, Director Wu Dianxing and Cai Jianchen to study opera. Thereafter, she also worked with and participated in performing Teochew opera aria in modern dance performances with Drama Box and Toy Factory Productions.



Lee Sze Yau on stage



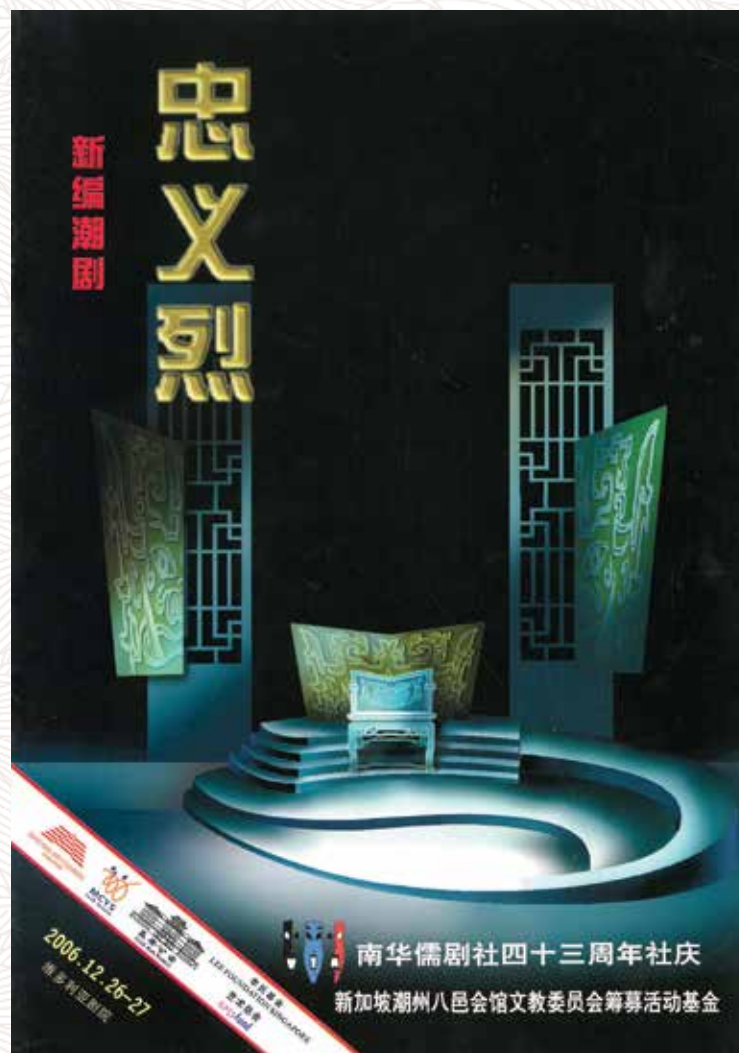
Young Artist Award recipient, Lee Sze Yau, 2000

• **“The Sacrifice”**

The 2006 “The Sacrifice” performance is an adaptation of Nam Hwa’s opera performance in 1977, “*Yi Lie Liu Fang*”. Director Wu Dianxiang performed the screen adaptation and composition of this opera. This performance boldly tested a rotating platform, a pioneer effort in the history of Singapore opera despite it being a common sight on Chinese opera stages. In addition, the stage design included many backdrops and props and Dance Inspiration and the Malay dance troupe, Sriwana, were invited to assist in the performance, giving Singapore audience a brand-new visual experience.



“The Sacrifice”



“The Sacrifice” souvenir magazine

26 of 55 Keywords: Wang Hanying**The Nam Hwa veteran that performed in the greatest number of characters**

Wang Hanying joined Nam Hwa in 1976 and has performed in many different characters. In "The ill-fated Beauty Xishi", he was cast as the Gou Jian, King of Yue and his superb acting was recognised by everyone. His most memorable performance experience was "The Sacrifice". He expressed that the character Feng Chengdong in "The Sacrifice" was not his initially, but as the original actor was unable to memorise the lyrics during rehearsals, Wang replaced him at the last minute. He spent a total of three days to memorise the entire script to ensure a smooth performance, a rather difficult feat to achieve.



Wang Hanying performing



Wang Hanying

• **“A Mother’s Woes”**

“A Mother’s Woes” is Nam Hwa’s 45th anniversary public performance and that marks the first time Nam Hwa performed at the Esplanade. Not only is this a breakthrough by Nam Hwa, it is also a pioneer move amongst the Singapore opera industry. Nam Hwa invited Yang Xiaoqing from Zhejiang, China to be the director for this performance. The plot of opera “A Mother’s Woes” is interesting and thought-provoking. Director Yang opined that this script expresses certain phenomenon in humanity and would serve as a reminder to society. She said, “One does not turn bad due to individual factors only, but it may also include other external factors. Just like how Wu Xin could have a chance to turn back, but his friends asked him to continue lying for their interests, causing his final fate to be like so.”

In addition, audience were impressed by the superb singing, acting and steadiness of the actors of “A Mother’s Woes”. Member of Parliament Mr Baey Yam Keng even praised “A Mother’s Woes” in parliament, which is a significant affirmation for the many years of painstaking management of Nam Hwa.



“A Mother’s Woes”

27 of 55 Keywords: Esplanade

Nam Hwa is the first Teochew opera troupe to perform at Esplanade

The Esplanade is a six-hectare shore-side building that has a concert hall with 1,600 seats, a theatre with a capacity of 2,000 and several smaller private performance halls. Many performances and activities that attracted international attention were held here. As the exterior architecture looks like the favourite tropical fruit of Singaporeans, the durian, therefore many locals nicknamed the Esplanade as the “Durian Shell”.



Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

• “The Yin-Yang Ridge”

In celebration of the 47th anniversary in 2010, Nam Hwa produced “The Yin-Yang Ridge” with Wu Dianxiang as the opera’s playwright and composer and performed it at the Kreta Ayer People’s Theatre. Nam Hwa invited famed Chinese Yue opera director, Yu Zhenzhu, renowned drummer Cai Jianchen and the Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company Chinese Orchestra to assist in this production. The plot of “The Yin-Yang Ridge” is both exciting and captivating, the lights, sounds and background music add to the expression of Teochew opera arts, making it an almost professional performance.



Nam Hwa Opera 47th anniversary souvenir magazine

28 of 55 Keywords: Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company Chinese Orchestra

First collaboration with the Singapore Armed Forces

The Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company Chinese Orchestra was founded in May 1992 where it aims to provide an opportunity for soldiers who have an interest in Chinese orchestra and have the potential to play the instruments to continue to develop their musical talents. These outstanding musicians are mainly Full-Time National Servicemen and many of them are prize winners of the National Chinese Music Competition.

Not only do members of the Singapore Armed Forces Music & Drama Company Chinese Orchestra frequently participate in the Ministry of Defence and various units’ celebratory performances, they also make attempts in opera music. The following are some of the types of opera that they have provided music accompaniment: Huangmei opera, Cantonese opera, Xiang opera and Yue opera.

Stepping into the international scene

The Shantou City Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China, the Cultural Bureau of Shantou City, Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan and China Guangdong Teochew Opera Theatre jointly organised the “Welcoming Asian Games and Sharing Nostalgia: Combined Performance by Teochew Opera Masters of Singapore and

Shantou” in 2010 to promote traditional Chinese culture, advance the building of Shantou as an important cultural city and to improve the cultural exchange and cooperation between Shantou and Singapore. Nam Hwa, Singapore Chinese Opera Institute, Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association, Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association and Kityang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Group were all invited to participate in this event.

29 of 55 Keywords: “Welcoming Asian Games and Sharing Nostalgia”

Nam Hwa first participation in the Asian Games.

The Teochew opera masters of both Shantou and Singapore hosted the “Welcoming Asian Games and Sharing Nostalgia: Combined Performance by Teochew Opera Masters of Singapore and Shantou” activity at the Xie Huiru Teochew Opera Arts Centre to perform Teochew opera. Together with famous Teochew opera masters such as Yao Xuanqiu, Zhang Changcheng, Fang Zhanrong and Zhang Yifeng, actors from five troupes from Singapore, such as Singapore Chinese Opera Institute, Nam Hwa Opera and Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association performed many familiar Teochew opera excerpts such as “The Swearing” and “Yanhg Zhi Liang demands to marry the maiden” that night, winning frequent, enthusiastic applause from the audience.

Nam Hwa was invited to participate in the 23rd Masan (South Korea) Opera Festival. Nam Hwa performed “The Affectionate Parting between Two Lovers”, Justice Bao’s Apology”, “Tao Hua Crosses the River”, and “Farewell at the Kiln”, in this festival. During their stay in South Korea, Nam Hwa also watched the performances by other countries, such as puppet show from Dalian, China; short drama, Enka and Kabuki from Japan. These different performances left members in awe and hoped that through these performances, they could “extract the best of others to make up for what is lacking”.

Not only did this overseas trip highlight the glitter Nam Hwa showed on the Singapore Teochew opera stage, but also shown that Nam Hwa could shine on an international stage.



Nam Hwa participate in 2010 Asian Game fringe activities

“Reborn like the Phoenix to scale greater heights”

Seeing light at the end of the tunnel

Nam Hwa has always faced issues with rental and relocation since it was first founded. From the early days at Jalan Besar to the present premises at Aliwal Arts Centre, Nam Hwa had to move from place to place and at one time, were even facing the potential prospect of a closure.

On that part of Nam Hwa’s history, General Affairs Secretary Tan Ah Hiang, Annie said, “Nam Hwa moved to the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre at 182 Cecil Road in 1994. As the rental contract was up in 2013 and Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre had to be demolished and reconstructed, Nam Hwa were forced to relocated. However, there were nowhere to go to despite a thorough search all over Singapore due to a lack of finances. Nam Hwa held several meetings to discuss this issue but were unable to come up with any solution. Therefore, it was decided that Nam Hwa will have to close. It was also further decided that there will be a grand celebration for its 50th anniversary before the closure.”

“There is light at the end of the tunnel. Some tunnels just happen to be longer.” The then Honorary President Toh Lin Mok felt that it was a pity Nam Hwa would have to close after 50 years of management when he got wind of the news. Therefore, he decided to send a letter to the then Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien. Thereafter the National Arts Council initiated talks and brought good news to Nam Hwa and even provided the current Aliwal Arts Centre as Nam Hwa’s place of operations.

Even though the premises at Aliwal Arts Centre resolved the issue of Nam Hwa’s relocation, Nam Hwa still faced the issue with renovation fees for this brand-new space. To resolve the lack of funds for renovation, Mr Toh Lin Mok and the then President, Hong Shaomin, decided to co-finance the renovation together with Nam Hwa’s reserves.



Aliwal Arts Centre, Nam Hwa’s new home



28 Aliwal Street - Aliwal Arts Centre

Despite the plight Nam Hwa faced in 2013, it managed to find better developmental space in this predicament. Nam Hwa saw the support and love of its members and further produced the grandest performance in the history of Nam Hwa: “The Dream of Xiao Zhuang”. Thus, Nam Hwa reached another peak in Teochew opera performance.

30 of 55 Keywords: Tan Ah Hiang, Annie

The most senior General Affairs Secretary of Nam Hwa

Tan Ah Hiang, Annie also addressed by others as "*Qiaoxiang jie*" (Sister Ah Hiang), joined Nam Hwa when she was 19 years old. To her, Nam Hwa is a very important part of her life and whenever Nam Hwa needs her, she will lay down everything to come over and help, whatever the time. Annie started to shift her focus on stage performances to helping in managing Nam Hwa's daily affairs. All along, Annie has always been the "housekeeper" in the eyes of everyone, and she was especially familiar in all matters related to Nam Hwa.



Annie Tan

“The Dream of Xiao Zhuang”

Nam Hwa could finally continue to operate after resolving the issue of relocation. That year, Nam Hwa produced the large-scale classic “The Dream of Xiao Zhuang”. On the day of the performance, Nam Hwa presented several awards, including the Lifetime Service Award, Outstanding Contributions Award, Special Sponsorship Award, Outstanding Artistic Instructor Award, Excellent Performer Award, Outstanding Performer Award and the Youth Achiever Award.

Nam Hwa invited the then Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information, Mr Lawrence Wong to preside over the opening ceremony for this performance. In addition, Nam Hwa launched the special 50th anniversary publication to review its 50 years of history, implying that Nam Hwa has embarked on a new milestone in the inheritance and continuation of the development of Teochew opera arts.



“The Dream of Xiao Zhuang” on the papers

31 of 55 Keywords: “The Dream of Xiao Zhuang”

Nam Hwa’s grandest performance

“The Dream of Xiao Zhuang” is an opera set in the Qing dynasty and narrates the story of the love between Empress Dowager Xiao Zhuang and Dorgon and the wrestle for political power. Nam Hwa members Chua Ai Peck, Jean and Low Seoh Khim, Doreen played the roles of the main characters Dorgon and Empress Dowager Xiao Zhuang. To present the perfect performance, Nam Hwa spent a total of \$300,000 on the production of this opera, inviting renowned Chinese director Yu Zhenzhu from the Zhejiang Vocational Academy of Art Faculty of Drama, to collaborate with Wu Dianxiang and handing the design and tailoring of costumes used in the opera to Chinese costumes designers.



“The Dream of Xiao Zhuang”

Tests and opportunities of the 21st century

Nowadays, many young people are no longer fluent in dialects due to the introduction of the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” in 1979. Coupled with the influence of globalisation, society is filled with popular culture from overseas and young people were already attracted to it and were no longer interested in Chinese operas.

The Singapore government has started to take note of issues with the conservation of local historic cultural heritage with the improvement to material life. However, there are lesser young people watching and participating in Teochew opera performances now compared to when Teochew opera was at the peak of its development. If this were to go on, Teochew opera will also face problems with inheritance in the absence of attention by young people. In that case, the treasures of Teochew opera arts, which has been in Singapore for a hundred years, will eventually disappear into the torrents of history.

To resolve the problems in shortage of talents and the lack of young audiences in Teochew opera arts, Nam Hwa believes that it must adapt to the times and make changes. “Professionalisation” and “rejuvenation” are important measures that cannot be delayed.

Transformation from amateur to professional

When Nam Hwa was founded, it was an amateur Teochew opera performing group and an assembly of Teochew opera hobbyists from all walks of life. The Teochew opera acting skills of members were gained through self-study, and there was no professional technical training. However, with the frequent exchange of culture and art between China and Singapore, Nam Hwa has created a few unique Teochew opera performances under the nourishment of various directors and performances of different troupes. The quality of the performance of the members is also close to professional standards and is a far cry from the original amateur Teochew opera troupe. Therefore, the road to “professionalisation” is imperative for Nam Hwa.

Nam Hwa Opera Limited

Since 2014, Nam Hwa has been planning the transformation work intensively to succeed in its quest for “professionalisation”. On February 17, 2015, it successfully registered as Nam Hwa Opera Limited, officially transforming the amateur troupe into a Limited Company. Nam Hwa also successfully invited 19 successful people from the local Teochew community and cultural industry to serve as its directors and to assume the responsibility for inheriting and revitalizing traditional Teochew culture.

The board of directors of Nam Hwa Opera Limited are all successful entrepreneurs and professionals, including Chairman Teo Kiang Ang, Deputy Chairman Toh Lin Mok, Vice Chairman Quek Meng Tong, George and Derek Goh Bak Heng, Secretary Su Zhangkai, Deputy Secretary Teo Beng Teck, Treasurer Lim Chin Boon, Deputy Treasurer Ang Chin Koon, and Directors Chia Chor Meng, Teo Ngiang Heng, Quek Soo Chek, William, Tan Lye Soon, Lee Geck Hoon, Ellen, Seng Han Thong, Dr. Tay Teow Kiat, Lie Kee Pong, Heng Boey Hong, Fong Chin Yoon Fah and Teo Chor Huan. Some of them are then Member of Parliament, successful businessmen, lawyers, accountants, principals, civil servants, and educators. The relevant board of directors is recommended by the management committee, and the management committee is selected by the members of Nam Hwa.

32 of 55 Keywords: Toh Lim Mok**The man behind the successful transformation of Nam Hwa**

Mr Toh Lim Mok is one of the main persons behind the successful transformation of Nam Hwa. He joined Nam Hwa in 2005 and became one of the Honorary Presidents. When Nam Hwa was faced with the predicament of relocation, it was due to his help that Nam Hwa was able to avoid closure. Mr Toh was invited to chair the committee for the 50th anniversary celebration. Under his leadership, the Golden Jubilee celebration of Nam Hwa won the support and funding of many Teochews and the National Arts Council, thus successfully promoting the performance of "The Dream of Xiao Zhuang" that drew an attendance of 2,600, marking an important chapter in the history of Singapore Teochew opera. Mr Toh was officially appointed as the President of Nam Hwa and successfully promoted the transformation of Nam Hwa into Nam Hwa Opera Limited.



Toh Lim Mok

33 of 55 Keywords: Teo Kiang Ang

The first Chairman of the Board after the transformation of Nam Hwa

Mr Teo Kiang Ang is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Nam Hwa Opera Limited and is also one of the main persons behind the successful transformation of Nam Hwa. He is the chairman and founder of Union Energy, the first gas company in Singapore to be listed, and is one of Singapore's famous successful entrepreneurs. Mr Teo is public-spirited and has sponsored many local arts

groups and organisations. As a Teochew, Mr Teo has also actively participated in the activities of several Teochew groups.

Mr Teo Kiang Ang has placed great hopes on the future of Nam Hwa. He hopes that Nam Hwa will be able to adapt to the development of the times and improve itself, so that the Teochew opera arts of Nam Hwa can continue to shine brightly in Singapore.



Teo Kiang Ang

After its transformation in 2015, Nam Hwa raised \$500,000 to set up a fund, and successfully applied to the National Arts Council for a “seed grant” as developmental funds and obtained a total of up to \$350,000 in grants over three years. Together with the government’s Cultural Matching Fund, Nam Hwa has a total of \$1 million in funds to implement a long-term improvement and development plan, so that Nam Hwa Opera Limited can move towards professionalisation.

34 of 55 Keywords: National Arts Council’s “Seed Grant”

The seed for Nam Hwa’s continual development

The “Seed Grant” is a subsidy from the National Arts Council for emerging non-profit art groups. The purpose of the grant is to assist these non-profit art groups to develop steadily. The main funding is for not more than 70% of the operating costs and will continue to be assessed annually. The maximum subsidy period is up to 3 years.

35 of 55 Keywords: “One-for-One” Cultural Matching Fund

The important source behind the push for the development of Nam Hwa

The “one-for-one” Cultural Matching Fund set up by the government will provide a dollar for dollar donation to the relevant organisations whenever an individual or private corporation donates money to any registered charities in the arts and heritage sector. This is to attract more people or major corporations to donate generously.

On 20th April 2015, Nam Hwa Opera Limited held its inauguration ceremony, thanksgiving banquet and the 51st anniversary celebration at the Orchard Hotel. On 30th April 2015, Nam Hwa performed the opera classic “A Family of Three Scholar” at the National Library Drama Centre. This performance coincides with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Singapore. On 1st and 2nd May 2015, Nam Hwa contributed to the historic National Day event by specially hosting Singapore’s pioneer generation to watch “A Family of Three Scholar” for free.

36 of 55 Keywords: “A Family of Three Scholars”

The first Teochew opera performance after the transformation of Nam Hwa

“A Family of Three Scholars” is Nam Hwa’s first Teochew opera performance after its transformation. This opera was performed at the New World Broadway as early as 1970. Nam Hwa also performed this opera at China Shantou Huiru Theater in 2017. “A Family of Three Scholars” tells the story of Zhang Wenda, a scholar who went to Beijing for the imperial examinations and subsequently lost touch with his family. During this time, the Chang and Zhou families went to Zhang’s house to collect debts. His wife, Sun, had no money to pay his debts and her two children were taken away to pay off

the debts. Sun began a journey of finding her husband, and the story ends with the reunion of the family of three scholars.

“A Family of Three Scholars” in the papers



The new vision of Nam Hwa Opera Limited

“To be the most recognized Singapore Teochew opera group in the local and international art scene”

Vision of Nam Hwa Opera Limited

After several rounds of discussion and adjustment by all directors and members during the preparation for the transformation of Nam Hwa, four important missions were renewed in response to the developmental vision of Nam Hwa:

- To preserve Singapore Teochew opera
- To perform Teochew operas - classics and new works
- To enhance the quality of performance and production standards
- To promote Teochew opera to local and international audiences

Post-transformation Nam Hwa Opera Limited

In 2016, Nam Hwa was awarded the “Special Organization Award” of the “Singapore Opera Orchard Award” by the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute for its successful transformation into a professional arts group. This award is a very important recognition for Nam Hwa Opera Limited.

06 新加坡 2015年3月23日 星期一 联合早报

转型成更透明与专业组织 南华儒剧社注册成有限公司

本地潮剧团“南华儒剧社”今年2月注册成南华儒剧社有限公司。社长卓林茂表示，今年将筹募50万元设立基金，加上文化配对基金的政府拨款，将有100万元可落实一套长远的提升与发展计划，朝更专业化的方向努力。

卓林茂说，南华今后聘请专家或名师指导演员时，例如唱功或水袖时，会开放给本地其他剧团或潮剧爱好者前来上课，不同的是南华社员的学费有优待。

南华儒剧社去年获得国家艺术理事会的种子基金（Seed Grant）拨款，儒剧社执行董事陈巧香说，艺理会的三年拨款总额约35万元，获得上述拨款，可说是促使这个创立于1963年，目前有100名社员的潮剧团体积极转型的原因之一。

三巴旺选区议员，也是南华法律顾问兼董事李玉云说，南华儒剧社今年2月17日注册为有限公司，是要让儒剧社的董事、管委会成员和演员更明确地分担角色。

她说：“南华注册为有限公司后，组织更透明，管理方式趋于专业化，南华日后要向政府申请配对基金时，将更符合申请条件。”

她指出，注册为有限公司的作法更能与时俱进，也更具弹性。例如董事会和管委会更清楚自己的角色，这样做也更吸引专业人士加入。

潮社与文化界19人任董事

南华儒剧社有限公司目前已成立董事会和管理委员会，将在4月20日在家品酒店举行的南华儒剧社51周年庆典暨答谢晚宴上，正式宣誓就任。卓林茂说，管理委员会是由

南华将在4月30日晚上7时30分在戏剧中心公演《一门三进士》，以庆祝52周年，演出门票分别是20元和30元，配合\$450，《一门三进士》将在5月1日和2日免费招待建国一代。咨询电话是6323-5528或9677-0209。

南华儒剧社的年轻董事苏章德下来将负责编撰两本新书，其中暂名为《潮声回响—新加坡潮州戏曲回忆录》的新书，将回顾潮剧在新加坡的发展与演变。另一本《典藏记忆·四说南华》以图片集，呈现南华走过的半个多世纪岁月。

苏章德个人还在策划另外两本新书，一是回忆本地娱乐发展的《娱乐印迹—四说新加坡华人娱乐史》和与人合著的《雪道芳踪—庄雪芳回忆录》。

为庆祝新加坡独立50周年暨潮花林成立170周年喜庆，潮花林正在举办大型竞赛活动《潮州好声音》，当中包括《潮曲卡拉OK歌唱比赛》及《潮剧折子戏表演比赛》。南华儒剧社是协办团体。

这项总奖金高达三万元的比赛，欢迎所有新加坡公民或永久居民，持有工作准证和学生证的潮剧业余爱好者报名参加，报名截止日期是4月30日。

淘汰赛及半决赛将于5月至6月间在潮花林举行，大决赛定于7月25日在牛车水人民剧场主办。咨询电话是6253-0111或9677-0209。

团缘

谢燕燕 报道
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有52年历史的本地潮剧团“南华儒剧社”，今年2月注册成南华儒剧社有限公司，从此转型为更透明且更专业化的艺术团体。这次转型的另一重要举动，是该社成功邀请本地潮州社群和文化界19名成功人士出任董事，一起为传承和重振潮州传统文化努力。

南华儒剧社社长卓林茂（68岁）说，南华今年将筹募50万元设立基金，加上文化配对基金的政府拨款，将有100万元可落实一套长远的提升与发展计划，朝更专业化的方向努力。

他计划把当中的30万元用来提升南华的专业行政与行销能力，包括聘请更多全职员工加艺术行政人员和行销人员等。

剩下的70万元，60%用在提升表演水平，即培训演员和编导人才，剩40%用来成立一支15人左右的潮州音乐队。南华儒剧社去年11月下旬曾选25名年龄介于11岁至72岁的演员到美国戏剧学校接受两周的正统训练。

带领南华儒剧社转型的领导班子。左起是董事会秘书苏章德、董事兼法律顾问李玉云、社长兼董事会管理主席卓林茂和执行秘书兼财务总监巧香。（陈训庄摄）



Nam Hwa reorganised to Nam Hwa Opera Limited

37 of 55 Keywords: Opera Orchid Award

Nam Hwa's first Opera Orchid Award

"Singapore Opera Orchid Award" was established in 2015 by the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute. Its purpose is to encourage the local opera community to work together to create Singapore's unique opera brand. In 2016, Nam Hwa won the "Special Organization Award" for its successful transformation into a limited company. The "Emerging Artist Award" added in the same year was also awarded to Tan Wei Tian, the youngest actor in Nam Hwa, making it a doubly joyous occasion.

戏曲胡姬花奖 发掘亮丽新苗



▲任伟辰（左）在本届戏曲胡姬花奖荣获优秀演员奖，陈纬恬（右）则捧走新设立的新苗奖。（梁献麟摄）

►陈纬恬（左）和任伟辰（右）虽年龄悬殊，又来自很不一样背景的家庭，两人却有相似的兴趣。这是他们粉墨登场前的合照。（任伟辰提供）



Tan Wei Tian won the "Emerging Artist Award"

38 of 55 Keywords: National Arts Council “Major Grant”

The important nutrient in the push for the development of Nam Hwa

In 2016, the National Arts Council adjusted the Major Grant Scheme, by changing the Major Grant to the Major Company Scheme and adjusted the funding framework to allow the arts community to apply for funding through three different channels, including: Bridging, Artmaking and intermediary work. Through the “Bridging” approach, Nam Hwa was successfully promoted from the Seed Grant to receiving the “Major Company Scheme” funding from the National Arts Council in 2017.

The “Major Grant” is one of the National Arts Council’s funding schemes. It targets well-known art institutions and is designed to allow these art institutions to apply for grants based on their expertise. All art institutions applying for grants must meet the various conditions of creation and promotion of the arts to receive the subsidies. In addition, art institutions can choose to apply for

grants from the three areas: Artmaking, Bridging, and Intermediary work. In 2017, Nam Hwa successfully applied for funding from the National Arts Council under the “Major Company Scheme” through the “Bridging” track, which will help in the future development of Nam Hwa’s greatly.

With the help of the government and the major Teochew community groups, Nam Hwa has drawn the distance between Singaporeans and Teochew opera closer through multiple channels. In addition to improving the quality of Teochew opera performances and accumulating more performances through different platforms, planning has begun on a series of Teochew opera promotional activities and training programmes. It is hoped that this will gain the acceptance of Singaporeans from all walks of life and attract more people to join the ranks of Teochew opera so that Teochew opera, the “Flowers of the Southern Countries” can bloom in Singapore.



Nam Hwa receives Major Grant from National Arts Council in 2017

“Gathering of like minds to preserve the culture”

Working closely with clan associations

Nam Hwa Opera Limited received support from many Teochew clan associations at the start of its transformation. In 2015, Chui Huay Lim Club and Nam Hwa jointly organized “Voice of Teochew”, a Teochew singing contest, which won the love and support of the public. Since then, Nam Hwa has worked with Teochew groups such as Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, Teochew Federation, Kityang Huay Kwan and Teo Ann Huay Kuan. This model of cooperation is to improve the cultural identity of local Teochews mainly, and to gain a deeper appreciation of the charm of Teochew opera culture and art through the cultural identity.

• Supporting the “Teochew Festival 2016”

The Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan organised the 10-day “Teochew Festival 2016” at Marina Bay Sands Conference and Exhibition Centre in 2016. The event combined elements of Teochew culture, arts and cuisine. Nam Hwa also presented several *zhe zi xi* (excerpts of operas) at the “Teochew Festival 2016”. In addition, Nam Hwa and Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan co-organized the “Teochew Festival 2016” concert - “A Teochew Concert in Lion City”. Nam Hwa presented two songs in the concert, namely “Love Song” and “Lantern Song”.



Nam Hwa with Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan at 2018 Chinese New Year Celebrations



Performance at the Teochew Festival



Teochew Music Reaches the Four Seas

39 of 55 Keywords: Teochew Festival

The first time Nam Hwa performed the “Eight Generals” welcome performance

The first Teochew Festival was held in September 2014 at the Ngee Ann Square in Orchard Road. In December 2016, Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan once again hosted the Teochew Festival. Nam Hwa also actively participated in this “Teochew Festival 2016”. Not only did Nam Hwa performed *zhe zi xi*, but also planned the “Eight Generals Welcome the Guests” activities. The “Eight Generals” represents the 8 different Teochew clan associations and its leaders, Teo Ann, Teo Yonh, Kityang, Pho Leng, Theng Hai, Raoping, Nan’ao and Huilai respectively. Nam Hwa also jointly organized three “A Teochew Concert in Lion City” concerts, and specially invited the Chinese Shantou Teochew Orchestra to come and perform.



“Eight Generals” at Teochew Festival 2016

• **Jointly organised the “Traditional Arts Performance” and “Teochew Opera Film Performance” with Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan**

in conjunction with the 27th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Singapore and China In 2017, Nam Hwa worked with Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan and the Teochew Federation to organise the “Traditional Arts Performance”. This is a combined performance of Teochew opera and Han opera by opera masters and actors of Chinese and Singaporean troupes and is a rare feast of Teochew opera performances in Singapore. This performance not only promoted the exchange of Teochew opera culture between Singapore and China, it also positively influenced the development of local Teochew troupes.

In addition, to celebrate the 55th anniversary of the celebration, Nam Hwa partnered with Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan and the Teochew Federation once again to present the classic operas “Prosecuting the Husband” and “Lady Liu Ming Zhu” on 22 and 23 June 2018 at the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. Nam Hwa’s youngest actor, Tan Wei Tian, took the lead in the opera “Lady Liu Ming Zhu” for the first time.

40 of 55 Keywords: “Traditional Arts Performance”

Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble’s first live accompaniment for a performance

“Traditional Arts Performance” is a programme developed by China’s Guangdong Chaoju Theatre to showcase the outstanding Chinese traditional culture through Teochew opera. Not only were there performances by professional actors from Guangdong Han Opera Inheritance Research Institute and the Guangdong Chaoju Theatre, local professional actors who have not performed on stage for a long time such as Tan Kah Noi, Tan Kah Luan, Chua Siew Tiang, Chua Koh Hong and Luo Qi Cai, performed together with Nam Hwa

Opera’s actors in “Uproar at the Kaifeng Magistrate Court”. In addition, the Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble established by Nam Hwa also provided the live accompaniment for performance of “Uproar at the Kaifeng Magistrate Court”.



Nam Hwa performs with famous Hanju opera performance on stage

41 of 55 Keywords: Tan Wei Tian

Winner of “Opera Orchid Emerging Artist Award”

“Almost the entire school know that I like Teochew opera!”

Tan Wei Tian is the youngest actor of Nam Hwa Opera Limited. She has been learning to sing Teochew opera with her grandmother since she was 3 years old. It can be said that she has already learned how to sing Teochew opera before learning how to speak Teochew. At the age of 10, Wei Wei joined Nam Hwa to learn the roles of “qing yi” and “hua dan”. In 2016, Tan Wei Tian won the “Opera Orchid Emerging Artist Award” from the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute. Nam Hwa sent her to Chaozhou Shantou several times to receive professional Teochew opera training, laying an important foundation for her opera skills.

Multi-dimensional promotion through education

To spread the art of Teochew opera, the first thing to do is to strengthen its promotion through education, and to target childhood education to professional academic field mainly. Therefore, Nam Hwa began to plan the blueprint for the education of Teochew opera arts, hoping to attract Singaporeans of different ages to learn more about the art of Teochew opera through different levels of education.

• Hosting Teochew opera academic seminars

On the macro level, academic research is the main foundation for mastering the knowledge of culture and art. Teochew operas can acquire a solid academic foundation through academic research and gradually gain the recognition of Singaporeans in the art of Teochew opera. On the evening of 18th August 2015, Nam Hwa held a lecture entitled “Looking at Chinese Opera films from a performer’s perspective”. In this lecture, Dr Hai Zhen, the keynote speaker, explored the value and limitations of opera films from the perspective of stage performances.

On 15th October 2017, Nam Hwa collaborated with Guangdong Chaoju Theatre for the first time to hold a conference on “The History and Legacy of Teochew Opera and Han Opera”. It invited Chinese actors Wei Guohao and Li Huanxia, Guan Leying, an outstanding young actor from Guangdong Han Opera Inheritance Research Institute, Zhang Yihuang and Xie Jishun, the Vice Dean and a renowned actor of Guangdong Chaoju Theatre. The content of the discussion was about the origins of Teochew and Han Opera, the characteristics of the role of *chou* in Teochew opera, and topics such as how to promote traditional culture and cultivate a new generation of audience.

List of seminars and conferences organised by Nam Hwa

Date	Topic	Venue
26-7-2015	Forum on Teochew Opera	Chui Huay Lim Club
18-8-2015	Looking at Chinese Opera films from a performer’s perspective	National Library 16th Floor
15-10-2017	The History and Legacy of Teochew Opera and Han Opera	National Library Building



Seminar on Teochew opera

• **Promoting opera educational activities to students**

Since 2017, Nam Hwa has begun to promote itself to students at an increasing intensity, starting from various educational institutions, and guiding students to understand the history of Singapore's Teochew opera, the basic knowledge and skills of Teochew opera in a vivid and interesting way. Several schools began to invite Nam Hwa to promote the art of Teochew opera since the beginning of 2017, including Nanyang Girls' High School, Tanjong Katong Primary School, Kong Hwa School and Institute of Technical Education College (West).



Nam Hwa at Nanyang Girls High School



Kit Yang City Arts School in Singapore

• **Promotional activities in campus – Kit Yang City Arts School**

President Toh Lim Mok once said, "I shall not wait for students to listen to Teochew music, I can go to them instead". In 2016, Nam Hwa specially invited 35 students and professional teachers from Kit Yang City Arts School to come to Singapore. These students were between the ages of 19-25 years old and they brought their energetic Teochew music to the campus and conducted an exchange with local school students. These schools include: Ngee Ann Secondary School, Nanyang Girls' High School, National Junior College, PCF Fengshan Sparkletots Preschool and Dunman High School.

• **Collaboration with Chinese education centres**

To effectively promote the art of Teochew opera, Nam Hwa also expanded the channels it uses to promote opera education of students. One of the activities is the collaboration with the Chinese education centre, Sprout Language Centre. In 2018, "Let's wayang!", a student holiday workshop catered for students between Primary One to Three was jointly organized by Sprout Language Centre and Nam Hwa. The course content includes: basic knowledge of opera and its movements and to allow students to learn about Teochew opera culture in a lively and interesting way.



"Let's wayang" at Sprout Language Centre

42 of 55 Keywords: Kit Yang City Arts School

The first overseas school Nam Hwa collaborated with

Kit Yang City Arts School has a strong faculty and a team of professional teachers with rich teaching experience. Since its establishment in 2000, it has adhered to the school philosophy of “emphasizing morality, advocating diligence, seeking progress and innovation”, strengthening campus management, and offering

professional courses such as Teochew opera performances, dance performances, music (vocals, piano, folk musical instruments). Kit Yang has cultivated many talents with cultural and artistic education for the society. The employment rate for its graduates are high, and they are engaged in a wide range of employment. Many students have already become the leaders of cultural organizations, enterprises and institutions.

List of Teochew opera education activities Nam Hwa promoted

Date	Educational Institution	Content
7-3-2016	Tanjong Katong Primary School	Introduction to Teochew Opera and basic movement demonstration • “Tao Hua Crossing the River”
11-7-2016	Kityang Arts School – performances during tour of schools	(Big) Percussion “Long Teng Sheng Shi” (Small) Percussion “Lion Playing with the Ball”
12-11-2016	Ngee Ann Secondary School	Music Ensemble “Hong Mei Bao Chun”
13-11-2016	Nanyang Girls’ High School	Flute Ensemble “The Eight Immortals Celebrationn”
14-11-2016	National Junior College	Percussion “Ying Xian Ke”
15-11-2016	PCF Fengshan Sparkletots Preschool Dunman High School	Xi Yue “Liu Qing Niang”, Suona “Qi Lu Ge”, Music Ensemble “Jiang Jun Ling”, Music Ensemble “Xiao Tao Hong”, Music Ensemble “Tidal Waves” Han Yue “Huai Gu”, Music Ensemble “Ban Kong Cai Feng”
8-3-2017	Tanjong Katong Primary School Mother Tongue Language week	Introduction to Teochew Opera and basic movement demonstration • “Bliss to the Three Families”
15-5-2017 17-5-2017 18-5-2017	Republic Polytechnic	Students visited the premises of Nam Hwa Opera Limited
24-5-2017	Nanyang Girls’ High School	Explanation on basic Teochew opera knowledge and basic movement demonstration • “Meeting in the Capital”
19-9-2017	Kong Hwa School	Introduction to Teochew Opera and basic movement demonstration Excerpt from “The Butterfly Lovers” - “The Lingering Farewell”
1-2-2018	ITE College West	• “Phoenix Hairpin”
7-3-2018	Tanjong Katong Primary School	Introduction to Teochew Opera and basic movement demonstration “Farewell at the Kiln”
23-5-2018	Nanyang Girls’ High School	Explanation on basic Teochew opera knowledge and basic movement demonstration • “Cheng Lin Save the Crown Prince”

Founding of Teochew Music Ensemble

There are some differences between Teochew music and music in general, especially the significant difference to the twelve-tone equal temperament which is more common. Therefore, for a music enthusiast who has some experience in other musical instruments, it will take some effort to learn this special mode of music. There are also many types of Teochew music, but here they are broadly separated into two categories, namely, Teochew music and opera music. Teochew music includes Teochew string music, *xiyue* (music from traditional string and wind instruments) and drums.

Nam Hwa began to plan for the establishment of the Teochew music group, in the hopes that youths and students would further understand the essence of this traditional culture after encountering Teochew music. The Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble was officially founded in 2017. To effectively train the music ensemble, Nam Hwa specially invited experienced music teachers Lin Yishu and Zhang Yanwei to teach and impart Teochew music. The Teochew Music Ensemble consisted of 15 young musicians and 15 senior musicians at its founding.

Although the Teochew Music Ensemble has just been established, they always present the songs to the audience with professional standards and serious attitudes at each performance and received good reviews. In addition, the Teochew Music Ensemble is dedicated to researching, rearranging, creating and performing Teochew music and other literary programmes with Teochew characteristics. At the same time, to achieve the ambition of the inheritance of Teochew music, the Teochew Music Ensemble is committed to inheritance and development, commitment to innovation, focus on talent development, and creating a good environment for artistic creation.



Nam Hwa set up a 30-member Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble

43 of 55 Keywords: Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble

Nam Hwa's first Teochew music group

Teochew music is an extremely important part of the Teochew opera performance. Faced with the shortage of Teochew music musicians in Singapore and in the hopes of attracting young people to understand Teochew opera, Nam Hwa established a 30-person Teochew music group for the first time. It is in the hopes that young people who like music will join the music group, and by learning and playing with experienced musicians, achieve the inheritance of Teochew music.



Numerous performances by Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble

Zhe zi xi strategy

Zhe zi xi, as its name suggests (*zhe zi* refers to chapters or excerpts; *xi* means opera), is one of the chapters or excerpts in the entire opera. Most of them are highlights of the opera and are the centre or soul of the entire opera where the plot is condensed, and characters are vividly depicted. *Zhe zi xi* such as “Tao Hua Crossing the River” and, “Yang Zhi Liang demands to marry the maiden”, in “So Luk Neung”, The Attempted Murder” in “Qin Xianglian” and others are the more exciting and interesting ones.

Nam Hwa had started performing *zhe zi xi* prior to its establishment at various traditional activities and community centres. The outstanding performance of Nam Hwa was gradually accepted by Singaporeans. Madam Heng Boey Hong, one of the directors of Nam Hwa, believes that the performance style of *zhe zi xi* can be used to attract young people and lively stage performance techniques can be applied to allow them to resonate with Teochew opera.

In addition to using *zhe zi xi* to promote Teochew opera in campus, Nam Hwa also specially held a opera programme based on the performance of *zhe zi xi* - “Nam Hwa Blazes”. “Nam Hwa Blazes” not only provided a platform for students of Nam Hwa to perform, it also enhanced their acting skills, and this became another important platform for Nam Hwa to promote the art of Teochew opera.

44 of 55 Keywords: Nam Hwa Blazes

Nam Hwa’s *zhe zi xi* performance

“Nam Hwa Blazes” is a free Teochew opera performance that Nam Hwa regularly organises once every three months since 2016. In addition to *zhe zi xi*, “Nam Hwa Blazes” also provides a platform for students of different courses to perform, in the hope that the performance techniques of the students can be enhanced through this platform. “Nam Hwa Blazes” is a Teochew opera programme for audiences of different backgrounds and ages and has been supported and well-received by the audience since its inception till date.



“Nam Hwa Blazes” Performance

Grooming of new talents

Singapore Teochew opera troupes and amateur troupes have been facing a shortage of talents after experience a period of slump, and actors and musicians were in a state of discontinuity. In view of this, Nam Hwa began to develop a systemic training program for nurturing new Teochew opera talents through different pathways and platforms in hope that Nam Hwa can inject new blood through this plan. Not only has Nam Hwa successfully established the Teochew Music Ensemble, but also groomed many outstanding new actors.

• Free Teochew opera courses for children

To effectively promote the art of Teochew opera, letting children meet the art of Teochew opera is one of the most important promotional tasks of Nam Hwa. In 2017, Nam Hwa launched the "Basic Skills for Children" course and provided free Teochew opera course for children with funding from the National Arts Council.

The "Basic Skills for Children" course guides children to understand Teochew opera through attracting children with fun games and enables them to be able to sing Teochew opera songs with emotion. Since the launch of the "Basic Skills for Children" course, it has won the support and love of many parents. Many children also began to love the art of Teochew opera from their long-term study and edification.

4岁娃学潮剧
‘唱念做打’样样行

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梁伟康 摄影

4岁娃“唱念做打”样样行！小女生一年前开始学传统潮剧，训练过程乐在其中不嫌苦，回家还主动看潮剧练习，如今华文和潮州话都有进步。

3岁孩童一般还懵懵懂懂时，黄诗晴（4岁）就已开始学潮剧。每周六下午，她到南华潮州社与七名年龄介于4岁至13岁的小朋友一同学潮剧。

不论是练功、练舞，还是高唱潮州戏曲，小朋友们在两小时课程中都得练习，排练时也表演得似模似样，目前已上台表演两次。

除了课中需要一些提示，黄诗晴几乎能记所有台词、动作，还会大声唱出潮曲，毫不怯场。

虽然还不太明白自己在唱什么，但黄诗晴总是兴奋地上课，在家还会观看经典潮剧片段《桃花过渡》练习。她说：“我喜欢潮州戏，因为可以表演、跳舞、唱歌，还有学新的东西。”

她的母亲冯静姿（39岁，公务员）从社长口中得知南华潮州社自去年4月开办儿童潮剧班。身为潮州人，她认为传统艺术快要没落，所以希望女儿多认识潮州文化，同时培养自信。

她说：“我不怕她太小学不了，这个年龄反而吸收力更强。她现在还学会一点潮州话，华文也进步许多。”

胡嘉彦（40岁，财务顾问）去年也送5岁女儿陈钰禧学潮剧。陈钰禧最喜欢色彩鲜艳的服装和头饰，宁可牺牲午睡时间，也要过来上课。

社长卓林茂指出，南华潮州社使命在于传承、推广和发展潮剧。

▶ 孩童们在课堂也得练功架。

▲ 胡嘉彦让5岁女儿陈钰禧学潮剧，希望女儿从小认识传统文化。

▲ 黄诗晴3岁就开始学潮剧，喜爱表演的她毫不怯场。

觉得潮剧是俗文化，一对兄弟的父母原本不支持他们学，幸好祖母坚持每周亲自带他们上课，两兄弟如今在家会一起唱歌，也不再像祖母常唠叨太吵。

也学潮剧的青丽珠（69岁）得知南华潮州社开办儿童班后，兴致勃勃地拉两名孙子陈俊刚（9岁）和陈泳旭（7岁）参与，但儿子和媳妇却有点耳障，担心影响功课。

青丽珠说：“一般年轻人认为潮剧是俗文化，不重要。他们觉得我自己喜欢潮剧就行，没必要也要带孙子去。”

为了不影响到儿子媳妇，她决定每周亲自带孙子上课，让他们认识传统文化并体验团体生活。出乎意料的是，两兄弟很快爱上潮剧，缺课时还会感到失望。

黄丽珠笑说：“以前我在家听潮曲时，两兄弟会嫌我吵，现在他们俩在家还会一唱一和。她妈见她俩如此有兴趣，也比较能接受她们学潮剧了。”

觉得潮剧‘俗’ 小兄弟父母原不支持

站都站不稳 不知兰花指

导师通过游戏 一字一句教唱

站都站不稳，也不知什么是兰花指，潮剧老师通过好玩游戏吸引孩童，再慢慢教导示范，让孩童也能唱出感情来。

吸引幼童爱上潮剧的关键，就在于两位来自中国的导师陈玉芝（24岁）和李琼侨（23岁）。10岁学潮剧的陈玉芝说，对于教导幼童她们完全无经验，得慢慢摸索。

她指出，小孩子好玩无法专心，她们就干脆陪他们玩，从游戏教导戏剧元素。

为了让孩童理解潮剧刻画的情景，她们用孩童熟悉的情景来比喻不同情绪，再一字一句教他们唱潮剧。

“这些小孩都是潮剧的幼苗，我们必须抓紧他们，再让他们受到熏陶，喜欢我们的课。”

家长胡嘉彦说，她从孩童们的身上“看到了希望”。

她认为：“传统文化要从小学，长大后才不会排斥。若年轻一代再不学，以后就没人会欣赏了。”

看视频：
两名导师陈玉芝（左一）和李琼侨（左二）对孩童耐心教导，让他们喜欢上上课。

Children undergoing basic skills for Teochew opera at Nam Hwa

45 of 55 Keywords: Basic Skills for Children

Nam Hwa started the “Basic Skills for Children” course

Nam Hwa opened its first free “Basic Skills for Children” course in 2017 with funding from the National Arts Council. Children between the ages of 3 to 12 are its main audience, regardless of nationality. The youngest participant in the course currently is 3 years old, with the oldest aged 10. Many children in this basic skills course are happy learning Teochew opera, giving unlimited hopes for local Teochew opera.



Children in Teochew opera costumes

• Recruiting additional professional teachers and talents in Teochew opera arts

Nam Hwa has always studied Teochew opera in a self-study manner since its inception, and there was no formal professional training. Some of the eager students could only go to Shantou at their own expense to learn Teochew opera. To have a better and more complete learning system for Nam Hwa students, Nam Hwa began to hire the renowned Teochew opera master in Singapore and Malaysia, Lee Mooi Ching, as Artistic Director in 2017, as well as teachers from China such as Chen Yu Zhi, Li Lv Qiao and Cai He Di to teach and be regular performers and artistic instructors of Nam Hwa. Nam Hwa Opera Limited began to resemble closer to a professional Teochew opera group under a team of professional teachers.



Cai Hedi, Music Instructor, Nam Hwa Opera

46 of 55 Keywords: Lee Mooi Ching

The first Artistic Director hired by Nam Hwa

Miss Lee Mooi Ching is the Artistic Director of Nam Hwa. She joined Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe when she was 16 years old and was selected to play the role of *xiaosheng* because of her voice and tall frame. She joined Chua Hong Kee's newly established Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe in the 1980s and only left in 1989 as the procedures to apply for a work permit was too complicated. Lee Mooi Ching could not get over Teochew opera after leaving the troupe, therefore, she often participated in the performance and direction of Teochew opera performances between Singapore and Malaysia and produced a Teochew opera artist album titled "Lee Mooi Ching", which garnered the appreciation and collection of the Teochew opera enthusiasts in Singapore, Malaysia and Chaoshan. Lee Mooi Ching was invited by Nam Hwa to be its Artistic Director in 2017, and is mainly responsible for the performance, planning and supervision of Teochew opera performances.



Lee Mooi Ching, Artistic Director, Nam Hwa Opera

• Arranging overseas training activities

To improve the performance of Nam Hwa members' performances, Nam Hwa sent students to the Chaoshan, the birthplace of Teochew opera, on multiple occasions. In November 2014, Nam Hwa sent 25 actors between the ages of 11 and 72 to Kit Yang Arts School to receive two weeks of formal training. This training includes training in singing, actions, props, basic skills and roles. Toh Lim Mok, President of Nam Hwa, said that the quality of teachers and teaching in Kit Yang Arts School is satisfactory. This overseas training has established a profound friendship between Nam Hwa's students and the teachers. Since then, Nam Hwa has sent several students to Chaozhou Shantou to receive guidance from the local Teochew opera experts to learn Teochew opera. After the establishment of the Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble, young musicians were also sent to the Chaoshan to learn from experienced musicians.



Professional training at Jieyang, China



Report on the overseas training of Nam Hwa

Writing the history of Singapore Teochew opera

Singapore already had Teochew opera performances as early as the 19th century, which is for more than a hundred years and is a gem in the history of Singapore Chinese culture. To record these precious histories, Teochew opera began planning for the compilation of the book, "Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore" in 2015 and officially published it in 2016. The book not only constructed the historical context of Singapore Teochew opera, but also enabled Singaporeans to understand the historical development of local Teochew opera.

In 2018, Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan and Nam Hwa Opera Limited teamed up to collect the oral history of local Teochews and Teochew opera and record this valuable piece of historical data of Singapore. To

Lim Mok, President of Nam Hwa is also a Director and Chairman of the Cultural Group of Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan. He said that Nam Hwa is mainly responsible for collecting and recording the history of local Teochew opera for this collaboration. Other than the history of Nam Hwa, they also visited other amateur musical and dramatic associations, Teochew opera groups, and even disbanded troupes, hoping to record the history of Teochew opera in Singapore more fully. In addition, the interviewees may be the current directors or former leaders of the amateur musical and dramatic associations; or they may be old members, persons-in-charge of troupes, Teochew opera actors, musicians and scholars who had conducted research on Teochew opera.



Report on the oral history project

47 of 55 Keywords: “A Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore”

The first book published by Nam Hwa on history

“Pictorial History of Teochew Opera in Singapore” tells the story of the development and changes in the history of Singapore Teochew opera with a collection of pictures. Many Teochew opera actors have been sought to sort out the historical development of Singapore Teochew opera during the writing process. The editor-in-chief of the book is Su Zhangkai, an Honorary Secretary of Nam Hwa and a Teochew opera fanatic. Not only has he collected countless historical materials of local Teochew opera, he also wrote “Between the stage and the screen: the interaction between Singapore and Teochew opera movies (1959-1965)” and papers such as “Su Liu Niang Fever: cross-establishment interaction in Singapore of Teochew film ‘Su Liu Niang’” and gained recognition and praise in the academic field.



“A Pictorial history of Teochew Opera in Singapore”

48 of 55 Keywords: National Archives of Singapore

The first collaboration between Nam Hwa and National Archives of Singapore

In 2018, the National Archives Oral History Centre facilitated the oral history by local Teochews project jointly organized by Nam Hwa and Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan. It is hoped that this collaboration will enrich the country's historical collection. In addition to being responsible for training interviewers, the National Archives Oral History Centre also lent freely the professional equipment needed to record oral history, as well as helping to handle back-end work, such as converting interview recordings into a collection version and a reference version, while uploading the post-production oral history recording to the National Archive's network platform for public reference.

Production of a new play “Painted Skin”

Nam Hwa presented the large-scale play, “Painted Skin”, which won the praise of local and overseas audience in 2017. At the invitation of Guiyang, Pohang and Seoul, Nam Hwa conducted a tour of these three places and presented an adaptation from Pu Songling’s classic, “Painted Skin”. This meaningful tour promoted the cultural exchanges between China, South Korea and Singapore.

This was a wonderful performance and Wu Xiuqing, a professor at Hanyang University in South Korea and the Honorary President of

the Korean Chinese Opera Society, gave a wonderful review on the performance, saying that the highly-rated performance by Nam Hwa allowed the South Korean audience to understand the stage charm and profound connotation of Teochew opera. Since then, the “Painted Skin” opera not only became famous overseas, it was also performed in various places such as Henan, Cambodia and Singapore, and has been loved and supported by the audience.



“Painted Skin” performance in Korea

List of “Painted Skin” performances in various venues

Date	Venue	Activity
30/7/2017	Guiyang, China	Guizhou-ASEAN Opera Festival The 10th China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week
6/8/2017	Pohang, South Korea	Pohang Bada International Theater Festival
8/8/2017	Seoul, South Korea	Performance at Seoul China Cultural Center
25/11/2017	Cheng San CC	Teochew Opera Appreciation Night
26/11/2017	Bukit Panjang CC	Bukit Panjang Teochew Opera Night 2017
28/3/2018	Cambodia Phnom Penh Cultural Center (Chenla Theater)	Delegation to Visit Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Teochew Opera Public Performance 2018
15 /5/ 2018 to 20/5/2018	Henan, China Hebi	Performance at Silk Road Festival

49 of 55 Keywords: “Painted Skin”

The opera that went on the greatest number of overseas tours

“Painted skin” is one of the “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio” written by Pu Songlin, a novelist of the Qing Dynasty in China, directed by Nam Hwa Art Consultant Chua Soo Pong. According to Dr. Chua, the play “Painted Skin” has been revised many times and has been performed by various operas such as Yu opera, Yue opera, Taiwan opera, Cantonese opera and Teochew opera. This Teochew opera performance “Painted Skin” was a combined performance by actors from many countries such as China, Singapore and Malaysia.



“Painted Skin” performers in Heinan, China

Nam Hwa Teochew opera goes international

Since the transformation of Nam Hwa Opera Limited, there have been more than 100 performances of varying proportion. Not only have these performances increased Nam Hwa's exposure, it also gradually improved the quality of performances and established the brand image of Nam Hwa. In 2016, Nam Hwa went international with the opera "Painted Skin", and the wonderful performances were recognised by many countries. In addition, Nam Hwa has also travelled to many countries to perform classic Teochew operas, and let the world see Singapore Teochew opera.

• Shantou, China - "Teochew Opera Show on Friday"

In 2017, Nam Hwa was invited to participate in the Shantou Teochew Opera Cultural Exchange Exhibition. Mr. Toh Lim Mok, President of Nam Hwa, led a delegation of 39 people to Shantou, Chaozhou mainly to participate in the "Teochew Opera Show on Friday" activity on 9th Decemeber. on 8th December, Nam Hwa and Guangdong Chaoju Theatre first conducted an exchange by performing on the same stage. During this exchange, Nam Hwa performed several *zhe zi xi*, such as: "Conjugal Bliss at the Capital Fore", "The Farewell" "Meeting at the Temple" and "Together in Eternity". Among these performances, "Conjugal Bliss at the Capital Fore" was performed by two young actors in Nam Hwa, Tan Wei Tian and Yap Ting. It is worth mentioning that Zeng Yifan, who has deep ties with the Singapore Teochew opera industry, said that the actors whom he used to be in contact with in the past were all actors who were more advanced in age. After seeing the new faces of actors such as Tan Wei Tian and Yap Ting, he felt comforted and expressed his approval for the nurturing of new talents by Nam Hwa.

On 9th December, Nam Hwa performed "A Family of Three Scholars" in the "Teochew Opera Show on Friday", which was performed by Lee Mooi Ching, Soh Gek Hoon, Goh Hooi Ling and Lee Heok Boon, Gladys. The serious and earnest performance of the veteran actors of Nam Hwa were well received. After watching the performance of Nam Hwa's

Teochew opera, famed Teochew opera actress Zhang Yihuang said that the singing and acting skills of the actors were excellent and of professional standards. In addition, she also pointed out that Mr. Toh Lim Mok is a bold and charismatic President who attach importance to the nurturing of young actors. His contribution to the inheritance of culture, the promotion of Teochew opera and the elevation of international popularity of Teochew opera is indisputable.

This performance exchange not only benefited Teochew opera performances, it also enabled everyone to see Nam Hwa's achievements in the nurturing of talents and performances.



Opera performance in Shantou, China

• **Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

In 2018, the Nam Hwa was invited by the Association of Chinese Teochew in Cambodia to perform at the Chenla Theatre in Phnom Penh for three nights. These include two Teochew opera classics, "The Prosecution of Scholar Gai" and "A Family of Three Scholars", and a new opera, "Painted Skin" and the witty and warm "Bliss to Three Families".

The city of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, has been called "Little Teochew" in the past. However, with the decline of the Teochew opera troupes, the local Teochew opera has disappeared. With this Teochew opera performances, Nam Hwa brought back the happiness that Teochew operas in Cambodia in the past used to bring. On the other hand, this performance was the first time that Nam Hwa had performed in Cambodia. It was also the first time that a local Teochew opera group presented a complete opera classic to Phnom Penh.

The number of Nam Hwa members involved in this Cambodia performance was 65. Mr. Lim Wee Kiak, Honorary Advisor of Nam Hwa, also went to Phnom Penh to host the opening ceremony with the Singapore Ambassador to Cambodia, His Excellency Mr. Michael Tan Keng Siong. In addition, the three performances by Nam Hwa were packed. The performances of the actors won the local audience's praise and left deep impressions of Singapore Teochew opera.

Li Jiegui, Secretary of the Association of Chinese Teochew in Cambodia, said at the gala evening that young Cambodian people know very little about the concept of Teochew opera. However, the club's recreation group has trained a Teochew music team formed by a group of young students to conduct exchanges with Teochew opera groups from various regions and are determined to carry forward Teochew

literature and opera among young people of Teochew descent. The arrival of Singapore Nam Hwa Opera Limited to perform in Cambodia provides a rare opportunity to learn.

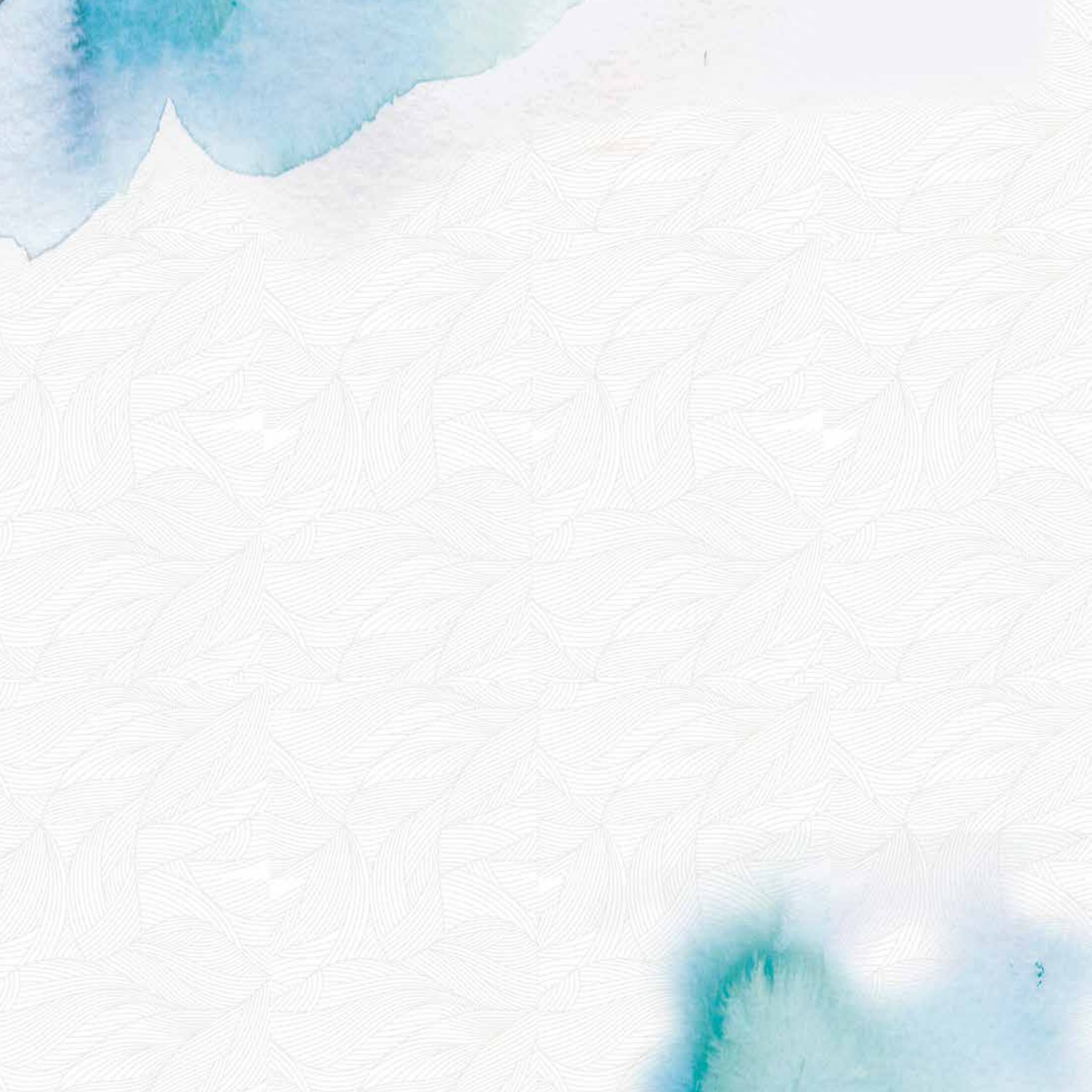
Nam Hwa's performances in Cambodia have not only expanded the stage of Nam Hwa to the world, but also promoted cultural exchange between Cambodia and Singapore.

The article "Cultural patterns shape society" published by the newspaper "Lianhe Zaobao" on 25th December 2017 pointed out that there were more free performances in Singapore than in previous years. Among them, the number of free performances and activities was 2,662, which was 20.9% higher than the previous fiscal year. Among the many performances, traditional opera performances account for a considerable number. Dr. Chua Soo Pong, a local opera expert, feels that the local opera groups are more active and have many performances this year. He analyzed this phenomenon and pointed out that "the art of opera has a strong vitality and is closely related to the core values and culture of the Chinese". In addition, the main reasons for the flourishing of operas include: operas entering campus and recruiting amongst the youth; the structure of the opera troupes is updated, the management is gradually specialized; the government is increasing its investment in tradition and the introduction of special subsidy programmes.

The period between 2015 to 2018 is Nam Hwa's developmental period after its transformation. It has achieved good results in both cultural education and performances, especially in public performances. More than 100 Teochew operas have been staged from 2015 to 2018. Not only did the actors honed better performance skills, it also improved the quality of Nam Hwa's performance.



Nam Hwa's performance in Cambodia





Chapter 6 Moving Forward

- The prospects and developmental direction of Singapore Teochew opera
- Transformation and innovation of Singapore Teochew opera
- A new look for Singapore Teochew opera - Nam Hwa Opera Limited
- Establishing the new image of Nam Hwa's brand of Teochew opera
- Nam Hwa Anthem – Song of Nam Hwa
- Name officially changed to “Nam Hwa Opera”

The prospects and developmental direction of Singapore Teochew opera

It has been more than 200 years since Teochew opera came to Singapore in the 19th century. During this period, Teochew opera has developed its own self-development track along with the development of Singapore. Teochew opera has now blended with the culture from other ethnic groups to become an integral part of Singapore's local culture to form the colourful cultural world of Singapore. We believe that the future development of Singapore's Teochew opera will surely follow the trends and changes in Singapore's overall cultural environment. Being away from its source, the development of the "Singapore Teochew opera" is also different from the development of native Teochew opera in Chaozhou. Singapore Teochew opera carries local characteristics, such as the selection of costumes, the layout and design of the plot. All these points to Singapore Teochew opera having a "personality" that is different from others. However, from the historical process, the self-production of the current Singapore Teochew opera is still insufficient.

It still relies on "outside support" in areas such as creation, scriptwriting, composition and direction. In terms of performances, it is often necessary to invite foreign professional instructors to provide guidance on an ad hoc basis or recruit tenured teachers from China directly to teach in Singapore. Some people think that Teochew opera has never taken root in Singapore based on the history of the development of Singapore Teochew opera and the current situation. On the other hand, the recognition and dissemination of the Teochew opera by the authorities, such as the National Arts Council and the Singapore Tourism Board, reflects to a certain extent that Singaporean society is undoubtedly involved in the incorporation of this art form into local culture. It has truly become a traditional art form that belongs to Singapore with the evolution of history and has a certain influence and effect on local history and humanities.



Cross generation of performers



A caucasian opera performer

Not only will the future development of Singapore Teochew opera require the support of the government, it will also depend on how relevant organisations and groups in the private sector work to promote the reform and spread of Teochew opera in Singapore. More importantly, as the actors and audiences who appreciate and love this traditional culture gradually age, it is also a matter of urgency to train a new generation of actors and audiences. Only by having “heirs” can it be guaranteed that it will not wane or worse, disappear. Gone are the days that the consensus was that Teochew opera is an exclusive culture of the Teochew community. To an extent, it is no longer restricted by dialect groups and has become a common cultural memory of Singaporeans. Fortunately, there are also different dialect groups and people of different ethnicities participating in this, which enriches the significance and influence of Teochew opera in Singapore. Therefore, it is obvious that cooperation by all parties without the boundaries of groups, languages, etc., is an important way to preserve and develop Singapore Teochew opera.

Secondly, with the changing times, the changes in forms of entertainment, culture, communication, etc., communicators must, regardless traditional culture or emerging art, keep up with the pace of times, using a way that the younger generation likes and is willing to accept to present the connotation of culture and the charm of art. We should not lose sight of heritage, but we should also look at it with a developmental perspective, because blindly following the old ways can only lead to the opposite result.

In addition, while deepening internal cohesion, close communication with the outside world must be maintained and high-quality elements introduced to improve the quality of performances. As the saying goes, “good wine needs no bush” and the same goes for traditional culture. To maintain its vitality, we must ensure that we continue to seek self-improvement. This way, we can keep the attention of the outside world on it and attract more people to feel and to appreciate it. When it comes to the promotion by external forces, tourism is also an important factor.

In Singapore's street show scene, local opera performances can be an important cultural resource to attract Western tourists, and the Singapore Tourism Board is also working on it. By building Teochew opera as a cultural tourism resource under this impetus, it can also be a direction for the future development of Teochew opera.

Transformation and innovation of Singapore Teochew opera

As mentioned above, Teochew opera came to Southeast Asia with the immigration of Chinese Chaoshan immigrants and integrated into the development of local culture, presenting a "Singapore Teochew opera" that is different from its Chaoshan native. This part discusses the two relatively major transformation and its drive in the history of the development of Singapore Teochew opera mainly in a summary, thus looking into the future of Singapore Teochew opera. These two transformations include firstly, the entry of Teochew opera movies in the 1950s and 1960s that brought "earth-shaking" influence on Singapore Teochew opera. This period was also termed the golden age in the development of Singapore Teochew opera. Secondly, after having only performed traditional plays for many years after the mid-1990s, there have been some innovative plays and performances that bore characteristics of the times by Singapore Teochew opera. The turning point of this reform and its impact on the development of Singapore Teochew opera is also worth pondering.



Promotions of opera by Singapore Tourism Board

(1) “Hometown tunes are worth 10,000 in gold”: Cultural identity promoted the reform of Singapore Teochew opera

Before the 1950s, the operas of the Singapore Teochew community were mainly Teochew opera and *wai jiang xi* (Han opera). At that time, Teochew operas were mainly to give thanks to the gods and performed in the form of a street show by professional troupes. Amateur troupes, such as Er Woo, Lak Aik, Thau Yong, etc. performed *wai jiang xi* mainly. This is because amateur troupes are almost all organized and participated in by the rich. Therefore, to distinguish their class from the ordinary people who are illiterate and to embody the honour of their identity, they like to perform *wai jiang xi* that are performed in Mandarin. In their view, Teochew opera is a poorly performed opera to give thanks to the gods, and not an art. In fact, the performance standards of Teochew opera were low at the time, the plot was draggy, content was boring, stage was simple, and the actors were not serious. However, as only a minority was able to join an amateur opera club and to perform the *wai jiang xi* from the perspective of art appreciation at that time, Teochew opera as an opera to thank the gods still had a large audience. “The only means of cohesion for the overseas Chinese community is the so-called ‘minor tradition’, built on folk customs, beliefs and cultural rituals of various dialect groups. Chinese operas function as the role of folk beliefs and cultural rituals.” As a part of folk festival ritual, not only do Teochew operas entertain the gods and the people, it also played the role of uniting overseas Chinese. These operas performed in the hometown dialect is the foothold of homesickness and provides emotional resonance for the Teochew community who are far away from home. Although the performance environment is noisy and not refined, the local accent is the biggest attraction.

The first Teochew opera movie “The Burning of the Riverside Tower” was released in Singapore in 1958, which drew the curtains of a popular and reformative trend in Singapore Teochew opera. In 1959, “So Luk Neung” starring Yao Qiuqiu pushed the trend to its peak. This well-produced, compelling plot and well-performed Teochew opera movie enabled everyone to see the charm of Teochew opera once again. Thereafter in the 1960s, many Teochew opera movies were successively imported from Hong Kong, such as “A woman sues her own husband”,

“Chen San and Wu Niang” and “The Story of Lau Meng Chu”. A group of actors such as Yao Qiuqiu and Tan Chor Hwee also became huge stars and box office guarantee at that time. These movies which are performed in the Teochew dialect, endeared the overseas Teochew community and they flocked to the cinema. At this time, Teochew opera is no longer just an opera to give thanks to the gods, but has entered the modern cinema through the wave of “sound, light and electricity”, becoming fashionable, and an elegant and noble art.

The status of *wai jiang xi* was shaken at this time. Since the early 1950s, “(*wai jiang xi*) instructors have become more and more difficult to find, and the older generation of *wai jiang xi* actors have gradually become old and weak.” The shortage of teachers and the decline in the standards of actors have gradually threatened the development of *wai jiang xi*. This form of opera, which is performed in Mandarin, reflects more on the artistic taste and status symbol of the wealthy class. As Teochew opera became a noble and elegant art in Singapore, they gradually changed their impression that the Teochew opera was an unrefined art. The emotional resonance evoked by the dialect made them start to have feelings for Teochew opera, so amateur troupes also started to switch to perform Teochew opera. In 1962, Er Woo performed “So Luk Neung” for the first time, and Nam Hwa, who perform Teochew opera mainly, was also established during this period. At this point, Teochew opera has become a culture recognised by the entire overseas Teochew community in Singapore.

The Teochew opera stage performance also carried out imitation movie reforms under the impact of this influence. Teochew opera became a common culture of the entire Teochew community because the Teochew opera movies redefined the “authentic” Teochew opera standards and cultivated the audience’s aesthetic appreciation ability. Audience who enjoy watching Teochew opera will naturally put forward higher demands on local Teochew opera performances and this prompted them to carry out reforms. These reforms are reflected mainly in four aspects: Firstly, reform of the plays. Almost all the popular Teochew movies in the cinema were adapted into operas, such as “o Luk Neung”, “Chen San and Wu Niang” and “A woman sues her own husband”. Compared with past operas, these operas were not as lengthy and the plot more compact and novel. The second is the reform of the stage. The Teochew movies were filmed in a realistic setting. This form of expression also influenced the presentation of operas. Physical

decorations are added to the traditional background curtains. The third is the reform of music. Past performances were very simple, and the troupe can begin their performance with simple music, using basic instruments such as *er xian*, *yangqin* and *yehu*, and several actors. The entry of Teochew opera movies has also led to the introduction of new musical instruments in traditional troupes. “*Xiao di, pi pa* and *san xian* have become important musical instruments. The emerging *erhu* and *di hu* are also widely used” so that the music can change with the plot and enable the performance to be more exciting and vivid. The fourth is the reform of the actors. Previously, most of the actors were child actors, their voices were sounded young and did not match up to the characters they played. The performances of adults in the Teochew opera movies caused the troupes to see a different charm to them. The compatible match between these type of actors to the age of the characters made the performances more vivid, and that left the troupes in awe and they started to make more use of adult actors. The performance standards were also increased accordingly. A commentary published in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in 1961 mentioned “Not only were there innovation in the performance of the Teochew opera, but also in stage design and lighting which is also more particular than usual. The lights that have always been ignored are also valued, especially some of the instruments that have been eliminated are also taken up onto the stage to play once again, which is a welcome phenomenon, and that shows that Singapore Teochew opera has taken a step forward.” These reforms by professional troupes have been recognised by the audience and attracted more viewers.

In conclusion, the identity and national identity of the Chinese were vague before Singapore was founded. However, their cultural identity was relatively clear. They identify with Chinese culture, especially the culture of their own dialects, including the rituals and operas. Therefore, when the standards of Teochew opera performance improved, it relied on its own dialect advantage to replace *wai jiang xi* to be the most influential culture of the Teochew community and helped to construct the cultural identity of the Teochew community. Be it ordinary people who used to watch these Teochew operas to thank the gods as entertainment, or the wealthy class who once abandoned Teochew opera in pursuit of status, Teochew opera became an invisible cohesive force and appeal in the Teochew community and an ethnic culture that is appreciated by the Teochew community from all walks of life. When the superb performances in Teochew opera movies helped to construct

the cultural identity of the Teochew community, this identity in turn put higher demands on the standards of local Teochew opera performance and pushed them to carry out reforms. From the slogans such as “Authentic Teochew Opera”, “Mainland Script” and “Mainland Singing” that frequently appear in the leaflets issued during the screening of Teochew opera movies, not only did it show that they are emulating the artistic standards of mainland China, but it also shows their Teochew cultural identity. Imitation movies by the Teochew opera troupes is the most direct embodiment of the reform.



Movie flyer of “Strange visitor” – an authentic Teochew movie production

(2) Co-existence of multiple ethnicities: multiculturalism fosters new developments in Singapore Teochew opera

Singapore Teochew opera was influenced by the Teochew opera movies that were so popular in the 1960s that the local Teochew opera movies were screened on television in 1964. However, by the end of the 1960s, the trend brought by Teochew opera movies began to gradually recede. In the 1970s and 1980s, Teochew opera was basically in a state of depression. The number of Teochew opera movies were few, and the stage operas were performing traditional plays mainly, with less innovative plays. In fact, Singapore's political events in the 1960s, such as the 13th May incident in Malaysia, have narrowed the scope of the troupes' activities. The disappearance of theatres and amusement parks in the 1970s have turned operas into street shows again, and the development of Teochew opera has lost its favourable performance environment. In addition, some people are of the view that this is related to the abolition of the child actor system. Without such a strict training method, the loss of audience due to the decline of the artistic standards is also the reason for the depression of Teochew opera in this period. In addition to the decline in standards, the low rate of production for new operas also affected the development of Teochew opera. The entry of the Teochew opera movies solved the problem of the local Teochew opera "script shortage" to a certain extent, but the number of Teochew opera movies imported into Singapore in the 1970s were less than those in the 1960s. Therefore, old plays can no longer satisfy the demands of the audience. The most important reason might be the change of Singapore's language policy. The policy of "speak more Mandarin and speak less dialects" also caused local operas that are performed in dialect mainly to also lose the favourable environment for development. Singapore Teochew opera passed through the obscurity of the 1970s and 1980s under such a repressive environment. It was not until the 1990s that another opportunity for reform was ushered in.

After the promotion of "Bilingual Policy" and "Speak Mandarin Campaign", not only have the dialects gradually lost their vitality in the 1990s, but the whole Singapore society has gradually shown signs of becoming "westernised". The government was also worried that Singapore will become a "pseudo-Western society" that is detached

from its Asian background. Speaking in Mandarin not only demolish the barriers between different dialect groups, more importantly it "preserves and spread traditional cultural values through Mandarin to strengthen the identity of Chinese Singaporeans. Because language, culture and values are closely related and passed down from generation to generation." As such, the government proposed to "transfer the focus of the Speak Mandarin Campaign from 'speaking less in dialects' to 'understanding culture'" at this time. The traditional Confucianism school of thought conveyed in the stories of Chinese opera contain the values, systems and social customs in Chinese culture, which is one of the essences of Chinese culture. This enabled local operas to become a form of promotion of Chinese culture as local operas that is performed in dialects can no longer create dialect group barriers. Under the influence of such policies, the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute came into being under the guidance of the National Arts Council in 1995. Their aims include "striving to guide young people to appreciate and understand



The Embodied Shoes

local operas”, “developing new operas which carries the characteristics of Singapore” and “extensive integration and absorption of the essence of other cultural traditions to enrich local Chinese opera”. In this context, the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute shouldered the heavy responsibility of creating innovative operas with both contemporary and local characteristics, naturally these include Teochew operas. Next, there shall be an analysis on the reforms to Teochew opera by the Singapore Chinese Opera Institute during this period.

During this period, some elements that blended foreign and exotic characteristics began to appear in Teochew opera. Compared to the native Teochew operas in Chaoshan, where most of them were adaptations from ancient stories with the old times as background, modern operas were inclined to depict the situation in China, and Singapore Teochew opera paid more attention to learn new ideas from other ethnic cultures to enrich itself. The creation of such operas came mostly from the hands of Dr. Chua Soo Pong, the former Dean of the

Singapore Chinese Opera Institute. First, from the conception point of view, the writing and directing was influenced by the multicultural living environment:

“I live in a multicultural society in Singapore and accept the influence of multiculturalism. So when I directed dramas early in the 1970s and 1980s, naturally I learned the skills and forms of expression from these traditions.”

Although Chua Soo Pong was referring to the screenwriter and director of dramas, it is not difficult to surmise that the creation and adaptation of the Teochew opera performances were also derived from this multicultural social environment. Therefore, he adapted the Indian epic poem “Ramayana” into the Teochew opera, the Western fairy tales into Teochew operas such as “Cinderella” and “Mouse Daughter’s Marriage”. Secondly, multiculturalism can also be seen in the mode of presentation. Screenwriters and actors will also add new ideas to attract audiences without changing the inherent form of Teochew opera. For example, the appearance of the costumes of the current Singapore Teochew opera. Not only are there the sleeves in traditional Teochew opera costumes, there are also some elements bearing characteristics from other cultures incorporated. These include the appearance of the tree demon in “The Haunted Temple” bears Malay characteristic with scattered hair and long golden nails; the golden deer costume in “Ramayana” are influenced by ballet costumes and carry foreign and exotic characteristics. In addition, there are also actors who are not of Teochew ethnicity participating in the performances, which reflects the status of Singapore’s ethnic integration.

In conclusion, opera creators are easily influenced by the unique living environment of Singapore where different ethnic groups stay together. Such adaptations and creative conceptions come firstly from this unique living environment, and secondly to push the promotion of Chinese culture and the promotion of racial harmony by expanding the reach of Chinese operas to other groups, including other races. Moreover, operas created under this influence are more likely to resonate with locals. In addition, the reason for the adaptation of fairy tales is also to attract younger audiences and cultivate people to appreciate Chinese operas. Some of the Teochew operas of this period also include Huangmei opera and the Taiwanese opera, especially the opera works created by



Ramayana

Chua Soo Pong, such as “Mouse Daughter’s Marriage” and “Ramayana”. Part of the reason for this is due to the “limited resources, making it impossible to invest a million dollars to produce large-scale operas or a pure Teochew opera, Huangmei opera and Yue opera”. In addition, “as overseas Chinese are scattered and living in different countries and regions with different tangible culture and cultural ecology, they have experienced acculturation or assimilation.” This situation is also exactly where the characteristics of Singapore lie: different dialect groups and different ethnic groups interact and integrate with each other culturally. During this period, the Singapore Teochew opera was shouldering the heavy responsibility of spreading traditional Chinese culture. It is also because of this opportunity that the Teochew opera once again had a valuable opportunity for development. Due to the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of Singapore’s society, Teochew opera has focused on these aspects to achieve better results. Not only did it take the diverse audience as a starting point, it also integrated diverse cultures into its content. These innovative operas have achieved good results.

In summary, Teochew opera in Singapore is not just an art, but plays a richer role with the development of the times. From being a cultural identity tool in the early days to the status of being a medium for the promotion of Chinese culture, its reforms and developments in different periods reflected the cultural environment of the society at that time. However, these reforms that began in the 1990s do not seem to be the atmosphere of the entire “Teochew Opera Circle” in Singapore. The above reforms are basically the creations of Dr. Chua Soo Pong. However, whether such reforms can really become a new development of Singapore Teochew opera by taking the opportunity to use Teochew opera as a medium to spread Chinese culture would still need to stand the test of time. It is undeniable that the audience of this traditional art form is shrinking. It is still an art as to how to attract audiences and how to add vitality to Teochew opera. This should also be the problem Singapore Chinese operas face and needs to solve.

• A new life for Singapore Teochew opera

The Singapore Teochew opera has evolved from being the spiritual sustenance of past immigrants to a form of local entertainment and culture. With the constant influence of local artists and local elements, this ancient culture from China has developed into local culture over time and has become the foundation of the development of Teochew opera in Singapore. Nowadays, with the support of the government, exciting Teochew opera performances and other traditional art forms are now played in communities, schools and groups. On the international front, Singapore Teochew opera and related Teochew opera troupes have also gained a certain reputation. More importantly, we are constantly seeing new and young faces appear on the stage of traditional cultural performances. We believe that with these foundations, Singapore Teochew opera will certainly be able to breathe new life into the construction, deepening and development of local culture and in the inheritance of traditional culture. So long as the music never stops, the future can be boundless!



Children from the Teochew opera classes

A new look for Singapore Teochew opera - Nam Hwa Opera Limited

55 years of history has nourished the extraordinary style of Teochew opera for Nam Hwa, and it has grown into one with strong vitality to lead all its members to a longer and farther path of Teochew opera. Nam Hwa's Artistic Consultant, Mr. Chan Kok Hua, said: "The 55 years of history of the development of the Nam Hwa is longer than that of the independence of our country. The country is now stable, and Teochew opera as representative of ethnic culture should set its foot on stage with a new look, injecting vitality and showing new life, continue to cultivate new talents and innovate in art. These are all practical and necessary. In addition, Mr. Ang Chin Koon, director of Nam Hwa, believes that "in the local dialect community, there are only a few opera troupes formed by people of Teochew descent. There are even fewer large-scale and widely supported groups. Nam Hwa is unique as it is recognised by the public and the government."

It has been four years since the transformation of Nam Hwa. With the support of the capable and motivated directors, the Teochew opera industry in Singapore is now more active and vibrant than ever before. At the 54th anniversary celebration dinner, Nam Hwa first set the record of the greatest number of people reciting Teochew nursery rhymes in Singapore. Nam Hwa was also invited to the Istana to perform the Teochew opera "Mu Gui Yin's Marriage Proposal" in 2018, which was well-loved by the audience. Be it the significant results in performances or the promotion of Teochew opera culture, Nam Hwa's ambitions are evident.

50 of 55 Keywords: Entering the Istana

The first time Nam Hwa performed Teochew opera in the Istana

Nam Hwa performed the Teochew opera "Mu Gui Yin's Marriage Proposal" at the Istana on 27th February 2018 on invitation. Guests include the first female President, Her Excellency Halimah Yacob, and the senior citizens from the beneficiaries of the "President's Challenge". The beneficiaries invited from this "President's Challenge" are the seniors from Fei Yue Senior Activity Centre.



President Halimah Yacob with Nam Hwa Opera at the Istana



President Halimah Yacob with Nam Hwa Opera performers

51 of 55 Keywords: “Singapore Book of Records”

Nam Hwa enters the “Singapore Book of Records”

At the 54th anniversary celebration dinner held by Nam Hwa at the Singapore Expo on 19th October 2017, guests, performers, directors and staff of Nam Hwa recited Teochew nursery rhymes together and set the record for the greatest number of people reciting Teochew nursery rhymes together in Singapore. Record, and left its name in the “Singapore Book of Records”. Nam Hwa hopes that this record can increase children and people’s interest in traditional Teochew culture and to inherit this precious culture and spirit.



Nam Hwa Opera enters the Singapore Book of Records



Nam Hwa Opera Board receiving the Singapore Book of Records award

Establishing the new image of Nam Hwa’s brand of Teochew opera

Ang Chin Koon, Chairman of Nam Hwa’s 55th anniversary celebration committee, said, “we have also refurbished our website and launched a new logo, giving a brand-new image and new vitality to Nam Hwa. Along with the finale of the celebration series, the Teochew opera “The Severing Sword” in March next year. I can feel the spirit of succession and innovation of Nam Hwa fully and am proud of it!”

To allow Nam Hwa to last in the history of Singapore Teochew opera, Nam Hwa actively establish the new image of its brand of Teochew opera and has therefore launched a series of re-brand work, such as logo design, re-making of the website, making good use of online media, and performing novel and interesting original operas such as “Voyage to Nanyang” and “The Severing Sword”. These are systematic and planned brand image project. The purpose of these projects is only to attract more Singaporeans to return to the world of Teochew opera once again, and to busk in this beautiful and elegant Teochew tunes.

52 of 55 Keywords: “Voyage to Nanyang”

Nam Hwa first original opera with local characteristics

“Voyage to Nanyang” is written by the famous Chinese veteran screenwriter Shen Xiangqu and composed by Zhang Zhenning. This opera tells the story of multiple ethnic races in Singapore living in harmony; the truth, compassion and beauty of citizens helping

each other, the local food culture, and the warm story of three generations living under one roof. Nam Hwa pays tribute to the selfless contribution of the founding generation of Singapore with this opera.



Samsui women appearing in Teochew opera



“Voyage to Nanyang” - a modernistic play written and performed by Nam Hwa Opera

53 of 55 Keywords: “The Severing Sword”

Nam Hwa first martial arts Teochew opera adaptation

The martial arts Teochew opera adaptation “The Severing Sword” is the grand finale of the series of activities celebrating the 55th anniversary of Nam Hwa. This story is adapted from “The Return of the Sword” by the famous martial arts novelist Liang Yusheng, and the script is written by the talented Chinese screenwriter Huang Jianfeng. Nam Hwa also took the opportunity to invite the famous Singapore theatre practitioner Mr. Goh Boon Teck as the director. This is the first time Nam Hwa has invited the director of Singapore Chinese theatre to direct the performance of Teochew opera. Many high-tech special effects technologies were boldly used in this opera. There were also breakthroughs in character modelling, stage design, costumes and makeup. This is an unconventional attempt by Nam Hwa to attract more young audiences to come to the theatre to enjoy Teochew opera.



Nam Hwa Artistic Director Lee Mooi Ching plays the lead in the production



“The Severing Sword” - a Nam Hwa film production

Nam Hwa Anthem – Song of Nam Hwa

55 years of ups and downs has tempered the unique characteristics of Teochew opera in Nam Hwa. Now, Nam Hwa hopes to look back on this precious 55 years with a brand-new look. Therefore, Director Wu Dianxiang was specially invited to write Nam Hwa's anthem - "Song of Nam Hwa". The lyrics of "Song of Nam Hwa" are elegant and beautiful and speaks of the difficulties and challenges Nam Hwa faced all this while at length. This song carries the hopes that Nam Hwa will perform continuously better in this path of Teochew opera.

"Song of Nam Hwa"

by Wu Dianxiang

Flowers of the Southern Country reflects on the Lion City

The old Chinese musical instruments play new sounds

Confucian classics prosper, good shows produced one after the other

Elegant songs flutter, exotic colours presented one after the other

The refreshing Teochew tunes gained through a thousand trials

The garden of arts perfected in unity through a hundred tribulations

The path to extraordinariness is under our feet

Success will be achieved through teamwork

Oh Nam Hwa, Nam Hwa

A thousand deep feelings laid

Ages of bold and inhibited feelings

54 of 55 Keywords: "Song of Nam Hwa"

Nam Hwa's anthem

Renowned director Wu Dianxiang wrote a song for Nam Hwa during its 50th anniversary celebration entitled "Flowers Bloom for You" that received many praises and admiration. That is why it was suggested to invite Director Wu to write another song for Nam Hwa for its 55th anniversary in 2018. After receiving the invitation from President Toh Lim Mok, Director Wu Dianxiang agreed immediately and composed the "Song of Nam Hwa" for Nam Hwa. You may not know, but Director Wu also subtly turned his congratulations and praises on Nam Hwa into an "acrostic poem" by burying his sincere hopes and blessings to Nam Hwa in the first words of each line.

Name officially changed to "Nam Hwa Opera"

At the time of the founding of Nam Hwa, most of the amateur Teochew opera troupes used to call themselves using the Chinese words "*ru ju she*" or "*ru yue she*", which means "graceful and elegant amateur opera organisation". Nam Hwa used the name of "Nam Hwa *Ru Ju She*" (Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association) to attract many Singaporeans who love the Teochew opera to join the amateur Teochew opera group as a form of pleasure. However, as time passes, most Singaporeans no longer understand the meaning of *ru ju she*. Over time, it formed a generation barrier that prevents young people from getting close. To keep up with times and align with the image of Nam Hwa as a professional Teochew opera group, Nam Hwa changed its Chinese name to "Nam Hwa *Chao Ju She*" (Nam Hwa Teochew Opera Society) in September 2018 to attract more Singaporeans to understand the art of Teochew Opera.

Although we bid farewell to the past “*ru ju she*” and changed our name to “*Nam Hwa Chao Ju She*”, the brand-new image is not contrary to the spirit of the original Nam Hwa Teochew opera. It is only given wings, taking Singapore Teochew opera with it and soaring proudly across the world with new vitality. Despite flying farther and farther away, Nam Hwa is still the Teochew opera group of Singapore’s “Nanyang Chinese”. In addition to upholding the spirit of the historic Teochew opera art, a different look to Teochew opera will also be brought to everyone.

55 of 55 Keywords: Nam Hwa *Chao Ju She*

Nam Hwa changing its name to “*Nam Hwa Chao Ju She*”

Nam Hwa decided to rename “*Nam Hwa Ru Ju She*” to “*Nam Hwa Chao Ju She*” to keep up with times on the 55th anniversary of its founding. Its main purpose is to establish the brand image of Nam Hwa’s Teochew opera as more people-oriented and hopes to present a professional Teochew opera troupe to Singaporeans. In November 2018, Nam Hwa officially appeared in the name of “*Nam Hwa Chao Ju She*”, and the new logo was unveiled as well, bringing a refreshing image of Nam Hwa to everyone.

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Viewpoints

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Brief Discussion on Teochew Music Records in Late-Qing¹

Associate Professor Yung Sai-shing

Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore

American scientist Thomas Edison (1847-1931) invented the phonograph in 1877, creating a new era of recording technology. Ten years later, the gramophone was introduced and recording technology entered a new era, and the Western record industry began to sprout. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Western multinational record companies have begun to produce Chinese opera records. According to Wu Xiaoru, an opera expert, the gramophones and opera recordings were already introduced to China in the middle of the Qing dynasty. The foreign gramophone companies that produced Peking Opera records at that time were: J.Ullmann&Co; Colombia; Old Becker (after 1929, German merchants re-used this brand and translated it to Becker); Li Wei (the later Odeon); S Moutrie & Company; Victor.² During the same period, the above-mentioned record companies began to produce opera records of different types of local operas. Cantonese opera and Teochew opera were frequently recorded, and they were especially favoured by the European and American gramophone record companies at that time as they were probably targeting the overseas Chinese market. In recent years, the author's research has focused on the Hong Kong operas of the late Qing Dynasty and the social and cultural history of Cantonese opera records. During the process of sorting out the historical materials, I had the opportunity to read the relevant literature on the production activities of the above-mentioned record companies in the Southern China region in the early 20th century. Let us discuss the bits and pieces of the late-Qing Teochew opera records with several original materials in brief.

The Moutrie Company took out an advertisement in the 7th issue of the Hong Kong literature magazine "World of Guangdong Stories" published in the 32nd year of the Guangxu era (CE 1906). Located at Hong Kong Central's "Big Clock Tower", this English-financed company not only sells western musical instruments such as the piano, it is also the reseller of the English Gramophone Company's opera records, including:

Gramophone mark:

Yellow Label; Silver Label; Green Label: Peking, Shenxi and Other Styles

Blue Label: Cantonese Style

Blue Lotus Label; Egg White Label: Teochew and Amoy Styles

Navy Blue Label; Flying Angel mark: Peking and Shenxi Styles³

"Yellow Label, Silver Label, Green Label" refers to the colour of the "label". "Mark" is the Cantonese pronunciation and refers to the English word "trademark". The "Gramophone mark" and "Flying Angel mark" should be the two trademarks of the Gramophone company, "His Master's Voice" and "Flying Angel". The advertisement stressed that "did not hesitate to hire the top troupes from the Capital, Guangdong, Shantou and Xiamen, and sang a new set of records. The sound is ten times louder and the quality is stronger." It is unclear whether this was advertisement speech, or it accurately reflected the actual recording activities by Moutrie. If it were true, then this English-financed company (or its related Gramophone Company) would have also participated in the recording of Teochew opera records before 1906.⁴ The Singapore Straits Times also published the "Zhen Chang Hao" company's advertisement on 1 December of the same year, advertising the sale of "Teochew opera song" and "Cantonese opera song" records. Singapore and Hong Kong have close business contacts. It is uncertain whether these are the same batch of opera records of Hong Kong's Moutrie. However, it is certain is that with the advent of the gramophone industry, Teochew opera records have been sold in Hong Kong and Singapore in 1906 at the latest.

"Zhen Chang Hao" and "Chao Chang Hao" are the main shops selling local opera recordings in Singapore. On 8 August 1908, "Zhen Chang Hao" advertised in the Union Times the "double-sided Teochew records" they were selling, such as: "The Return of Emperor Wen", "Chen San having a love sick" and "The Cry of Emperor Qi". Other than opera records, "Zhen Chang Hao" also sell watches and clocks, spectacles and flat needles, appearing to a high-end imported goods

shop that sells “modern” western goods. On the other hand, “Chao Chang Hao” advertised its “newly arrived gramophone made by a top master. Double-sided recording of Lau Jit Kee Hiang’s songs, original mechanical machinery and mechanical needle, complete with all types of recordings”. Other than the Teochew opera (then known as Teochew-hee or Teochew Dialectal Opera) recordings loved by the general public, “Chao Chang Hao” also sells the so-called *wai jiang xi* (now known as “Guangdong Han opera”) recordings. (Union Times, 19 August 1908) Wang Dinggao said in the “*鳄渚摭谭*” that, “There are four types of operas that belong to Teochew and are called troupes, they are *zhengyin*, *baizi*, *xiqin* and *waijiang*. *Zhengyin* is similar to Kun opera and has the longest history while *baizi* are performed by children and sang in dialects”. The 1902 Lingdong Daily stated that, “Teochew operas were divided into *wai jiang* and Teochew. Other than the 4 major troupes, there are few others. Teochew opera troupes were growing daily, numbering almost more than 200 troupes.” During this period, *wai jiang xi* was gradually overwhelmed by Teochew opera troupes that sang in dialect even though it still had the support of the rich merchants and literati of Teochew descent. The Singapore “Chao Chang Hao” had sold the records of the *wai jiang* troupe, Le Rong Tian.

German-financed company, Beka Record G.m.b.H, was another company that recorded and produced Teochew opera records in late-Qing. Heinrich Bumb, an important member of Beka Record, left Berlin, Germany to embark on a global “recording expedition”. The recording team took the train and passed Vienna, Austria and Budapest, Hungary before arriving at its first recording stop, Constantinople (now known as Istanbul). After recording Turkish music, he took a boat and arrived at the Port of Alexandria in Egypt. After completion of the recording of Arabic music in Cairo, he took a boat and passed through the Suez and Red Sea and reached Bombay and Calcutta, India. On 18 February 1906, Bumb and his team arrived in Hong Kong via Singapore. He witnessed the flourishing records market in Hong Kong and the strong American competition:

The American record companies have occupied most of the market in Hong Kong. Columbia Graphophone Company has just completed its latest recording recently. It is said that they paid a total of USD50,000 to record 1000 operas. Victor, Grammophon, Zonophon-Records and Odeon have local agencies.⁵

Beka Record used Hong Kong as its base for recording after their arrival to record Cantonese and Teochew operas in the Guangdong province. They set up a temporary recording studio on the second floor of a building (an opium den was on the floor below) and invited local actors and musicians to record Cantonese music recordings. In addition, they hired an opera troupe from Shantou to come to Hong Kong for its recording project. They worked from 9 in the morning till 4 in the evening every day. The Teochew opera troupe used 4 days to complete its recording and the recording of the Cantonese music took 10 days.⁶ Thereafter, Bumb went to Shanghai and Japan to continue his long “recording expedition”. He took a boat and returned to Berlin in July.

Three months later (November 1906), a large Beka Record advertisement was published in the New York “Talking Machine World” magazine. It showed that Beka Record was headquartered in Berlin with its branch in London. Together, they claim to be the sole agency for “Great Britain and its Colonies” (including Hong Kong, Malaysia and India) and emphasised that the music records they produce were “cheap, good and renowned”. The geographical scope and categories of the records by Beka Record can be seen from this advertisement, and it encompasses European countries such as Germany, France, England, Portugal, Italy, Austria, Hungary, Holland and Russia and Asian countries such as China, India and Malaysia. Under the column China, it can be further divided into six categories: Swatow, Guakau, Pekinese, Shansinese, Kiangnanese and Cantonese. The abovementioned Chinese opera records include both Teochew opera and *wai jiang xi* and these should be the results of Bumb’s “recording expedition”.

In the global business network of multinational record companies, Hong Kong is the southern gateway to the Chinese record market. Record companies in various countries not only set up branches in Hong Kong, but also use Hong Kong as a base for recording Chinese opera records. Bumb said that “American record companies occupied most of the market in Hong Kong” and one of their main competitors was the Columbia Phonograph Company. The advertisement of “Chao Chang Hao” in the “Union Times” mentioned that they sold “Dragon Label Teochew Music” records. The so-called “Dragon Label” should refer to the trademark of Columbia Phonograph Company. The Talking Machine World published in December 1910 reported on the recording activities of Columbia in China: Guangfu, Chaoshan and Minnan opera music records are the focus of production for this American company;

the company has set up a recording centre in Hong Kong and sent sound engineers and staff went to Guangzhou, Chaoshan and Xiamen to record Teochew and Min opera songs. An important market for these records is the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Therefore, the “Dragon Label Records” from the Columbia Phonograph Company can be bought from “Chao Chang Hao” in Singapore.

Before the end of the full text, part of the Teochew opera records sold by the Singapore “Zhen Chang Hao” in 1909 is appended to aid in the explanation of the popular Teochew operas in the late-Qing Dynasty. These are: “Hong Niang Qing Yan”, “Peng Yuan Qiu Shou”, “Gou Huan Guo Guan”, “The Cry Of Emperor Qi”, “The Return of Emperor Wen”, “Chen Shi Mei”, “Chasing The Boat”, “Meeting Of Xue Ren Gui”, “Lan Fan Cao”, “Zhu Gan Ji”, “Second Lady Mo”, “The Farewell” and “The Red Book Sword”. (Union Times, 27 January 1909)

(translated from Chinese)

Note:

- 1 I am deeply appreciative of Mr. Su Zhangkai for inviting me to pen this article, chasing after me for submission and the discussion we had, and to Mr Wu Song Wei of the Department of Chinese, National University of Singapore in providing the early 20th century advertisement materials in the Union Times and Straits Times.
- 2 Wu Xiaoru, *On Old Peking Opera Records*, *Wu Xiaoru Opera Catalogue* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1995), p785.
- 3 Huang Boyao and Huang Shizhong, *Chinese and Foreign Novels* (Hong Kong: Xia Fei'er International Publishing Company, 2000), p168-169.
- 4 I personally visited the National Sound Archive in England and checked the EMI Archive. However, I am unable to find any archive records of “Moutrie” and “Gramophone Company” recording Teochew opera records. This may require further research.
- 5 “The Great Beka ‘Expedition’ 1905-6”, *The Talking Machine Review*, 41 (August, 1976): 729-731. Original text is published on *Der Phonographische Zeitschrift* in 1906.
- 6 Same as above, p732.

Teochew Opera in Singapore: Continuity and Challenges

Dr. Chua Soo Pong

Teochew opera, a regional opera form in Southeastern China, has a long history of over 500 years. Evolved as a genre with distinctive characteristics in the mid-Ming Dynasty, Teochew opera has a repertoire that can be traced to the classics of the Nan Xi, Southern drama, a regional opera that was popular from the 1230s to 1460s in Southern China.

As a regional form integrated with local music and folk arts traditions, Teochew opera was a popular art form among the Teochew speaking population in Southeastern Guangdong province by the 15th century.

Like other cultural practices of the immigrants, Teochew opera travelled with our ancestors to Singapore at the turn of the last century. At that time, Singapore was the biggest port in Southeast Asia. According to the survey conducted in 1881, 26.1% of the total 84,484 Chinese immigrants were Teochew.

Visit of the first Teochew opera troupe from China

In the late 19th century, there were already theatres built in the Chinatown area. Scattered along Temple Street, Sago Lane, New Market Road and Eu Tong Sen Road, these venues were centres of entertainment. Some were homes of Cantonese opera, Beijing opera or Hokkien opera while Yi Yuan at Merchant Road and Zhe Yuan at New Market Road were theatres specialising in Teochew opera. It is believed that the first group that came to Singapore was *Lao Sai Yong Feng*, a big group that had over 100 members. By the 1910s, there were about a dozen troupes performing in Singapore. These included *Lao Yi Tian Xiang*, *Lao Yi Zhi Xiang*, *Lao Yuan He Xing*, *Lao Zheng Tian Xiang* and *Lao Sai Bao Feng*. Some of these groups travelled here for a season or two while others came regularly. There were also some groups that settled here. The only group that has survived all these years is *Lao Sai Tao Yuan*.

The Teochew community was the second largest and a very influential dialect group of the Chinese community in Singapore. Engaged mainly in businesses dealing with gambier, pepper and rubber plantations, rice milling, pineapple canning, saw-milling and

fish distribution, the Teochew's growing success in business led to the formation of the first business association, the Ngee Ann Kongsi in 1845.

The first Chinese newspaper, called *Lat Pau*, was launched in 1881. This was an indication that there was a growing number of literate Chinese in Singapore. Although many were illiterate, the immigrants valued education and understood the importance of learning. By the beginning of the early 20th century, there were over 70 Chinese schools and English medium schools in Singapore. The first Teochew medium school, Tuan Mong was set up in 1906 at Tank Road.

In 1903, Singapore became the seventh biggest port in tonnage of shipping in the world. By 1911, Chinese inhabitants increased to 185,000 and accounted for 75% of the total population. A year later, the Er Woo Amateur and Musical Association was formed. Like music and cultural groups of immigrant societies elsewhere, the Teochew businessmen who founded Er Woo gathered and engaged in a cultural expression that they were familiar with.

The founders were Teochew businessmen who were particularly interested in *waijiang xi* and *waijiang* music. This genre came from northern China and was transmitted to Anhui, Hubei, and Jiangxi. The artistes of this northern art form were brought to Guangdong by official businessmen during the late period of Emperor Qianlong's rule. The genre was transmitted to the Chaoshan area, southeastern part of the Guangdong province in China later. By the end of the 19th century, playing *waijiang* music and performing *waijiang xi* became activities greatly enjoyed by the Teochew literati and businessmen in Chaoshan and Singapore. One of the businessmen Chen Zi Li, frequently gathered his friends to play *waijiang* music and decided to turn the informal group into a registered society in 1912, and thus the Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association was formed.

Waijiang music and *waijiang xi* players of the Teochew community in Singapore

The declared objectives of Er Woo were promoting *waijiang* music and wholesome cultural activities as well as contributing to social

welfare. Due to constraints in resources, the association's activities were limited to a small musical ensemble and singing instead of staging opera. There were also attempts to study the music more systematically. Small as it was, the musical ensemble soon made a name for itself as it participated in several charity performances to raise funds for victims of flood or earthquake in England and China, in 1917, 1918 and 1922.

The pioneers in Er Woo, however, were not satisfied with singing and playing *waijiang* music of the *waijiang xi* for long. In 1925, they managed to engage several masters from China to train their members to prepare for their first stage performance. After months of preparation, 10 excerpts of *waijiang* opera were finally presented over three nights at a private club called He Feng Yuan. The response was overwhelming and ignited the fire of enthusiasm.

In 1931 a new group called Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association was formed by Tan Kee Char and friends. The Association rented the third floor of a shophouse on Carpenter Street, with the 20 founding members contributing three dollars a month. Thau Yong was not formed by successful merchants but by *waijiang xi* lovers of relatively modest means. Lack of adequate facilities however, did not diminish their enthusiasm of getting together for practices. News of their regular singing sessions spread fast and in less than a year's time, its membership increased to over 50. By the time Thau Yong moved to another house on the same street, it had more than 80 active members. The new elected Chairman was Mr Ng Buan Song. This new leadership was keen to stage a performance at the Great World Amusement Park. Many leading members donated their salaries for the production cost. In November 1935 Thau Yong made its debut, featuring over 10 excerpts of *waijiang xi* in three nights for enthusiastic audiences.

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, Er Woo staged many more charity shows with the help of masters from China. In 1936, a charity show was organized for the poor students of the Shantou Polytechnic, and a year later, when the Japanese invaded China, a special show was presented to collect money to help the wounded soldiers and refugees in the northeastern province of China.

One must also note that Er Woo was not alone in its cultural pursuit. Its contemporary, the Singapore Amateur Vernacular Drama Society, in the same period, staged many plays. Some of them, such as 'Military Hospital' and 'Acrobatic Feats' by Ye Ni were said to have been performed several hundred times in Singapore and Malaysia.

When news of the Japanese invasion in China reached Singapore, the Chinese staged demonstrations, organized boycotts of Japanese goods, presented charity shows to raise money (the China War Relief Fund) to help the Chinese on the mainland in their fight against invasion.

Thau Yong organized a highly successful fundraising show in mid-September, 1937, merely two months after the invasion. Shortly after, two reputable professional actors from China, Mr. Lee Kwang Kwa and Mr. Tay Song Nee, joined Thau Yong. With the devoted members, through frequent regular practices by its devoted members, the ensemble at Thau Yong was considered amongst the best in the local theatre scene. All their fundraising performances in the following years drew large crowds, especially the one held in October 1941 at the Happy World Amusement Park, for the local invasion resistance China Relief Fund. However, when the Japanese soldiers set foot in Singapore in 1942 all cultural activities ceased for three years.

Er Woo joined many cultural organizations in raising funds to assist the resistance movement in China and the United Kingdom. Its active involvement in the social activities before the Second World War was in line with similar cultural organizations at that time and for that reason, the fear of being victimized by the Japanese led to the decision by Er Woo leaders to destroy almost all the archival materials before the invaders occupied Singapore in 1941. It was indeed a great loss of a part of valuable materials and Singaporean Teochew culture. On the contrary, Thau Yong kept a large number of *waijiang* scripts and musical scores, and it still has an ensemble that plays *waijiang* music today.

However, it is not known if the 40 odd *waijiang* operas played by Er Woo and recorded by German Company between 1928 and 1935 were all lost too. There were as many as one hundred active members involved in productions during the peak of *waijiang* opera in Singapore. For example, its charity show for the relief fund for the Teochew county in China for the war was able to raise around \$43,000 from the show.

When the war was over, Er Woo, like many others, took a while before activities resumed. China, apart from having suffered from the devastating war, was plagued by flood and famine. Responding to the situation, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan, the recognized leading organization for all Teochew clan associations, organized a joint performance of *Waijiang* opera evening by four Teochew cultural organizations: Er Woo, Thau Yong, Lak Aik and Chenh Hua. Throughout the post war years until Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent country in 1965, Er Woo and Thau Yong continued to

present *waijiang xi* almost annually. These included the memorable performance for the opening ceremony of Nanyang University's new self-governed status in 1959 and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's inauguration show for its new building at Hill Street in 1964.

A milestone in the 1950s

A farsighted entrepreneur with an artiste's vision established an influential organisation and organised a historic event in the Teochew opera history in Singapore in 1954. That person is Yeoh Liew Kung, the lead musician of the then famous *Sin Yong Hua Heng* Teochew opera troupe. The organisation was called the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union. Yeoh was a much respected figure and under his leadership, the union was able to attract 313 members from the seven Teochew street opera troupes in Singapore at that time.

During the colonial days, the people of Malaya and Singapore always considered themselves as belonging to the same political entity. The street opera troupes presented their shows in Malaya and Singapore, crossing the causeway freely.

Bringing together members of the competing troupes under one roof was no small feat. It was possible because they believed that they would be better off with a union which could help look after their welfare and represent them in settling disputes with their employers whenever the need arose.

Most impressive of all, was the joint performance "The Jade Dragon", launched at the beginning of 1957, under the directorship of the much-respected director, teacher and playwright, Lin Ru Lie. As it was the first time in the Teochew opera history in Singapore that the stars of the different troupes appeared in a single production, tickets sold like hot cakes despite the steep price of \$5 & \$10. The Union managed to raise nearly \$20,000 from the milestone production and used the money to buy a two storey shophouse at 135 Rangoon Road. The premises were inherited by the Teochew Drama Association in 1984. The Union helped to obtain several benefits for its members. For example, the troupes' performance hours were shortened. No longer did they have to perform the morning shows. New show times for matinee performances started at 1.00 p.m. and ended at 5.00 p.m., while the evening shows started at 7.30 p.m. and ended at midnight. Wages were increased and since then,

27th and 28th of December has been a holiday for opera artistes. For the next few decades, the Union served as a club for the members to meet and to spend their leisure time together. The Union also helped some retirees with their travel costs to return to China, the country of their birth.

Influence of Teochew opera movies in the late 50s and the birth of Nam Hwa

External influences on the arts in Singapore had a strong effect as shown in the Teochew opera movies from China: *Fire at the Riverside Pavilion*, *Su Liu Niang*, *Chen San and Wu Niang*, *Liu Ming Zhu*, and *Prosecuting the Husband*. These movies shown in 1959 and the early 60s, featured the most well-established stars in China. They provided Singapore opera fans with new ideas of packing a complete story in two hours with elegantly written lyrics, heightened dramatic tensions and composition and instrumentation that paralleled the development of the plot and portrayal of characters with strong musical elements.

This is in contrast to the loose structure of traditional street opera, which had only an outline of stories. Called "*Mu Biao Xi*", the leader of the group briefed the members with a table listing the content of each scene, leaving it to the performers to fill in the details. These movies were products of years of continuous efforts in improving the quality of opera productions. The Ministry of Culture of the beginning of the People's Republic of China, set up its Opera Reform Bureau in November 1949, one month after the Government was formed. In less than a decade, many state-funded training institutes and professional troupes were formed. Festivals and seminars were organised to promote the art form. By the mid-50s, China had started to produce opera movies. Yue opera movie like 'The Butterfly Lovers' and Beijing Opera movie 'Women Generals of the Yang Family' and many other opera movies as well as the above-mentioned Teochew operas packed the cinemas for months.

Local groups, both amateur and professional, were inspired to upgrade the performers' skills, to rehearse with scripts and to make new and realistic sets they saw in the cinema. In no time, every group was performing the stage version of Teochew opera movies "*Su Liu Niang*", "*Chen San Wu Niang*" and "*Prosecuting the Husband*". Audiences flocked to the performances of different groups to compare quality of productions. This informal competition, together with television

recording of performances of local Teochew opera groups, contributed to the popularity of Teochew opera in the early 60s. It was in this context that Thau Yong staged 'Su Liu Niang', the Teochew opera rather than its usual *Waijiang* opera, in 1962 for its 31st anniversary celebration at the Victoria Theatre. Thau Yong's debut of Teochew opera was a great success. It also marked the beginning of its gradual shift from Wai Jiang opera to Teochew opera. The overwhelming response to their performances of three to four nights at the 900-seat Victoria Theatre often meant that many fans had to be turned away and they were greatly disappointed. Thus in 1965, Thau Yong decided to move to the 3000-seat National Theatre for its double bill: Wai Jiang opera 'Marching to Southern Tang' and Teochew opera 'Liu Ming Zhu'. To their delighted surprise, the house was packed for both nights. By 1968, Thau Yong had to stage three performances at the National Theatre to cater for the growing size of the supportive audience. In that year, their show 'The Eight Immortals' was also recorded and telecast at the local television.

In 1966, Er Woo decided to switch to Teochew opera and its first production was 'The Magic Lantern', a popular legend about a Goddess who falls in love with a mortal. The following years, 'The Magic Lotus' staged by Er Woo was recorded by the Radio Television Singapore (RTS), and in the following few years, the 'Tale of White Rabbit' (1968), 'Wang Zuo Chopping Off His Own Arm' (1969), 'Zhu Yu Lian' (1971) and 'The Case of A Love Letter' (1972), were also recorded. In fact, between 1964 and 1972, a total of 46 Teochew opera productions by the amateur and street opera troupes were televised. The series helped to promote traditional theatre.

The Teochew opera movies from China also inspired the residents around Jurong Kecil to gather at a small clan association by the name of Huang Shi Chi Chang Association to learn the opera Su Liu Niang. The opera lovers learned everything by themselves without any teacher. They watched the movie and listened to the opera broadcasted by the radio and Rediffusion, a company which pioneered cable radio in Singapore, repeatedly, and then staged the opera. The self-taught experience was similar to the secondary school students of the Chinese schools and arts groups in those days. They repeatedly watched the dance movies from China and learned the dance by remembering the steps and floor patterns of the dances and staged them in their variety shows. The success of these enthusiasts encouraged them to register a formal group and it was called Nam Hwa Amateur Drama Group. In 1963, Nam Hwa

staged its inaugural performance at the Broadway Stage of the New World Amusement Park and drew a great number of supporters. Nam Hwa the new comer of the opera scene, staged excerpts of the classics at the 3300 seated National Theatre in 1965 and produced large scale full length operas at the National Theatre from 1967 until 1983. Thereafter, Nam Hwa staged its annual show at the 1800 seat Kallang Theatre, 1200 seat Golden Theatre and the 1100 seat Kreta Ayer People's Theatre. In 2008, Nam Hwa staged a grand scale new opera entitled "A Mother's Woes" at the 1800 seat Esplanade Theatre.

Cultural Revolution and the Hong Kong movies

However, the Chinese opera boom created by the opera movies from China came to an abrupt end when the Cultural Revolution broke out in the summer of 1966. For the next ten years, traditional Chinese operas were banned in China. Seventy per cent of the five thousand professional groups in China were disbanded and the remaining groups were instructed to perform eight approved 'Model Dramas'. Although film versions of these revolutionary operas were produced, their political content made it impossible for them to be granted permission to be shown in Singapore and neighbouring countries.

Filling the gap was the filming of local opera groups' performances by Television Singapura, and the many Hong Kong made Teochew opera movies throughout the 60s. The making of these television programmes greatly encouraged the street and amateur opera groups while the Hong Kong movies nurtured a new generation of Teochew opera audience. Stars like Chen Chu Hui, Zhuang Xue Juan and Fang Qiao Yu became household names.

Some of these movies are based on folk tales, adapted from Ming dynasty literature, ghost stories, others from court dramas or rewritten scripts from other opera genres. The audience enjoyed the familiarity of the traditional melodies, poetic lyrics and the cultural value the movies articulated. The visits of professional Teochew opera groups from Hong Kong, notably the Xin Tian Cai Teochew Opera Troupe and the Xiang Jiang Troupes were the most popular. The former performed at the Happy World Stadium while the latter performed at the New World Amusement Park.

In 1974, the Xin Tian Cai Teochew Opera Troupe made its third visit with equal success. Its superstar, the famous male impersonator, king

of xiaosheng, Chen Chu Hui who played many lead roles in the Hong Kong movies was the centre of attention. For four months, the troupe performed nightly at Broadway Theatre of the New World Amusement Park.

The 70s was also a period of rapid urbanization and industrialization in Singapore. Changes in the lifestyle of the people meant changes in their choice of entertainment. With the expansion of housing estates and stricter rules imposed by the Public Entertainment Section of the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Environment, hawkers were gradually phased out due to considerations of hygiene. But removing the food component of the Chinese opera performance proved to be disastrous as it eliminated an attractive component that is so important for the food-loving Singaporean audience and it diluted the fun of such social functions considerably.

Due to the changes in social and political structure, education policies and closure of Chinese stream schools, the young generation was now unfamiliar with the cultural traditions and practices and thus found Chinese opera an alien art form. The street opera audience then suffered a steadily shrinking audience. Further contributing to the decline was the fact that theatre guilds and temples which previously engaged Chinese opera for their religious functions switched to the *ge tai* for the same festivals. The Ministry for Culture, then headed by former President Ong Teng Cheong, began a series of programmes promoting Chinese opera. First, the Annual Drama Festival featuring drama groups from all language streams, including Chinese opera, was launched in 1977. The year after, the Chinese Opera at Hong Lim Park series was launched with the support of the Singapore Tourism Board.

Opera at Hong Lim Park

The vicinity of Hong Lim Park had several Chinese opera theatres before the war. Long after these buildings were demolished, many street opera groups continued to perform there for religious functions. The choice of a venue that had historical meaning in Chinese opera went down well with opera lovers. The press reported it widely at the launch and in the next few years, several memorable productions representing the various dialect groups were seen at Hong Lim Park.

Among them was the Siong Leng Musical Association's revival of the *Gao Jia Xi*. A veteran from China, Chen Jia Bao, trained the members

of Siong Leng and directed all its shows from the mid-80s. Their performances featured several young performers that gave new hope to the once popular form, before it was replaced by gezaixi.

Er Woo's staging of 'Prosecuting the Husband' at the Hong Lim Park took the audience on a nostalgic journey as the movie version of the opera was a hit in the 60s, packing cinemas for three months.

Nam Hwa's "The Sisters Switched Marriage", a comedy adapted from a popular Chinese *Lu opera* movie won critical success too at the Hong Lim Park. From the moment the lead roles took centre stage, the audience was totally engrossed in the drama of how a father had to deal with an unreasonable daughter of a seriously stubborn disposition. The dialogues and songs between the father and daughter were often comical and made the audience burst into laughter.

The rise of amateur groups gave Chinese opera a boost as the street opera groups continued to decline. The inability of the street opera groups to attract new audiences was due to the lack of fund, poor management skills, limited resources for training, the inability to attract new talents and a lack of marketing strategies. On the other hand, amateur Teochew opera troupes were able to continue recruiting new talents and were better managed.

Visit of Teochew Opera Troupes organized by the National Theatre Trust in the 80s

From 1979, till the year it was dissolved in 1991, the National Theatre Trust (NTT) and the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre played an important role in bringing quality productions of Teochew opera from China to Singapore, keep the art form alive. The first troupe invited by the NTT was the Guangdong Teochew Academy, Shantou. The NTT chairman in the early 90s, Mr. Teo Liang Chye, recalled 'When news of the visit was announced, it spread like wild fire. On the day tickets were sold, the audience did not even know which operas would be performed as the academy in China had not confirmed the opera schedule. Nevertheless, the audience would just buy the tickets as if it did matter which show they would be watching as they were sure the Teochew operas would be of high standards.'

The visits of these groups from China ignited new enthusiasm for Teochew opera. It paved the way for the development of friendship between the leading directors, actors and musicians in China and the

Singaporean practitioners. Lin Hong Fei, Wu Dian Xiang and Lin Wen Yu, reputed for their vast experience, innovativeness and high quality of teaching, were invited to direct and train performers for Teochew Drama Association, Nam Hwa and Er Woo.

The 1990s saw intense activities by Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association, which yielded what might be regarded as a great harvest. Under the leadership of Poh Por Chiew, the President of Er Woo since 1986, the troupe moved to its current premises at Smith Street, benefitting from the National Arts Council's Arts Housing Scheme. At the new premises, Er Woo actively presented performances at local community centres, parks and other outdoor venues, shopping malls and at events commissioned by the Singapore Tourism Board. Er Woo has also made many highly successful overseas tours since then.

The first trip was made in 1991, when Er Woo was invited to participate in a government-organised Arts Festival in Kuching, Sarawak, in East Malaysia. It was the first overseas group to visit the city in years. Opera lovers who had been deprived of good shows for long time, flocked to the theatre to see the excerpts presented by Er Woo.

Two years later, Er Woo was invited to participate in the first International Teochew Opera Festival held in Shantou and presented an excerpt from 'The Butterfly Dream'. The production was rated highly by the critics and audience in Shantou. In the same year, Er Woo was also recommended by the People's Association to participate in another festival in Kagoshima. The appreciative Japanese audience greeted the excerpts Er Woo brought with great enthusiasm.

Facilitated by the Chinese Opera Institute, Er Woo brought 'Snow in Summer' with veterans Lim Siew Hong and Helen Chua as the lead performers, to the Chun Chon International Theatre Festival in 1996. The Yuan Dynasty classic is well-known among Korean theatre specialists, but it was the first time they were watching it performed as Teochew opera. In the city of Chun Chon, where it played to a packed house, the rich percussion and subtle melodies of Teochew opera conquered the audience. The role of Dou Er, a filial girl about to be executed after being wrongly accused of murder, was portrayed vividly by Lim while her distressed mother was played by Chua competently. Er Woo made its second visit to Korea, at the Pohang International Theatre Festival in 2002 where the troupe performed side by side with leading companies from Korea, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Russia and Croatia. Er Woo's double

bill: Excerpts from "The Legend of Chun Xiang", one of Korea's most popular folktale and "Reunion at the Capital City". When "The Legend of Chun Xiang" was performed, happiness was written on the faces of the Korean audience as they appreciated their well-known 'Romeo and Juliet' story presented in a foreign language. But it was Lim Siew Hong who played the male lead in the latter who won the votes of the adjudicators. She won the Best Actress Award of the Festival. 'A confident and very capable performer with vocal prowess', said Kim Chul Li, one of the judges and Director of the Korea National Theatre.

Poh Por Chiew, President of Er Woo also led the troupe to France for an International Theatre Festival in 2000 and then again in 2003 with the excerpt 'Mu Gui Ying Looking for a Groom', a light-hearted romantic opera. The French received Er Woo's polished show with equal enthusiasm. Jacques Lemaire, President of the International Amateur Theatre Association praised Er Woo's ensemble, 'Remarkable team work with outstanding lead performers!'

Poh's successor Ng Sen Ming led Er Woo twice overseas, to Masan, Korea in 2014 and a year later brought Er Woo to Bintan, Indonesia. In 2015, Er Woo's new president Ng Lee Eng led Er Woo to attend the CHINA-ASEAN Theater Week in Nanning. The performance was well received by the young audience who saw Teochew opera for the first time.

Traditional Theatre Festivals and Temple Festival of the 1990s

In 1990, the Ministry of Community Development launched a Traditional Theatre Festival that featured traditional theatre forms of all ethnic groups. Chinese opera, Malay Bangsawan and Indian Kathakali were presented. It was ended abruptly two years later by the National Arts Council, which replaced it with a short lived Asian Performing Arts Festival. The groups that performed in this Festival were the various amateur Chinese opera groups of different genres.

The professional Teochew opera groups were faced with a serious threat of closure due to declining audience, fewer performances at the temples because of competition from getai and insufficient recruitment of younger performers in the late 80s. This threat was alleviated when a temple with vision and foresight came onto the scene and invited these groups to perform in a well-managed temple festival. This is the Lorong

Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple Association located at 15 Arumugam Road since 1989. It organised a 28-day festival to celebrate the birthday of Shenghuangye (the City God). The highly successful event in the 1989 event was a big boost for the itinerant Chinese opera groups as most temples engaged groups only for three or four days. One of the key persons who initiated the Festival is Mr Tan Thiam Lye. He established the link between the temple with the ancestral temple in Anxi, Fujian Province, China. Later, similar visits were made to study the many aspects of temple management, and Taoism studies and opera schools in both mainland China and Taiwan. He was especially impressed by the role temples played in keeping the opera scene alive in Taiwan and thought that the success story could be replicated here.

The Festival grew in scale and reputation rapidly. By 1992, it became a 46-day event. Local media billed it as the most popular Chinese opera festival in town. The temple began to invite foreign Hokkien and Teochew opera companies from abroad from 1993. By the late 90s, Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple was firmly established as the premiere venue for Jiexi (street opera), a term referring to the itinerant professional Chinese opera troupes that used to perform at a temporary stage at the side of the streets. In the following two decades, the audience was fortunate to watch leading Teochew opera companies from Shantou, Yunxiao, Jieyang and Raoping and to witness the continuity and change in the style of Teochew opera in China from such groups. The Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple Association's annual festival helped a dozen Hokkien opera groups maintain their business and continue to attract a sizeable audience. Despite the support from the temple, only one Teochew opera group, Sin Ee Lye Heng, continues to participate in the temple festival this year. The other groups were not able to sustain their existence. This group is almost half a century old and performs both Teochew opera and iron stick Teochew puppet shows. It is basically a family group, which also performs at restaurants, heritage festivals and other community events.

Productions of high quality in the 90s

There are several productions in the late 90s that could be considered as milestone works of Teochew opera in Singapore: 'Princess Turandot' (1997) by Er Woo, 'The Secret of the Song Court' (1999) by Thau Yong, 'The Spirit of Artists' (1999) by Kit Yang Huay Kwan and 'Xi Shi returning to the Kingdom of Yue' (2000) by Nam Hwa.

'Princess Turandot' was staged by Er Woo to commemorate its 85th anniversary. Adapted from Puccini's opera, director Lin Yun Yu highlighted how a lonely heart was touched and the remarkable transformation of the once proud princess was highly believable.

However, inviting directors, designers and teachers from other provinces who specialized in non-Teochew opera regional genre was a new phenomenon in the second half of the 90s. The outsiders' approach, free from the Teochew opera convention, injected some refreshing new elements. One of the best examples was 'The Spirit of Artists' performed in 1999 and directed by an award-winning director from China, Xie Ping An presented by the Kit Yang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Group. While Cantonese Opera groups affiliated to clan associations have been active for decades, it was only in 1995 that Kit Yang Association set up a Teochew Opera group, the first among the Teochew Clan Association. Unfortunately, the group has now dissolved.

Likewise, Thau Yong's guest director, Yan Shi Yan, an established actor and director of Han opera from Hu Bei province, also directed three full-length operas, with clever devices and tricks that delighted the audience. In 1999, 'Secret of the Song Palace' had quick costume changes like those in Japanese Kabuki and amazed the audience. A year later, actresses in Thau Yong's production performed clever tricks like magicians in making a bunch of flowers appear from nowhere, impressing the audience. Yan's systematic training of actors also won praise. Thau Yong has since then invited other non-Teochew opera guest directors to guide their productions. Lim Soo Hiang, one of Thau Yong's veteran actor who played both martial and scholarly roles in numerous operas in Singapore and overseas, also direct some of the group's productions.

To celebrate its 90th anniversary, Er Woo invited Li Yun, residential director of the Chinese Opera Institute to direct 'Tale of Ma Zu', a story of the Goddess known to help seamen in trouble. Li, originally from An Hui province of China.

However, Teochew opera directors from China and occasionally from Thailand, continue to be invited to Singapore as their knowledge of tradition is invaluable, especially in the staging of classics. Nam Hwa Amateur Dramatic Association had for years engaged Wu Dian Xian, a wellknown director from Shantou, to coach the cast. In 2000, the best of his production: 'Xi Shi returning to the Kingdom of Yue' gave its lead

actress Lee Sze Yau the best chance to showcase her talent. In the same year she received the Young Cultural Medallion Award.

This production marked a confident experiment with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra on a score composed by Teochew opera veteran Li Ting Bo, also from Shantou. The arranger, Huang Zheng Sheng, wove traditional Teochew melodies with expressions of Chinese instrumental music smoothly. The music departed from the opera style on several occasions only to achieve specific dramatic effects.

The designer, Zhao Zhu Ming, of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Academy, filled the stage with strings of silver balls. They were hung in rows with soft curtains of corresponding length. With light changes, these shades were transformed into leaves of trees or curtains of palaces. His minimal sets consisted of platforms, slopes and steps. The visual effect was strikingly similar to Yue opera.

Wu, who also conducted the 30member orchestra, maneuvered the core of amateur performers as guards in natural everyday movements running, jumping or rolling, thus avoiding the use of *Yuan Chang Bu* (glidinglike circular movement) or the technicallydemanding *Kai Da* (movement for fighting sequences).

In the following year, the Chinese Opera Institute invited Huang Rui Ying, an accomplished actress who studied directing at the Shanghai Academy of Drama in the 70s to direct a popular classic 'Fire at the Riverside Pavilion', with Liu Bai Xiong as the lead drummer.

In the recent years, Teochew opera lovers have been catching up with Cantonese opera counterparts. More community centres, clan associations and amateur groups are conducting classes on karaoke singing, under local and foreign instructors. One of the significant events that marked this development was the Teochew Opera Concert organized by the Nam Hwa Amateur Dramatic Association in June 2002. Over Fifty members of its choir sung 25 popular melodies, under conductor Goh Ying Ho and artistic director Zeng Yi Fan, senior instructor of the Chinese Opera Institute. It was the first time so many singing talents were presented on stage together. The impressive display of talent was a sign of new development.

Teochew Opera Troupes brought in by various initiatives in the 90s

With the disbanding of the National Theatre Trust, the agency that brought in high quality Chinese opera productions from China, various agencies and amateur opera groups took over the responsibility. Nam Hwa Amateur Dramatic Association was one such group that is active in presenting Teochew opera group from China. Between 1994 and 2001, it presented three series of Teochew opera from China. Koh Brothers, a listed company too presented the Guangdong Teochew Opera Academy three times between 1998 and 2002. Thau Yong Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association also invited the Jie Yang Teochew Opera Troupe once in 1998.

Of all these visits, in term of box office, the student troupe from the Shantou Opera School was the most successful. This is because there were several young talents who show great potential and these teenager performers were well trained. The audience was elated to see the possibility of them becoming the next generation of stars.

In the recent years, the Chui Huay Lim Club, a club set up by the Teochew businessmen to engage in business networking and recreational activities, also brought in the Guangdong Chao Ju Academy in 2011, 2015 and a Bei Hua Chaoju Troupe in 2017 for public performances. These performances showcased the new generation of artistes and new works, some of which had staging that was evidently a departure from traditional Teochew opera. It could be said that the artistes are seeking changes and innovations. The Club had also organized two Teochew opera and Teochew song competitions in 2015 and 2017, generating considerable interests among the amateur performers.

The Lion City Teochew Opera Festival

In year 2000, The Ngee Ann Kongsi organised a major event that featured the prominent Teochew opera groups in town: The Lion City Teochew Opera Festival.

Opening with a real big bang was the Chao Zhou Da Luo Gu (Teochew grand percussion). The traditional piece was led by trumpet player Ng Han Song and guest drummer Lin Li Qin from China. Their performance captured the hearts of 500 enthusiastic audience that packed the auditorium of the Teochew Building.

The Thau Yong Musical Association presented the excerpt of its production “The Secret of the Song Palace”, which was acclaimed at the Shantou International Teochew Opera Festival. Directed by Yan Shi Yan, the fast-paced production, featuring water-sleeve and headgear special skills and strong singing from the cast, was an applause winning curtain raiser. It was a fine example of how new elements of performance were injected in Teochew opera by a non-Teochew guest director, from Hu Bei, China.

Er Woo Amateur Musical Association, which triumphed in the International Comedy Theatre Festival in France in the summer of 2000, presented the comic excerpt from the hit of the 60s “Su Liu Niang”, performed by a female clown and a male clown. Another hit of the 60s “Chen San Wu Niang”, was performed with the right mix of comedy and serious singing. Directed by Hu Qi Xian, another non-Teochew guest director from Zhejiang, China. The cast from Kit Yang Huay Kwan created the atmosphere of a crowded Lantern Festival in a well-choreographed sequence.

The audience was delighted by the highly innovative interpretation by the lead performers of Nam Hwa Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association. They cleverly gave a familiar opera “Jin Hua sending her husband off” an unusual setting. The romantic piece has been performed numerous times but, in this production, the performers Lee Sze Yau and Chua Ai Peck were in modern day clothes! With Chua dragging a suitcase and later carrying an umbrella, and Li taking her husband’s passport from her handbag for him, the performers were rewarded with roaring laughter and thunderous applause. Wu Dian Xiang, a director who always attempts to create something new in his productions, directed the piece.

Ng Song Heng, a veteran of the Teochew Drama Association, sang a classical piece “Gao Wen Ju” with confidence and conviction. The song is not only timeless in its texture of composition, but also a remarkable testimony of the technical prowess of the Teochew opera of the 50s.

The evening was at times marred by technical faults of the sound system, and imperfect timing on the part of the singers to the accompanying tapes. Singing to pre-recorded music is seldom satisfying and this also reflected a weakness that most of the Teochew opera groups must address: how to groom an ensemble that can play music for opera performances.

The lighting and set designer Eric Tan Thian Huat must be credited for the simple yet effective stage decor. Using shadows of different types of windows or doors, different localities were clearly defined.

The highlight of the evening was the last item when well-known songs from various operas were sung by the stars of all participating groups, some dressed in their costumes, others in contemporary clothes. Under the direction of Zhu Yi Zeng, a well-respected teacher from China affiliated to the Chinese Opera Institute, the presentation flowed with graceful movement and engaging singing. It is in these familiar songs that one is moved by the deeply felt connection between stage and auditorium. The Festival succeeded in creating awareness and aroused pride in the community over the centennial tradition of Teochew opera, and it will no doubt be remembered as a watershed event in the history of Teochew opera in Singapore.

New Effort in training young talents since the 90s

When an art form is detached from its place of origin, it is most likely that the form will absorb new influences and undergo the acculturation process. In many cases, the art form would fall out of the mainstream over the years if the people practicing it become a minority of the society. In the case of Singapore Teochew opera, when the dialect is no longer spoken and understood by the new generation, such danger is very real. Fortunately, there has been keen effort in creating new operas and in providing training for young people.

One of such group is the Teochew Drama Association, formed in 1984. Its predecessor was the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union. With Yeo Boon Hong, a businessman who is passionate about Teochew opera as chairman, and the opera troupes’ leaders, veteran performers and musicians, school teachers, journalists and a few young professionals as core members, the group soon launched an ambitious production that won loud applause from Teochew opera fans, “Ma Niang Niang, The People’s Empress”. In the last decade, with Lin Hong Fei, a respected opera director from Shantou who has strong a foundation in the tradition and a much respected dance teacher Lim Moi Kim as its key trainers, the association managed to attract many young enthusiasts. In its productions, the young cast always projected a youthful image of the Association. The invitation to participate in the First Anatolian International Theatre Festival in Turkey in 1998 and the International

Theatre Festival in Girona in Spain in 2000, is undoubtedly a recognition of the good work done by the Teochew Drama Association.

The Chinese Opera Institute (COI) established in August 1995, is a non-profit organisation with the support of the National Arts Council. As a training centre and a research centre responsible for the promotion of all facets Chinese opera, it holds talks and courses throughout the year to encourage opera practitioners to expose themselves to different genres and techniques in Chinese opera, as well as to familiarise and educate the public on Chinese opera. Thus, it has been conducting courses on Teochew opera, and staging and creating Teochew opera.

The COI set up the Singapore Chinese Opera Performing Ensemble (SCOPE) to carry out the Arts Education Programme (AEP) in schools and colleges. Original Teochew operas written by Founding Director Chua Soo Pong during this period include 'Ramayana', "The Haunted Temple", "The Embodied Shoes", "Mouse Daughter's Marriage" and "Nezha". These operas toured many schools as part of the Arts Education Programme. Its children training programme staged a classic 'Assassination of Liang Ji' at the 2002 Chinese Cultural Festival and was greeted with great enthusiasm. It was later invited to perform in the 7th World Children Theatre Festival in Lingen, Germany and a guest performance at the Youth Theatre School in South Holland where they impressed the audience and critic in Europe. The COI's "The Haunted Temple" is the most travelled production, having performed in China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Korea and USA. The full-length opera "Ramayana" was premiered in 1991 by Thau Yong at the Stuttgart International Theatre Festival. Four years later, it was invited by the National Commission of Culture of Thailand to perform in the International Ramayana Festival to celebrate of the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty's reign. In his message in the souvenir programme, Singapore Ambassador to Thailand, Mr. Wong Kwok Pun congratulated "Thau Yong for receiving the high honour to perform in Thailand in celebration of the Golden Jubilee of His Majesty's reign. It is a tribute to the high artistic standards achieved by the Thau Yong group. It is also an honour for Singapore."

Thau Yong was invited to participate in the International Ramayana organised by the Ministry of Culture of Indonesia at the Open-Air Theatre, Prambanan Temple, Yogyakarta, Indonesia on September 5th - 10th and Majapahit Festival in Pasuruan 11th - 15th September, 2013. The diverse versions from Cambodia, India, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines,

Singapore, Thailand, and Yogyakarta & Bali provinces attracted thousands of enthusiastic audiences who were keen to experience the diversity of cultures in the region. The international audience greeted the Teochew opera that was accompanied by Teochew music orchestra live with great enthusiasm.

The COI also organized a Teochew Opera International Conference in 2009, supported by the National Arts Council and the National Museum. The theme of the Conference is protection and promotion of Teochew Opera as intangible cultural heritage. Speakers from Singapore, Malaysia and China discussed various approaches of transmitting the vast cultural knowledge of Teochew opera to the new generation, and strategies to reach out to new audience. These included continuously learning and reviving the classics as well as creating new works that connect to contemporary audience by using elements from the traditional forms, thus keeping the characteristics of the art form intact. All agreed that embracing our heritage will help to enhance the societal cohesion and uphold the community's cultural identity.

A new driving force in Teochew opera and the Singapore stories

Teochew opera was a theatre genre that had a large following across the dialect groups. In the early 60s, the Teochew operas "Siu Liu Niang" and "Prosecuting the Husband" were adapted by many Hokkien opera and Hainanese opera groups. Although many young people are not able to speak the dialect, some aspects of the Teochew culture like Teochew cuisine, continue to be very much appreciated and some of the customs related to rites of passage are still observed. However Teochew opera is not as easily appreciated by young people. This is unfortunate as it is a theatre tradition that has a long history and its oldest play was written in 1431, during the Ming dynasty. In the Qing dynasty, there were as many as 200 troupes crowded in the Chaoshan region. According to Professor Wu Guo Qin and Lin Chun Jun, there were almost 800 scripts written and staged during that era. Stories from "Romance of Three Kingdoms", "Journey to the West", "Generals of the Yang Family" were produced. Scripts of the southern drama of the Yuan and Song Dynasty like "Cai Bo Jie's Pipa Tale" and also "The Golden Haripin of Liu Xi Bi" were adapted as Teochew operas. Teochew opera also borrowed stories from other genres like Xiqin and Baizi opera, the Yiyang genre of Jiangxi province,

Beijing opera and waijing xi. The stories from new sources enlarged the scope of the Teochew opera repertoire considerably. It is important to note that Teochew opera playwrights during that time also started to use local themes, writing stories of the local people like Su Liu Niang and Chen San Wu Niang. The dramatic text writing, performing skills, musical complexity and role type specialties were developed by generations of practitioners in the hundreds of years that followed.

The high artistic achievements continue to attract new comers despite the decreasing number of young audience since the 90s. Nam Hwa is fortunate to have invited the successful businessman Toh Lim Mok to join the group, as his vast experience in community service and business help to lead the group to a new journey of development.

Toh is a very enthusiastic leader, full of vigour and vitality. He passionately believes that for a traditional theater to thrive, it must first develop a high level of connectivity to the community. With his wide social network, he soon convinced the leading Teochew businessmen and community leaders to join Nam Hwa and collectively transform Nam Hwa into a company that actively preserves, develops and promotes Teochew opera as an important heritage of Singapore.

Understanding the important role of Teochew music orchestra, the new Nam Hwa lost no time in training musicians to play Teochew music and engaging teachers from China and local veterans to form a Teochew opera orchestra. Singapore has a very vibrant Chinese music scene, with over a hundred primary and secondary schools supporting Chinese Orchestras. Tapping the large pool of talents, and with vigorous training, it now has a Teochew music orchestra that plays for its regular performances.

Nam Hwa Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association was renamed Nam Hwa in 2016 and obtained IPC (Institution of a Public Character (IPC)) status. Since it became a professional company, it has staged classics "Prosecuting the Husband", "Three Scholars in One Family", "Liu Ming Zhu" and "The Dragon Well Jetty", as well as new works like "The Painted Skin", "Match Making at Five Foot Way", and "Han Dan Dream". It has produced a quarterly showcase featuring new talents in the scene in the last two years. Currently Nam Hwa has four full time teaching staff who conduct classes on Teochew opera singing and performing classes and a Teochew music percussion teacher who is responsible for the establishment of a musical ensemble. Nurturing new talents and providing them with opportunities to perform have

been the core activities of Nam Hwa. Promoting Teochew opera locally and reaching out to the community and schools require the ability to produce quality programmes and sustained commitment. The group has also been actively performing at international festivals and community events in Cambodia, China, Germany and Korea. These include the well-established Tang Xian Zu International Theatre Festival, China-ASEAN Theater Education Week, One Belt One Road Arts Week and Pohang International Theatre Festival. Toh's visionary leadership, innovative thinking and strong passion has created a vibrant theater company with devoted staff who share the big dream of keeping Teochew opera culture alive within a short span of five years.

One must also acknowledge the important contribution of the People's Association, a Singaporean statutory board that oversees neighborhood grassroots communities and social organizations. It plays an important role in supporting traditional theatre of all genres at the grassroot levels. Over thirty community clubs and centers have Chinese opera activities and classes. One of the most dynamic groups currently is the 16-year old Joo Chiat Community Club Teochew Opera Group, headed by Albert Ang. Although he comes from a Hokkien speaking family, the love of Teochew opera started early for him. Working with amateur performers of all age groups at the community club, Ang faces the challenges of maintaining standards of three to four public performances a year. With a repertoire that ranges from classics like "The Dragon Well Jetty", "Chen San Wu Niang", "Prosecuting the Husband" as well as new works such as "The Bukit Ho Swee Fire", members of his group have to acquire new skills and stagecraft. Joo Chiat's regular performances increased the visibility and credibility of Teochew opera performed by non-professional actors. In the last few years, it continued to attract new comers, from the 4-year old to young working adults. Their shared memories made over tiring rehearsals add to the sense of belonging at the community club. The group has also been invited to perform in Shantou and at the China-ASEAN Traditional Theatre Gala in Nanning, Guangxi, China. These opportunities also motivated the members to work harder to sharpen their skills in performing Teochew opera. Another community centre group that has a long history is the Jalan Kayu Zone 5 RC Teochew Opera Troupe which has for decades promoted the art form with tenacity with its devoted leader Heng Ah Muay, a pioneer of the Lak Aik Amateur Musical and Drama Association.

In the last decade, several newly registered groups appeared in the Teochew opera scene. In 2010, Nick Shen, a former television drama actor founded a group called Tok Tok Chiang. Not exclusively doing Teochew opera, the group also does magic tricks and bilingual performances, as well as perform for local charity, government and corporate organizations' functions. Several other groups were active in the last decade but have now ceased to exist. For example, the MacPherson Community Centre Teochew Opera Group which made far reaching impact in its two Indonesia trips to the Riau Island of Indonesia with big scale productions like "Ramayana", "Three Scholars in One Family", "Prosecuting the Husband" and "Nezha". Arts Focus, set up in 2005 by Chua Swee Huang, former lead actress of Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association, staged several big productions. There have been newcomers in the recent years too, such as the Traditional Arts Centre set up in 2012 and the Chui Huay Lim Club Teochew Opera Research Association, conducting classes and presenting stage shows. There are also groups affiliated with clan associations like the Nanyang Poh Leng Hui Kuan, Teochew opera classes at the Teo Ann Huay Kuan and a Teochew music orchestra at the Singapore Kit Yang Huay Kwan. There is also another private training center Pei Hong Operatic Drama, set up by Ding Pei Hong, formerly a professional actress of the Chaozhou City Chaoju Group, in 2004. The centre has regular end of term showcases and public performances.

Singapore stories on Chinese opera stage

The PA launched a community arts and culture initiative called PAssionArts Movement in 2012. As part of the initiative, a total of 86 Community Arts & Culture Clubs (CACCs) and nearly 250 new community arts and culture interest groups were established. In line with this initiative, PA launched the 1st PAssionArts Chinese Opera Festival in 2016 with the Chinese Opera Institute and Nam Hwa as partners. The festival's great success led to the organization of the 2nd PAssionArts Chinese Opera Festival in 2018 with a new objective: to feature Singapore stories in Chinese opera style. The call immediately won the support of practitioners as the opera groups see the urgency of finding a "Singaporean voice" on the Chinese opera stage. On the 29th September, Nam Hwa presented a newly created Teochew opera called "Match Making at the Five-Foot Way" while the Marine Parade Community Club presented a Teochew/Cantonese opera "The Bukit Ho Swee Fire". The event also featured Hokkien opera "Singapore" by Do opera, a group

with many young members and "Sang Nila Utama: A Singapore Story" by the 39-year old Queenstown Cantonese Opera Group. The refreshing images and stories about Singapore's past connected with the audience very well. The audience also greatly appreciated the ability of the pioneer generation's ability to speak Chinese vernaculars like Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Malay, and even a few words of Tamil. The language of performance is an important cultural attribute. The Singapore story operas remind us of the fact that our pioneer generation spoke many dialects and these dialects are reservoirs of knowledge. Linguistic diversity is a precious asset of humanity and tool for inter-cultural and intra-cultural communication. Keeping this ability could help us connect to many cultural traditions of our community. Apart from being amused by the reality of linguistic diversity, they thoroughly enjoyed the songs and dances that praise the rich food cultures here. Multiculturalism was also vividly displayed in the hawkers' dances and the fire scene. It was a clear sign that the Singapore stories on Chinese opera stage touched the hearts of the audience as they find the narration relevant and are able to connect with the characters easily.

However, this is only the first step of the long journey to find a Singapore voice on the Chinese opera stage. The producers have learned from this first experience in staging original contemporary opera. More time is needed to polish the new works.

To develop Teochew opera to achieve higher artistic quality, practitioners will have to examine their works more critically and the lack of theatre criticism here is an area we must address urgently. Chinese opera writers must master at least three basic elements: lyric, dialogue and set stylized movements. A writer will have to have a good command of the language of performance, and understand the art form's specific characteristics, and know how to employ the appropriate performing skills to express the feelings effectively. The first step of developing playwrights will be organizing workshops for aspiring playwrights, producers, actors and actresses. One possible format is to get the playwrights to work with performers and to devise and to rehearse together on a topic they are interested in. From first reading of the script, all involved are given the opportunity to discuss their ideas. Creating opportunities for new synergies will also promote team work. Opera groups will have to offer time and resources for playwrights to develop their works to their fullest potential.

Conclusion

As an intangible cultural heritage that has a history of close to 200 years in Singapore, Teochew opera is increasingly recognized by the community for its value of transmitting core cultural values of patriotism, filial piety, loyalty, sense of justice and social responsibility as well as abundant aesthetic knowledge of the art form.

With the dynamic drive of a professional company, Nam Hwa Opera, and the passionate pursuit of many devoted community Teochew opera groups, there have been more public performances in the last three years. Several groups have also effectively groomed young talents, including children who are only 4 or 5 years old. Many promising teenagers also emerged from the scene, some of them are playing lead roles in the classics convincingly. Collectively, the groups have generated a new interest in Teochew arts and culture in Singapore and attracted attention from countries in Asia. Groups were invited to perform in Cambodia, China, Korea, Malaysia and Thailand. It is set to experience a healthy revival in the decades to come in Singapore. With the \$25 million

in funding pumped into the traditional arts from 2015 to 2019, traditional theatre groups have been receiving greater support for presenting shows, documentation and reaching out to audiences, at home and abroad.

However, like other intangible culture with a long history in Singapore such as Cantonese opera, Teochew opera is an exceedingly refined and highly complex performing arts form that needs time and perseverance to master. Teochew opera groups will have to invest more resources in learning the history, theories, old and new scripts, incorporating strategy to improve skills and standard of the artistes and developing capability to stimulate creativity. While ideas are inspiring, execution is the key determinant of success. Ensuring the continuous flourishing of Teochew opera requires the commitment and concerted efforts of every player. The journey to excellence in productions, research, theatre criticism and documentation is challenging, Teochew opera groups today shall carry the touch passed down from our pioneers, stand up to the challenges and march on!

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Teochew Opera in Singapore

Dr. Lye Soo Choon

1. Foreword

Teochew operas is a form of localised opera found in Guangdong province. It is popular amongst the eastern region of Guangdong, southern part of Fujian, Taiwan, Hong Kong and southeast Asian countries where overseas Chinese reside in. It is famed for its performance in Teochew dialect and for Teochew being its centre of activity.¹ As Teochew opera had absorbed its nutrients from Guangdong Han opera (*wai jiang xi*) and *Hai Lu Feng* opera in China, it still had numerous connections to *wai jiang xi* despite its arrival in Singapore. After its arrival in Singapore, it encountered other forms of opera and influenced each other, therefore Singapore Teochew opera and China Teochew opera has its differences. In contrast to Hokkien opera however, Teochew opera had relatively retained its Chinese traditions. In addition, as Teochew opera had studied performing skills from China Teochew opera movies in the late fifties and sixties, the difference was also lesser.

Research into Singapore Teochew opera were mainly academic papers that targeted specific issues and they include: "Teochew Opera of Singapore" by Zhan Xiuying for her Nanyang University thesis in 1978/79 that gave an overview of Teochew operas in the seventies; "Singapore's Amateur Teochew Opera Troupes" by Chen Shuli for her National University of Singapore thesis in 1995; "Teochew Opera in Singapore: A Research into Oral History" by Peng Xuezhen for her National University of Singapore thesis in 1998; "A Study on Teochew Music Clubs in Singapore" by Yap Wee Cheng for his National University of Singapore master's thesis in 2000 and "A Research on 'Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe'" by Zhuang Qiuyan for her National University of Singapore thesis in 2003/04. In addition, there is also "Singapore Teochew Opera and Han Opera: 1963 - 1983" by Xu Yongshun,² but this is a list of latter information. I am of the view that the academic paper that both summarises Teochew opera and is related to its history can be traced to "Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore" by Li Huizhen for her Nanyang University thesis.

There is more research into Teochew opera compared to other forms of operas. However, due to a lack of first-hand data or original data and some sweeping arguments, some misunderstandings and blind spots exist in the field of Teochew opera research. For example, the "abstract of thesis" of Li Huizhen's thesis showed some blind spots and misunderstandings the public has of the development of Teochew opera in Singapore, causing several problems in the thesis that requires correction and discussion. Another source of information that researchers frequently refer to is the Nanyang Year Book. This article shall also discuss the several points from the book which can be corrected.

2. Pre-war Teochew Opera

The earliest opera performance in Singapore can be traced to 1826 where the Teochews built the Yueh Hai Ching Temple together with the Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. Together, they held a festival which they called "*sui wan chou shen*" (to offer thanks to the gods at the end of the year) that lasted for a month and a half annually, between the 10th and 11th month of the lunar calendar. Every dialectal group will invite opera troupes to come over to perform to give thanks to the gods, therefore professional opera troupes came over in response to the activity. According to the Dictionary of Chinese Operas, after the end of the Opium War in 1840, many Teochew opera troupes frequently travel to and fro places such as Siam (Thailand) and Singapore. This corroborates to the history of opening of ports to send Chinese workers overseas after the signing of the Nanking Treaty in 1842. Although it is estimated that Teochew opera troupes came over after the completion of the Yueh Hai Ching Temple, there was no strong historical evidence between 1826 and 1840 that this happened. Therefore, the earliest evidence that Teochew opera arrived in Singapore was in 1840. The shipping volume of Chinese vessels in the 19th century was low, and navigation depended on the seasonal winds. Therefore, whenever a troupe came to Nanyang it would have to stay for several months. Professional troupes would likely perform operas for entertainment purposes other than performing the ritualistic operas to give thanks to the gods.

Western European countries set up "pigsties"³ in Chaoshan to recruit labourers to colonise southeast Asia and the New World in the 19th century. Due to the civil unrest in China, many Teochews went abroad to Nanyang, and many of them gathered at the estuary of Singapore River

and many of them worked as transportation workers. The Teochews would settle in places near to the estuary of Singapore River, such as Shan *Zai Ding* (common name of Chulia Street), Chulia Street and Teochew Pasar. As the focus on early immigrants was to earn a living and pray for a peaceful and smooth sailing life, therefore the building of a temple was for spiritual sustenance. Immigrants also brought the practice of organising *chou shen xi* (opera performances to give thanks to the gods) to Singapore as it originated from their hometown.

Records of early Teochew opera include: a book published in 1879 in which the author, Vaughan, recorded the existence of Teochew performances in the Singapore opera theatres⁴. Similarly, Li Zhongjue also pointed out that there were Teochew opera performances in opera theatres in 1887.⁵ Teochew opera was recorded in the Nanyang Year Book as follows: “The earliest Teochew opera troupe to arrive approximately 50 years ago was *Lao Sai Yong Feng*”.⁶ The arrival of Teochew opera in Singapore should be taken as 1900 since Nanyang Year Book was published in 1951, and the article stated the arrival of Teochew opera as approximately 50 years ago. However, under the column “Arrival of Famous Artistes in Singapore” in page 6 of the 11th May 1888 Lat Pau newspaper, there was an advertisement stating the arrival of the Teochew child actors troupe *Xin Xin Shun Xiang* and their performance that will be held at the Xin Jiekou Chengle Yuan. On page 2 of the paper dated 8th March 1889, there were already Teochew *guanyin* (Mandarin) opera performances in Singapore to celebrate the return of power by the Empress Dowager. On page 4 of the paper dated 14th September 1896, there was a performance in Yi Yuan by the troupe Lao Yuan Sheng. On page 5 of the paper dated 14th May 189, there was a performance at the Si Jiao Ting (Four Corner Pavilion) by Teochew troupe *Xin Shun Xiang*. The records in Nanyang Year Book could be pushed 10 years earlier based on these records, and *Lao Sai Yong Feng* may not be the first Teochew opera troupe to arrive in Singapore.

There is a special message found in the Lat Pau article dated 1889: “Teochew *guanyin* opera”. Is the *guanyin* opera Teochew opera? What is certain is that it was a performance by a Teochew troupe. It is stated in the book “A Brief Talk on Teochew” by Wang Dinggao that “There are four types of operas that belong to Teochew and are called troupes, they are *zhengzi*, *baizi*, *xiqin* and *waijiang*”. *Zhengzi xi* (or *zhengyin xi*) belong to a branch of nanxi from the Yuan and Ming dynasty, performed using the Zhongzhou Mandarin (Teochews call this the *kongzi zheng*).

The Lingdong Daily stated on the 28th year of the Guangxu era (1902 CE) that: “Teochew operas at the time were divided into *wai jiang* and Teochew. There were more than 200 troupes and Teochew opera were at its peak”.⁷ In the book *Guanyin Huijie Shiyi* by Cai Shi, who lived during the Qing Dynasty, it states “*Zheng yin* (Beijing opera) is sung using *guanqiang* (mandarin), *bai zi* (dialectal opera) is sung using Quanzhou dialect, *daban* (former name of Peking opera in Hokkien) is sung using *kunqiang* (kun opera), *chaodiao* (Teochew tune) is sung using chaoqiang (Teochew tone).” Chaoqiang and chaodiao is Teochew opera in the Ming dynasty and it means to “perform operas using hometown dialect”. The hometown dialect refers to Teochew dialect. Guangdong Han opera (*wai jiang xi*) is an opera that uses the *erhuang* as its main singing tones and Zhongzhou Mandarin as the language of the opera. During the late-Qing period there were still “*ban ye fan*” performances. These “*ban ye fan*” performances refer to the performing of *zheng yin* opera at the earlier half of the night and the performing of *bai zi* opera at the latter half of the night. In fact, some of the lyrics used in the current *ban xian xi* (playing the role of god) in Teochew opera still uses Zhongzhou Mandarin.

Therefore, Teochew opera troupes has a history of performing *guanyin xi* (Mandarin operas). Its performance, “In Celebration of the Return of Power by the Empress Dowager”, was an official activity. I agree with Zheng Rongxing’s (President and Professor of National Taiwan College of Performing Arts) view that *guanyin xi* “belongs to a concept formed by the association of language and power”.⁸ This is because *guanyin* is a language of a higher status than *bai zi* opera in the eyes of Southerners. It is more appropriate to perform *guanyin xi* for formal or high-class events. However, as Teochew troupes has a practice of “*ban ye fan*”, which is to perform *guanyin xi* followed by Teochew opera, even though the performances for the events would be completely in *guanyin xi*, but for performances on other days, there is a high chance that they will perform Teochew opera. More importantly, these troupes are Teochew troupes, therefore there would already be Teochew troupes performing in Singapore by 1889. Zhang Xuequan had sought confirmation from Yang Haoran of Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association what *guanyin xi* referred to in the papers were, and Yang indicated that “*guanyin xi*” is *wai jiang xi*. Based on this clue, coupled with the fact that there were instances of “*ban ye fan*” (where *wai jiang* was performed followed by Teochew opera) in Teochew opera after the mid-

Qing period; and the information found in oral history interviews that there were professional Teochew opera troupes in Singapore post-war that would perform an act from Han opera before official Teochew opera performances, my deduction is that Teochew opera troupes in those days brought the “ban ye fan” style of performance to Nanyang too, which is why professional Teochew opera troupes in the late 19th century also had Han opera performances.

In terms of the location for performances, the Teochew opera theatre is located at Merchant Road, near the old Thong Chai Medical Institution. This is a place where Teochews gather and is commonly known as the Teochew Pasar. There were two opera theatres: Yi Yuan and Zhe Yuan. Despite the engraving “1921” found on the external wall of Zhe Yuan, there are at least two applications for renovation of the opera theatres found in the archives that proves that the building had existed since 1880.⁹ Performances in these two opera theatres included renowned Teochew opera troupes, including Yong Sai Bao Feng troupe who is well-known for its action opera, and Lao Sai Tao Yuan troupe, Xin Rong He Xing troupe and Yu Lou Chun troupe. Together they are known as the “Big Four Troupes”. Other Teochew opera troupes include troupes such as: Lao Zhong Zheng Shun and Xin Sai Bao Feng and many others. There were another two Teochew opera theatres at North Bridge Road estimated to be built in 1904: Tongle Yuan and Yongle Yuan.¹⁰

According to the records of Lat Pau from 1887 to 1920, there were the following Teochew opera troupes: Xin Xin Shun Xiang troupe, Xin Shun Xiang Teochew troupe, Lao Yuan Sheng troupe, Sai Yong Feng troupe; and their places of performance were: Xin Jiekou Chengle Yuan, Si Jiao Ting, Kim Lan Beo and Yi Yuan. Teochew opera had lesser news in relation to Cantonese opera and Peking opera, therefore it showed that Teochew opera performances in opera theatres may not be as regular as Peking opera or Cantonese opera. However, the performances at Si Jiao Ting¹¹ and Kim Lan Beo¹² showed that there were street performances for Teochew opera then, and street performances typically do not advertise themselves in the papers. For performances at these two places, Si Jiao Ting appeared in the news because a fire broke out on stage while Kim Lan Beo appeared in the news as there were large scale Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien opera performances due to the celebration of the birth of the buddha, Guanyin. Therefore, the frequency of Teochew opera performances is way higher than what is recorded.

In the “abstract of thesis” of Li Huizhen’s thesis, she wrote: “Pre-war Teochew operas were all performed in opera theatres and movement was fluid. It also kept close contact with troupes in China. They would perform short operas that were of high quality.”¹³ There are two problems in the aforementioned statement. Firstly, it is incorrect to state that pre-war Teochew operas were all performed in opera theatres. According to the oral history interview with Mr Lim of Teochew (Mr Lim: born in 1920, used to perform puppet shows when he was younger. He joined Lao Sai Tao Yuan when he was 10 in Teochew and came down south in 1931 where he shot to fame in Siam with the opera “Xiao Peng Er” and he performed chou characters when he reached adulthood. Due to the interview agreement that states that his true name shall not be revealed, this article shall refer to him as Mr Lim), pre-war Teochew opera troupes such as Zhong Sai Tao Yuan, Xin Sai Tao Yuan, San Sai Tao Yuan, Si Sai Tao Yuan had all performed street shows. Only superior troupes such as Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Xin Rong He Xing performed solely in opera theatres and New World Amusement Park”.¹⁴ In addition, Lat Pau also had records of Xin Shun Xiang Teochew troupe performing at Si Jiao Ting.¹⁵ One would need to apply for a construction permit for building opera theatres since the time when Singapore was still a British colony. The National Archives of Singapore kept many refurbishment and renovation plans of opera theatres such as Li Chun Yuan, Qing Wei Xin, Qing Sheng Ping, but there were no records of Si Jiao Ting. Therefore, the inference is that the performances at Si Jiao Ting were street shows. At the same time, the performances were in celebration of the return of power by the empress dowager, therefore it should not be a ticketed performance. Moreover, the information on Sai Yong Feng’s performance at Kim Lan Beo¹⁶ is also historical evidence of a street show.

I agree with the point raised by Li Huizhen that local troupes “also kept close contact with troupes in China”, but what should not be overlooked is the importance of its contact with other countries in the Nanyang region. Before the war, Nanyang Chinese immigrants believed they are China Chinese and have an intimate connection with China, but as transportation was not as developed then and the boats they rely on to travel depended on the seasonal winds, therefore they tend to associate with countries such as Siam, Malaya and Indonesia. For example, Zhong Sai Tao Yuan, San Sai Tao Yuan, Si Sai Tao Yuan and Xin Sai Tao Yuan performed regularly in Indonesia before the war. Lao Sai Tao Yuan also performed in places such as Malaya and Siam.

3. Teochew Opera During the War Against Japan and Japanese Occupation (Syonan) Period

Li Huizhen wrote in her “abstract of thesis” that “the Pacific War broke out in 1941 and Singapore fell in the second year. Teochew opera activities were virtually paralysed”.¹⁷ This is the common conclusion of past opera research due to a lack of information. I have managed to uncover more historical evidence to prove that Teochew opera was very active during the Syonan period. (Singapore was renamed Syonanto after she fell, and the period of Japanese occupation was termed Syonan period)

Mr Lin said during his oral history interview that licenses will be granted for those who performed for the Japanese Imperial Army. Every actor who received a “yi” plate will not be forced into labour. The actors had performances in opera theatres during the Japanese Occupation and been to Taiwan Yuan in Penang, Singapore’s New World and Yi Yuan to perform.¹⁸

The *huadan* of Teochew opera troupe Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Chen Yangtao, clearly recalled that more than 10 persons from their troupe went missing as they lost their permits during one of the inspections by the Japanese, almost causing the troupe to disband. However, the actors had to perform to earn a living, and they had to perform day and night, which was worse than what they faced before the Syonan period. She recalled that they regularly performed street shows that were mainly performances to thank the gods and there were many audiences then. When there were no street shows, they would perform at entertainment places such as Great World, New World and Happy World. Although the Japanese did not create trouble during the opera performances, the conditions for performance were more difficult than pre-war.¹⁹ Cheah Gek Song, who performs as a qingyi (female character) in a Teochew opera troupe, recalls that Teochew opera was frequently performed as street shows during the Syonan period, and when there were no street show performances they will perform at the opera theatres and entertainment places for a couple of days.²⁰

Oral history interview provided a portion of the information on opera activities during the Syonan period. Textual records include the Syonan Jit Pau 1942 article on street performances during the Emperor’s Birthday

celebration.²¹ Teochew opera troupes at those times include San Zheng Shun Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe located behind the Kheng Chiu Hwee Kuan (currently known as Hainan Hwee Kuan), Yu Lou Chun Xiang Troupe located at Chin Nan Street, Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew Opera Troupe at Joo Chiat Road and Xin Rong He Xing Teochew Opera Troupe beside Kallang Bridge.

Written records can also be found in the Nanguang Zhoukan (Light of the South Weekly) published by Syonan Jit Pau Press during the Syonan period, where there will be a “Report on Performances Around New Great World” every week and Teochew opera troupes were reported to be performing at each entertainment places.²² Teochew opera troupes that performed at these entertainment places include: Lao Sai Tao Yuan, San Zheng Shun, Yu Chun Xiang, Xin Rong He Xing, Yu Lou Chun Xiang Troupe and Sai Bao Feng Troupe. The movement of Teochew opera troupes were very fluid, there were no list of actors and they performed tens of titles such as: “Yuhua Hun”, “Jigong, The Living Buddha”, “Octopus Spirit”, “Snow in June”, “Female Bandit”, “Meng Li Jun”, “The White Bone Beauty”, “Taohua Zhai”, “Nanyang Pass”, “Bai Tu Zhu”, “Da Feng Gong”.

There were no amateur Teochew opera activities during the Japanese Occupation as there were no amateur Teochew opera societies. In fact, watching opera performances was also a form of entertainment for the Japanese troops. Although Japanese troops did not restrict opera performances for commercial entertainment purposes and set certain conditions for performing to lull people into believing in peace and security at those times, but due to the harsh times, disappearance of many Teochew opera artistes due to permit checks and the resistance people harboured against the invaders, the development of Teochew opera was negatively affected.

4. Post-war Teochew Opera

Teochew operas began to aggressively recruit child actors and to nurture its next generation of successors after the Japanese Occupation. In the oral history interview with Chua Hong Kee, he spoke of his joining of the Xin Rong He Xing troupe in 1949 and that there were child actors before and after he joined, with every batch numbering about ten or twenty people.²³ Due to the eager nurturing of new talents, Teochew opera managed to attract fans with local artistes from the late 1950s to the 1960s. This batch of talents did take over the older generation

when they had retired and were active in the 1980s, 1990s and even till now. When new China was established in 1949, the source of opera resources was cut off from China, directly impacting the exchange of actors and arts. Costumes, make-up, stage design were also forced to develop by themselves in Singapore. For example, there was still a batch of Chinese actors invited by Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew opera troupe to come down to Singapore in 1949. Subsequently in 1950, another batch of artistes invited by Xin Rong He Xing troupe had to stay on an off-shore island after their arrival and were finally repatriated back to China by the British colonial government. Taking costumes as an example, all opera troupes regardless of its type, bought their costumes from a costume shop opened by the Cantonese, the Shanghai Chen Bingxiu Zhuang (a costume making shop). However, Singapore no longer imported any costumes after 1950. This influenced the costumes for all types of drama in terms of the colour, cutting, embroidery, style and headdress. For example, the costumes of Teochew opera were more like Guangdong opera by using more vibrant colours, more sequins and less embroidery, which is different from China's Teochew opera. In terms of scripts, scripts would be sent from China in small envelopes separately, and they were pieced together after they arrived in Singapore. There were also scripts by local Teochew opera masters and there were also scripts by Peking opera masters. For the teaching of operas, it was left solely to the artistes in Singapore.

Teochew opera flourished during the 20 years after the war, but they also faced minor setbacks and competition from other operas. However, Teochew opera was always able to adjust and transform themselves. Hokkien opera troupe owner Wei Mufa went to Johor and Singapore to survey the market. The nineties were the Teochew opera's world as operas to thank the gods and street shows were almost monopolised by Teochew opera troupes.²⁴ However, Min operas started to fight for a share of the market after 1955 as Taiwanese opera performances relate more closely to life, were easier to understand and were cheaper to hire compared to Teochew opera. Therefore, some operas to thank the gods and street shows turn to hiring Hokkien opera troupes, threatening the livelihood of Teochew opera troupes. Teochew opera maintained their prices and did not increase them despite rising costs, and they made changes to their performances to win back the audiences and to rebound from the low they were in.

In the "abstract of thesis" by Li Huizhen, "Post-war Teochew opera were influenced by movies and long-running shows replaced short acts. In addition to the shortage of opera theatres and more importantly the lack of content in performances, audience numbers fell gradually. To sustain themselves, Teochew opera finally walked out from the opera theatres onto the streets, becoming street shows to thank the gods."²⁵

The point that other than superior Teochew opera troupes, there were already Teochew opera street shows before the war was mentioned earlier. In addition, Mr Lim also said that during the Syonan period, the owner of Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Chun Quan, was invited by his friend to perform street shows, and was offered one thousand dollar a day, which is twice the amount given to other troupes. Therefore, they performed 5 days of street shows. Others who caught wind of this also started inviting superior troupes, therefore Xin Rong He Xing, another superior troupe, also performed street shows with high remuneration.²⁶ Therefore, Teochew opera troupes did not start performing street shows because they had fallen. In addition, it was a good thing for Teochew opera industry that China opera movies entered the market, affecting Cantonese opera performance. Hokkien operas had once threatened the market for Teochew operas in the early 1950s by offering lower prices and enhanced artistic techniques. The first China Teochew opera movie "The Fire of Linjiang" was screened in 1958 and its superior opera arts changed the original views audiences have of Teochew opera arts, and inspired audiences' passion for Teochew operas. Shortly after, Teochew opera movies such as "Su Liu Niang", "Suing My Husband", "Causing a Ruckus at Kaifeng", "Lu Lin Hui", "Liu Mingzhu", "Wang Maosheng Jin Jiu" entered the Singapore market. Teochew opera movies by Hong Kong Dongshan Teochew opera troupe and Xin Tian Cai Teochew opera troupe were also screened subsequently, making a total of approximately 200 movies screened in a few years' time. Other than causing a fever for Teochew opera movie, it also enhanced and inspired the development of Teochew operas in Singapore. Teochew opera actors learnt from the movies, such as those performing the huadan role would study Yao Xuanqiu and Xiao Nanying; those performing the ruanchou role studied Hong Miao; those performing the wushan role studied Fan Zehua; those performing the laosheng role studied Zhang Changcheng; those performing the xiaosheng role studied Huang Qingcheng; those

performing the laochou role studied Li Youcun. The self-improvement made by Teochew opera artistes attracted movie audiences back to the Teochew opera stage.

Before the arrival of China opera movies into Singapore, audiences would have never imagined how beautiful, elegant, refreshing operas can be and how its techniques could be so intricate and beautiful, its music so moving. China opera movies guided the process of refining Singapore opera performances. Not only did professional opera troupes work hard to improve its quality of performance, amateur troupes were also upgrading themselves and everyone was imitating the performing art of movies. Suddenly, many China Teochew opera records entered the Singapore market, such as: “Bao Lian Deng”, “Bai Tu Ji”, “San Ku Dian”, “The King of Qi Seeks a General”, “Eight Immortals Crossing the East Sea” and “Kong Que Dong Nan Fei”. Although there was no stage for these records to perform, it was still useful for the improvement of Singapore Teochew opera industry. The performing technique troupes learnt from imitating movies equipped them with the ability to orchestrate, and there were significant improvements such as acting skills, set design and lighting. Other than the indispensable musical instruments such as zixian, yangqin and yehu, xiaodi, pipa, sanxian, erhu and dihu were also used to match the plot. Therefore, the view held by many people in the past that Teochew opera and its artistry was on the decline and had fallen to perform street shows such as operas to thank the gods or to worship the ghosts due to movies and other forms of entertainment post-war and pre-independence was not entirely correct.

Other than the old professional troupes that stayed in Singapore before the war, such as : Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Xin Rong He Xing, Zhong Sai Tao Yuan, Lao San Zheng Shun, Lao Yu Li Xiang, Lao Zhong Zheng Shun, Lao Sai Bao Feng, new professional troupes that were established during that period of time, other than Zhiyun Teochew Opera Troupe, were troupes such as: Tiancai Teochew Opera Troupe, Chaoyi Opera Troupe, Xinyi Teochew Opera Troupe, Tuohong Teochew Opera Troupe and Xin Tao Yuan Chun. The state of flourish of Teochew operas in the 1950s could be seen from the many professional Teochew opera troupes and their many performances. Cheah Gek Song, a male Teochew opera artist who perform the qingyi (female character) role expressed in his oral history interview that the luzhu (the organiser of temple celebrations) had expressly picked him to perform his forte “mai hun ren” for 20 days in a month. Most of the performances were at Bukit Ho Swee, Redhill,

Hougang, Changi Point, Changi 10th Milestone and Mata Ikan (Area in Sembawang). There were only one or two performances in the offshore island Pulau Tekong. Opera troupes would be performing “shu bo xi” (performances for the ghosts, this is referring to the performances for the Hungry Ghost Festival)²⁸ specially for the lunar seventh month. Teochew huadan Chng Gek Huay also said that they were “virtually performing every day”. Her forte includes performing the “Li San Niang”, “Hou Yue’e” and “Drunken Empress Lü” and the performances were at places such as: entertainment places like New World, Great World, Happy World and ticketed performances on stages set up with canvas cloth at Dapo.²⁹ Street shows were mainly for “worshipping of the gods” (other than the operas to thank the gods, “worshipping of the gods” referred to by general Singaporeans also include performances for the traditional seventh month Hungry Ghost Festival and other religious performances).

Many opera activities that were originally amateur in nature with predominantly Teochew participants, gradually shifted from performing Han opera originally to performing Teochew opera as the post-war Teochew Dialectal Opera (performed in Teochew language) were the rage for some time. It underwent several improvements, produced famed artistes, had constant increase in the quality of performance, produced many renowned operas and some were filmed into movies and screened in Singapore. At the same time, Teochews felt a sense of familiarity with the opera that was performed in their own dialect, and as society gradually opened, people were less discriminatory of opera actors.

The development of amateur Teochew opera peaked at pre-independence. Its rise can be seen from each of the amateur musical and dramatic associations. Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association gave up on performing Han opera and switched to Teochew opera after 1965. Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association started gravitating towards Teochew opera in 1962. Firstly, Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association were invited by the television station to perform the “Assassination of Liang Ji” at the cultural centre for live television broadcasting and they held a public performance of the Teochew opera “Chen San Wu Niang” in the same year, and on members’ request, performed for two nights at Victoria Theatre in December. They publicly performed “Chen San Wu Niang” at Hong Lim Garden in 1963 on the Ministry of Culture’s invitation and they performed and filmed “Chen San Wu Niang” in the National Theatre on the television station’s invitation in June. They performed “Lu Lin Hui” and “Assassination of

Liang Ji" for the association's 35th anniversary in 1964, performed the "Chen San Wu Niang Sequel" in 1965 and filmed "Wang Mao Sheng Jin Jiu" into television. After the performance at Victoria Theatre, Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association no longer perform Han opera, and after it started performing Teochew operas in 1962, Teochew opera completely replaced Han opera.

The situation with another amateur musical and dramatic association, Thau Yong, that started from performing Han opera was the same. Under the influence of the Teochew opera movie fever in 1960, they started learning Teochew opera too. Other than performing Han opera, Thau Yong also performed the Teochew opera "Su Liu Niang" in 1962, just like Liu Yi. Thereafter, they gradually replaced Han opera with Teochew opera due to the change in audiences' taste. After they performed its last Han opera in 1970, they switched completely to perform Teochew opera.

Another amateur musical and dramatic association, Nam Hwa Opera, appeared in 1963 that directly advertised the "promotion of the art of Teochew opera...", which clearly shows the difference in direction between the old amateur musical and dramatic associations of the past which are set up to perform Han opera and Nam Hwa Opera which specifically seeks to promote Teochew opera. Nam Hwa Opera performed several popular Teochew operas after they were established, such as "Chen San Wu Niang". The following operas of Nam Hwa Opera were filmed by television, such as "San Ku Dian", "Bao Gong San Kan Hu Die Meng", "Nan Shan Zhu", "Chuan Xi Ding Qin", "Xiao Xiang Qiu Yu" and "Bai Hua Zeng Jian". Nam Hwa also performed Teochew operas that were popular in Singapore at large venues such as the Victoria Theatre and the National Theatre during its anniversary celebrations. Teochews started to learn Teochew opera without the language barrier. Teochew operas were performed using Teochew dialect, which was easier to learn and closer to the masses. The reason behind the rise of Teochew opera and the fall of Han opera lies therein.

In terms of localisation, in the 20 years of Teochew opera performance in Singapore, it has constantly mixed the artistic characteristics of other operas to refresh itself. In the 1950s, the huadan of Xin Rong He Xing troupe, Chng Gek Huay, would watch Cantonese operas frequently and brought the appearance of characters in Cantonese operas into Teochew opera. In terms of facial makeup, Teochew opera used shuifen initially, which is a cosmetic made from mixing ground cake makeup with water,

and its colour was relatively duller. Chng brought in the loose powder and greasepaint of Guangdong Cantonese operas to brighten up the colour of the face. At the same time, she also learnt from the makeup techniques of Guangdong Cantonese opera that outlined the nasal bridge and the picking up of the corner of the eye to highlight her facial features. In terms of headdress, the tiebin (hair pasted as sideburn on the cheeks) of Teochew operas was originally pasted together as one piece. However, Chng learnt from the Guangdong Cantonese operas to paste them in small, movable pieces that can be adjusted to enhance the effects of shaping and beautifying the outline of the face. Chng was already a famous actress then, and the improvements made to her makeup and headdress were well received by the audience such that it caused a storm in the Teochew opera circle, and many Teochew opera actors started to imitate her. Other than using greasepaint for makeup, Teochew opera has retained a portion of the makeup techniques borrowed from Guangdong Cantonese opera till date. In terms of performance, Chng also use performance techniques that relate more closely to life, reducing the stylised exaggeration and long-windedness of operas.

Another aspect is the reform of the costumes of Singapore Teochew opera. There was a change in Teochew opera costumes as opera costumes were no longer exported to Singapore after new China was established, and Singapore Teochew opera was also influenced by Guangdong Cantonese opera. Prior to the 1950s, Teochew opera costumes were made by Teochew embroidery. After the loss of the source of costumes, Singapore troupes had to buy from the local costume maker: Shanghai Chen Bingxiu Zhuang. Despite having "Shanghai" as the name of the shop, the lady boss who tailored the costumes was in fact a Cantonese. Cantonese opera costumes then used many sequins which shone brightly under the light, making it quite a sight. Teochew troupes also started to imitate and ordered them, therefore, designs made from sequins began to show on Teochew opera costumes thereafter. As the opera audience in Singapore were used to opera costumes influenced by Cantonese opera, therefore when Singapore and China Teochew opera troupes began their exchange in the 1980s, Singapore Teochew opera troupes did not change the costumes that were influenced by Cantonese opera. Taking Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe as an example, troupe leader Chua Hong Kee went to Teochew in the 1980s to look for opera costumes but felt that they pale in comparison to Cantonese opera's, so

he eventually ordered opera costumes influenced by Cantonese opera in Hong Kong.

In terms of music and singing, Teochew opera music and Teochew tunes faced challenges between the mid-1950s to early 1960s. Lead huqin performer, Chua Hong Kee described the situation then as “Teochew music was almost completely drowned”.³⁰ Xin Rong He Xing had recruited Yang Liujiang as the lead performer then, and Yang added Chinese songs such as “Ma Che Fu Zhi Lian” and “Sha Li Hong Ba” into Teochew operas. Chua recalled that Chng Gek Huay and Jiumei sang “Sha Li Hong Ba” in their adaptation of the opera “Zhang Shang Ming Zhu”. Chng also recalled that she had sang pop songs such as “Yi Ba Shan Zi” in Teochew opera, “Feng Liu Jiang Jun” in “Lü Bu and Diao Chan” and “Yazi Bei Feng” in “Jiang Hu Er Nü”.³¹ These songs were used by the opera teacher, Chen Xihe, in the opera’s song and dance scenes. Chua Hong Kee said that other than borrowing Chinese songs, Teochew operas then were also influenced by Guangdong Cantonese opera music and used Guangdong music such as “Ping Sha Luo Yan” in Teochew operas too. Thankfully this situation lasted only for a few years and stopped when the entrance of Teochew opera movies into Singapore caused an uproar in Teochew opera.

Teochew opera movies were screened in Singapore around 1959, and the superb performance in the movies made Teochew opera popular amongst the people. Only when professional Teochew opera troupes learnt from the movies and enhanced their performances did they return to the traditional Teochew music and stopped using Chinese songs and Guangdong music. In addition, some Teochew opera troupes also hired Shanghai artistes as opera teachers (Peking opera), and they were teaching action scenes mainly. Therefore, there was also a little influence by Peking opera in terms of performance. However, as there were no recordings then, it would not be possible to compare the influence of Peking opera in performances before and after the 1950s and this could only be found in the narratives of actors who had participated in the performances then.

Not only did the Teochew opera movie fever pushed professional opera troupes to develop further, it also drove amateur Teochew opera performances. Despite the setbacks faced by the development of Teochew opera post-war, its overall trend was still a thriving one. Teochew operas were hugely popular in the 1950s, but it was also

affected by other performing arts in the mid-1950s. Especially for the street shows in which Teochew operas were almost the sole monopoly, Hokkien operas had taken a portion of it from them. From an artistic angle, it seems that Teochew opera had absorbed the makeup and costumes, which are the strengths of Cantonese opera, and the techniques of performing action scenes from Peking opera, integrated them and took artistic performances to the next level. Of course, there were also the danger that the performances would have been detached from tradition and became nondescript, but thankfully the Teochew opera fever caused by Teochew opera movies guided them back to mainstream Teochew opera, and the reform kept both the traditions of Teochew music and absorbed the strengths of the other operas. The development of Teochew opera during this period was an integration with and borrowing from other forms of opera and entertainment. More importantly it was a period of change and localisation of Teochew operas. It is a pity that there were scarce video records for further research to be conducted.

There were no amateur Teochew opera societies in pre-independence Singapore. The first was founded in the 1950s. Li Huizhen believed that “Teochew Opera Society was founded in 1951 to look after the welfare of artistes and its members were all owners of opera troupes”.³² The members of the Opera Society were all owners of opera troupes and they include the troupe owners of: Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Xin Rong He Xing, Lao Yi Zhi Xiang, Lao San Zheng Shun Xiang, Lao Yu Chun Xiang and Zhong Sai Tao Yuan. However, the reason for the establishment of the society was not for the welfare of the artistes, conversely, it was to protect the interests of the employers. Therefore, the workers organised the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union in 1954. Mr Lim said in his interview that the situation then was: whenever a worker was dismissed by the xidie (referring to troupe leader) or if the worker wishes to quit and to move to another troupe for higher wages, the Opera Society will convene a meeting to prevent this. After the worker leaves the troupe, member troupes of the Opera Society will not hire this worker for the next 6 months. As many of the opera workers do not have much savings, the troupe leader could use this to control its workers. This is the reason that caused the establishment of the union (the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union) in 1954, 3 years after the establishment of Teochew Opera Society.³⁰

Due to the rules set by the Opera Society, which consist predominantly of troupe leaders (employers), limiting the welfare of employees, the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union (“Union” for short) led by the lead performer Yang Liujiang of Xin Rong He Xing troupe, led Cheah Gek Song, Chen Xiru, Hong Qisheng, Su Jianru, Chen Laixing, Tang Luhai, Chen Tudi, Wang Decheng, Chen Changshun, Tang Lianye, Chen Qiao’en and Xie Jinlian, to publicise and to organise the registration of the Union. The authorities approved the registration in 1954 and the founding conference was held officially in 1955, a union that is mainly made up of actors and musicians, that represents employees was official founded. After the foundation of the union, the opera, “Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon – Yu Jiao Long”, adapted and directed by Lin Rulie was performed for two days to raise funds for the Union.

Mr Lim said during his interview that he recalled the situation then after the Union was established was that “The lead performer (the music lead) of Xin Rong He Xing took the lead and refused to let the towkay (troupe leader or owner) to tie them down. Rights can be fought for by the Union. Every night after performances had ended, Yang Liujiang would go to about 5 or 6 troupes, from troupe to troupe to give speeches to persuade workers to join the Union. He would tell them that with the establishment of the Union, negotiations can be held with the troupe leaders such that the Opera Society cannot prevent other troupes from hiring a worker within 6 months after the worker was dismissed by his troupe.”³⁴ My deduction is that the restriction that other troupes cannot hire the worker within 6 months might be the direct reason why the Union was established. The Singapore Labour Movement was at its peak then and it was the period where the push to topple the administration of the colonial government and the exploitation of imperialism was at its peak. Many unions were established then to correct the bias caused by the colonial government policies to the working class.

The establishment of the Union was also to fight for the actors’ status and welfare. The artistes then were called derogatory names such as xizi or xizai, it was after the establishment of the Union did people call them artistes or actors instead. In terms of welfare, there used to be no overtime pay for working past the normal hours. For example, normal performing hours would end at 12, but performances at xian shui ba³⁵ in Malaya would only end at two in the morning without any overtime allowances. Allowances were only given after successful negotiations by

the Union and the decision was published in the newspapers. In addition, the Union successful fought for a month’s maternity leave for female artistes and a day’s leave for Lunar New Year’s Eve for members. There were no rest days in the past for the entire year.

As the Singapore and Malayan Teochew opera industry shared an inseparable relationship, the two places were termed as one when the Union was established in 1954, therefore the name of the Union was “Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union” when in fact this organisation was always in Singapore. During the celebration of the Union’s second anniversary, Yang Liujiang said in the “Foreword”^{xxxvi} that “the purpose of setting up this Union is to improve the lives and jobs of our brethren and to enhance employee-employer cooperation, at the same time also liaise with, increase communication and stay in touch with all Malayan Teochew opera workers, and to mutually advance the research and improvement of Teochew opera to stay current with times.” The members then came from Teochew opera troupes such as: Lao Sai Tao Yuan (60 persons), Xin Rong He Xing (52), Lao Yi Zhi Xiang (43), Lao San Zheng Shun Xiang (56), Lao Yu Chun Xiang (38) and Zhong Sai Tao Yuan (43), making it a total of 292 members. We can estimate the number of employees of each Teochew opera troupes to be between 50 to 80 persons based on the number of Union members from each troupe and these six troupes could also be seen to be the main Teochew opera troupes in the Singapore and Malaya region. Another group of 21 non-opera troupe members who were classed as “Teochew qingyin troupe and others” are artistes from Lao Zheng Tian Xiang, Xin Sai Tao Yuan, Xin Yi Li and Ying Ban San Zheng Shun.³⁷

Zhong Sai Tao Yuan folded in 1958 as there was internal strife within its shareholders and more than 70 workers were left in the lurch. The Union set up a new opera troupe, Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe, to deal with the workers’ livelihoods. Zhi Yun performed mainly in opera theatres and the occasional street shows. This is also a contribution by the Union for the artistes after the troupe was disbanded. At the same time, the organisation of Zhi Yun was different from other Teochew operas who had the traditional troupe leader system. There were no troupe leader or owner, the troupe was a shareholder system and all its workers were shareholders.

During the early years of the Union, it acted in concert with the Singapore labour movement. However, the Union was unlike the other

unions in Singapore that went on strikes and protests, like the Singapore Bus Workers Union, Textile Workers Union who frequently met and went on strikes. Teochew opera artistes were comparatively law-abiding, and this may have something to do with the lifestyle of opera troupes. Opera troupe artistes performed 365 days a year and had little time to understand the movements and developments of society. Opera troupes frequently go abroad, causing difficulties in maintaining communication with the outside world for extended periods, and as many artistes were illiterate, therefore this background would cause them to be more law-abiding. In addition, there are some people who are less willing to join the Union due to emotional attachment, for example Chng Gek Huay, who felt that the troupe leader had treated her mother and her well.³⁸ Therefore the Union was not actively participating in activities to subvert the employers. This could also be the reason why the Union became inactive eventually and every election became routine. The Union finally changed itself into the Teochew Opera Friendship Society in the early 1980s as the functions of a union ceased to exist.

5. Post-independence to 1980

There were approximately 20 professional opera troupes that were relatively active in the early years of independence, such as: Xin Rong He Xing, Lao Sai Tao Yuan, Lao Yi Zhi Xiang, Zhi Yun, Lao San Zheng Shun, Lao Zhong Zheng Shun, Xin Rong Yi, Lao Zheng Li Xiang, Xin Yi, Xin Xing, Lao Zheng Tian Xiang, Lao Sai Bao Feng, Xin Yi Tian Cai, Tuo Hong, Xin Chao Yi, Zhong Yi Tian Xiang, Lao Yu Chun, Xin Tian Cai and Lao Yu Li Xiang. It should be pointed out, however, that in the two to three years following independence, troupes were still performing in Malaysia as Singapore and Malaysia had not completely split then. There were 24 Teochew opera television shows filmed in the Singapore television station between 1968 to 1969. Although short-lived, the Ministry of Culture also invited troupes such as Lao Sai Tao Yuan and Lao Yi Zhi Xiang to air-conditioned theatres to perform for its arts festival in the early 1970s. Thereafter, as Singapore hastened its pace for the development of the city, there was a sharp decline in the number of villages, which meant opera troupes were unable to set up opera stages at will; the opera stages of the village temples were also torn down and the number of operas to thank the gods reduced significantly, thereby leading to lesser number of performance grounds and opportunities. In addition, entertainment places were no longer thriving, and opera

troupes were unable to perform in Singapore and Malaysia freely like before, leading to a constant reduction in performances and economic benefits.

Staff turnover for professional opera troupes was particularly serious post-independence. While a Teochew opera troupe could have up to a hundred people in the 1950s, a big troupe in the 1970s would have about 50 people in the troupe. The aging and passing of artistes along with the switching in profession by the actors, caused big troupe to become small troupes, and there were many troupes that even disbanded quietly by the late 1970s. Opera troupes were mainly made up of a group of artistes who started off as child actors post-war and they were just about the age of young adulthood to middle-aged. Many of them left due to the reduction in the income of the opera troupes and other jobs offered better pay. The hidden concern that Teochew opera would be unable to find its successor in the 1980s became embedded, as economic restructuring, industrialisation and commercialisation and troupes were unable to attract young people to learn opera were happening at the same time.

There was a reduction in performance opportunities and local Teochew opera troupes were unable to develop new performance locations and opportunities. Even though there was the National Theatre and Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, local Teochew opera troupes had never performed in those theatres. Teochew opera lead musical performer Chua Hong Kee once said that professional opera troupes performed mainly in street shows which were free-of-charge. Audiences would not spend money on tickets to watch operas in theatres when there were free shows.³⁹ My inference is that the income from street shows for Teochew opera troupes then were good and there was no need to risk performing in theatres when there was no guarantee for box office.

The Singapore television station pushed for a "mass compilation of local opera" in 1968 to launch opera shows systematically. A total of 24 Teochew operas were broadcasted between 1968–69, with Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe performing 6 of them, Lao Yu Chun Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe performing 4, 2 by Thailand's Xin Zhong Zheng Teochew Opera Troupe, 4 by Xin Rong He Xing, 4 by Lao Yi Zhi Xiang, 2 by Lao Sai Tao Yuan troupe, 2 by Lao San Zheng Shun Teochew Opera Troupe. There were also 3 shows performed by amateur opera troupes Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association⁴⁰, Yio Chu Kang Road⁴¹ Villagers Mutual Assistance Society and Nam Hwa Opera. However, the

thriving sight was only temporary. There were also 24 shows broadcasted in the 10 years between 1970-1979, which is a significant drop, and half of which was performed by amateur opera troupes, which meant professional troupes only had 12 shows in 10 years.

Overseas Teochew opera troupes also became competitors to local troupes post-independence. There were troupes from Hong Kong such as Xin Tian Cai, Sheng Yi, Xin Tian Yi, Zhong Yuan He, Shantou Xiangjiang Teochew Opera troupe; troupes from Thailand such as Xin Zhong Zheng Shun and Lao Sai Bao Feng and troupes from Malaysia such as Xing Ma Xin Yi Teochew Opera Troupe. These troupes performed mainly in Gay World, New World, Kreta Ayer People's Theatre and the National Theatre. Of which, Xin Tian Cai performed for more than 110 days in 1973, more than 130 days between 1974-1975; Sheng Yi performed for more than 100 days in 1977 and Xin Tian Yi performed for more than 110 days in 1978. Many other overseas opera troupes would perform for more than a month. These foreign troupes that came to perform ticketed shows were from one type of opera only and yet they were able to take many days of performance at theatres. Therefore, this is also one of the reasons why local Teochew opera troupes were unable to perform at theatres.

The difficulties faced by Teochew opera troupes come mainly from the economic and cultural environment of society. This is different for amateur opera troupes as they do not face pressure in terms of box office, and the audience are usually from within their own circle, which are members or their friends and families. The development of amateur opera troupes in post-independence Singapore was relatively stable as amateur musical and dramatic associations switch to perform Teochew opera. Despite the focus on people then was nation building and managing their own livelihood, but activities were still frequent. Taking Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association as an example, performances are held annually, and Thau Yong and Liu Yi also held performances annually or once every two years. Most of the performances are held at the Victoria Theatre, National Theatre and the Kreta Ayer People's Theatre. There would be more performances if there were fundraisers or other charitable activities. In 1967, amateur musical and dramatic associations performed a total of 14 performances on 6 occasions, a record which still stands, as the Chen Chuhui-led Hong Kong Xin Tian Cai troupe raised a wave of Teochew opera fever in Singapore.

Li Huizhen's thesis emphasised the severe impact caused by social

unrest to Teochew opera after 1963 and how it caused the gradual shrinking of the Teochew opera market. In addition, as they were unable to come up with new ideas for the content of performances and many artistes do not seek improvement, therefore causing the gradual decline of Teochew opera today.⁴² (Based on the thesis' completion date of 1972, the author should be referring to the late 1960s to early 1970s) Based on my analysis of the information that I have gathered, I am of the opinion that professional Teochew opera were still flourishing in the early years post-independence and the development of amateur opera troupes can be said to be stable.

6. 1980s till date

The Singaporean society was gradually completing the process of transformation and moving towards stabilisation from the 1980s. This is when professional Teochew opera troupes start to face serious problems. There were still more than 20 professional Teochew opera troupes in the 1970s, but it has since halved. This could be because a portion of these troupes remained in Malaysia after Singapore split from Malaysia, but one should not ignore the opera troupes that disbanded quietly. The formation of Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe in 1980 was not due to market demand but a split from Xin Rong He Xing troupe due to internal problems. Some may question how could performances continue when a troupe was split into two? However, because there were other Teochew opera troupes that were disbanding, there were no problems in recruiting actors. In terms of looking for youthful successors, Kim Eng had also tried to advertise in the papers to look for apprentices but there were only a few who responded, and only one who remained after completing his training. As there were not a lot of people who were concerned about the development of Teochew opera and society's developmental focus was not on operas, professional Teochew opera troupes might be secretly glad that there were lesser competitors. That was why there was not much ripple caused by the gradual disbanding of opera troupes.

Teochew opera troupes faced mounting problems with the completion of society's transformation, the sharp decline in audience numbers and the taking over of the opera market by foreign Teochew opera troupes, who even invaded the market of operas to thank the gods, the prospering of other recreational entertainment and the lack of

actors and musicians. The closure of the 174 years old troupe, Xin Rong He Xing, with the opera “Wan Gu Liu Fang” on 14th January 2001 finally woken many people’s memories and concern. There were about more than 300 audiences who went to watch the show, even though it was a pity the spectacle only occurred during its final act before its demise. The more well-acclaimed Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe also disbanded on 10th February 2007, but the number of people who went to watch its show numbered less than a hundred, and the severe drop in audience numbers is plain to see. Coincidentally, the troupe leader of Xin Rong He Xing, Tan Khar Luan⁴³, and the troupe leader of Kim Eng, Chua Hong Kee⁴⁴ said during the oral history interviews that the reason for disbanding was due to the lack of successors, and it was better to end on a high while their opera arts were still of a certain level. Chua Hong Kee said that there were still 280 days of performances in a year, therefore maintaining an opera troupe was still plausible. However, the decline in the arts and the lack of new talents caused him to become down-hearted. I had followed Teochew opera troupes for more than two years, and Kim Eng’s skills were superior compared to other Teochew opera troupes, yet the troupe leader chose to give up. There are only 3 or 4 professional opera troupes remaining in Singapore such as Xin Xin Rong He Xin, which is newly founded by old actors; the historic Lao Sai Tao Yuan who perform mainly in Malaysia, and Zhi Yun who only perform in Singapore during the lunar seventh month’s Hungry Ghost Festival.

Amateur Teochew opera in Singapore rely on amateur musical and dramatic associations who hold activities constantly, but they also face the same difficulties in attracting younger generation to learn Teochew opera. Other than amateur musical and dramatic associations, there were also some newly established amateur organisations. The Teochew Opera Friendship Society in 1984 was originally the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union and is inactive, many of its members are there just

to play with music. The Society used to perform in community clubs and had participated in the International Teochew Opera Festival in Shantou in 1993, Turkey in 1998, and performed in Kuching in 1997. Kityang Huay Kwan set up its Teochew opera troupe in 1995, and other than its usual practices on weekends, it held public performances annually and participated in the activities of various organisations to perform and were quite active, and at one time it had more than a hundred members. The Macpherson Zone C Residents’ Committee Senior Citizens Club had a Teochew opera group in 1996, Paya Lebar Teochew Opera Troupe invited Cai Bixia of the Opera Institute to be their trainer and to train the troupe. The current active members of amateur Teochew opera troupes are mainly senior citizens.

7. Conclusion

Local Teochew opera appear less optimistic in recent years as professional troupes are bounded by the difficult circumstances and are dependent on the Teochew opera activities of amateur troupes. China Teochew opera troupes are relied upon for ticketed theatre performances, and there is also such trend even for operas to thank the gods. An example would be the Koo Chye Ba Sheng Hong Temple. Other than hiring local troupes a few years ago, Koo Chye Ba Sheng Hong Temple started to invite foreign troupes to perform its operas to thank the gods. It can be gleaned from the ticketed Teochew opera performances in theatres that there were still audiences in Singapore for Teochew opera, but there is no place for local troupes. Foreign troupes and amateur societies are to be depended upon if Teochew operas are not to vanish from Singapore in future.

(translated from Chinese)

Note:

- 1 *Dictionary of Chinese Operas (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 1995), p1311.*
- 2 *Xu Yongshun, Singapore Teochew Opera and Han Opera: 1963-1983 (Singapore: Xu Yongshun Studio, 2008)*
- 3 *I came to know that "Pigsties" in China are related to inns in Singapore according to the sporadic information in oral history. Although this is an interesting topic, such as the family business of the troupe leaders of Lao Sai Tao Yuan and Xin Rong He Xing were inns, but as this article is not about the inn industry, this shall not be taken into discussion.*
- 4 *Vaughan, Jonas Daniel, The manners and customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements, Singapore: Mission Press, 1879, p82.*
- 5 *Li Zhongyu, Journal of Local Customs of Singapore (Singapore: Nanyang Book Co Ltd, 1947), p28.*
- 6 *Edited by Yu Shukun, Nanyang Year Book (Singapore: Nanyang Press, 1951), Volume B, p217.*
- 7 *Dictionary of Chinese Operas (Shanghai: Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 1995), p1312.*
- 8 *Zheng Rongxing, An initial look into beiguan musical activities after the retrocession of Taiwan, Proceedings of the 1st Academic Symposium of the China Folk Music Society (Taipei: Council for Cultural Affairs), p101.*
- 9 *See Building Plans of the National Archives of Singapore "Repair to theatre Merchant Road, 41" Accession no55, 1889 and Front ground floor theatre hall, Merchant Rd, MC41", Accession no 170, 1896.*
- 10 *Wayang - A History of Chinese Opera in Singapore (Singapore: The National Archives of Singapore, 1988), p31.*
- 11 *Near to the current Tiong Bahru, it was mainly a cemetery and a small village with temples. Tan Tock Seng's grave still resides there.*
- 12 *Kim Lan Beo was founded by the people from Yongchun and Quanzhou in 1830 and was located near the junction of Yan Kit Road and Narcis Street, commonly known as "Little Market. Singapore had just opened its port for 11 years and people were forming societies to protect their interests. Kim Lan Beo was the centre for secret society activities of the Hokkien gang "Taoyuan Jieyi" during the early years when Singapore just opened its port.*
- 13 *Li Huizhen, Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore, p1.*
- 14 *See Interview with Mr Lim TS, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 1988, Accession no. 0891 Transcripts, p115 Lat Pau, 14th May 1895, p5.*
- 16 *Lat Pau, 8th March 1909, p8.*
- 17 *Li Huizhen, Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore, p1-2.*
- 18 *Interview with Mr Lim TS, Transcripts, p50-51.*
- 19 *Oral History Interview with Mdm Tan Yeo Toe, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 1988, Accession Number 0939*
- 20 *Oral History Interview with Mr Cheah Gek Song, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 1988, Accession Number 0932*
- 21 *Syonan Jit Pau, Singapore, 26th April 1942, p3.*
- 22 *Light of the South Weekly Published by Syonan Jit Pau of Syonan-to weekly, beginning at the end of February 1942.*
- 23 *Oral History Interview with Chua Hong Kee, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 2005, Accession no. 2979, Volume 1-3.*
- 24 *Manuscript of Wei Mufa, 27th June 2006.*
- 25 *Li Huizhen, Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore, p2*
- 26 *Interview with Mr Lim TS, Transcripts, p50-51.*
- 27 *Oral History Interview with Mr Cheah Gek Song.*
- 28 *Transcript of Oral History Interview with Mr Cheah Gek Song, p31.*
- 29 *Oral History Interview with Chng Gek Huay, National Archives of Singapore*
- 30 *Lai Suchun's interview with Mr Chua Hong Kee, 16th January 2006.*
- 31 *Chng Gek Huay, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 1987, Accession no. 860.*
- 32 *Li Huizhen, Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore, p2*
- 33 *Interview with Mr Lim TS, Transcripts, p75-76.*
- 34 *Interview with Mr Lim TS, Transcripts, p75.*
- 35 *Xian Shui Ba refer to the red forests by the seaside. Here it means the villages near to the sea.*
- 36 *Yang Bangyao, Cai Maosen, Special Publication in Commemoration of the 2nd Anniversary of the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union (Singapore: Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union, 1957), p1.*
- 37 *Special Publication in Commemoration of the 2nd Anniversary of the Malayan Teochew Opera Workers Union, p55-57.*
- 38 *Oral History Interview with Chng Gek Huay, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 1987, Accession no. 860.*
- 39 *Oral history interview with Chua Hong Kee*
- 40 *Publication in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association (Singapore: Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association, 1972), p143-144.*
- 41 *Yio Chu Kang Road, name of a place*
- 42 *Li Huizhen, Development of Teochew Opera in Singapore (Singapore: Nanyang University National University of Singapore Honours Thesis, 1971/72), p2-3.*
- 43 *Oral History Interview with Tan Khar Luan, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Recording date: 2001-2002, Accession no. 2482*
- 44 *Oral History Interview with Chua Hong Ke*

A Brief Understanding of Singapore's Teochew Opera

Shen Xiangqu

Note: Teochew Opera, originally named as Teochew Accent (Chao Qiang), Teochew Tune (Chao Diao) or Elegant Tunes of Quan Chao (Quan Chao Ya Diao), is also known as Teochew-hee or Teochew Dialectal Opera (Chao Zhou Bai Zi Xi). Teochew Opera is a type of localised Chinese Opera performed using the Teochew dialect that arose from the Southern Song and Yuan Dynasty (12~14 Century) and gained popularity through the Southern Opera (Nan Xi) of the Eastern Guangdong and Southern Fujian during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE). It also followed the footsteps of Teochew ancestors, reaching Southeast Asian countries first before spreading to many countries all over the world subsequently.

Initially, Teochew Opera troupes would travel from China to Southeast Asian countries for commercial performances. However, Teochew Opera International was born after Teochews living abroad started organising and registering Teochew Opera societies in the countries they lived in. Not only do such societies keep in constant contact with China Teochew Opera, some societies had to develop and evolve to adapt to its environment. For example, there are societies in Thailand who can perform Teochew Operas in Thai.

Teochew Opera has its unique history of existence and development amongst the diversity of culture in Singapore.

1. Immigration and Teochew Opera

There are no reliable written records of the earliest Teochew Opera performance in Singapore. According to the book "Journal of Local Customs of Singapore" written by Li Zhongjue who was sent to Singapore as an envoy by the Qing Dynasty in 1887 CE, Chinese Opera performances were already relatively active. "There were male and female troupes in the theatres, about four or five at Dapo, one or two at Xiaopo, and all of them were performing Cantonese Operas with the occasional Min Opera and Teochew Opera. Only countrymen would watch the shows and the prices were very cheap, the most three or four zhan, or two or three heyin (thousandth of a tael) per person. Prices were not in taels." (See Note 1) There was also a record in the 1985 Singapore

Lianhe Zaobao's "Leaving a Footprint in History" column that states "Teochew Opera troupe 'Lao Sai Yong Feng' came from China to perform at the start of the century. Initially they erected a tent at a field (where Saint Joseph's Church currently stands) located at the junction of Victoria Street and Middle Road and performed there." (See Note 2) According to the two abovementioned description, it proves that since the mid to late 19th century, Singapore already has a certain scale of Teochew Opera performances, with the former as commercial performances in theatres whilst the latter as performances in open air stage performances. It can be surmised that the timing of the arrival of Teochew Opera not just in Singapore, but also the neighbouring Malayan peninsular, could be much earlier, especially for open air stage performances. There is a close relationship between this and the history of overseas immigration from Chaoshan district.

Residents of the south-eastern coast of China rely on the developed handicraft industry and advanced shipbuilding and navigation technology to begin the expansion of trade in the Nanyang island countries way back in the Tang and Song Dynasty. Thereafter when Zheng He lead his huge fleet on the Ming's Treasure Voyages during the Yongle years in the Ming Dynasty (from 1405 CE) did the Nanyang countries and Ming Dynasty established close relations. Trading among the people also became more frequent. Exciting stories and myths about Zheng He and his exploits in foreign lands were passed down from Teochew ancestors who had been to Nanyang to the people in Chaoshan.

Due to Zheng Chenggong's occupation of Taiwan and Nan'ao to topple the Qing Dynasty and restore the Ming Dynasty, the Qing government instilled the cruel "Great Clearance" along the south-eastern coast during the Shunzhi and Kangxi years, prohibiting its people from going to the sea. However, despite facing the probability of being accused of piracy, the border people would still take the risk to venture into the seas to engage in trading activity with the Nanyang countries. The interactions between the Teochew ancestors and the people of Southeast Asian countries paved the way for future mass immigration.

The mass immigration from Chaoshan to Singapore and Malaysia occurred in the 100 years between mid to late 19th century to mid-20th century, which is also the period between the late Qing Dynasty and Republic of China. One reason for the mass migration was that China was facing both internal problems and external aggression, frequent wars and continuous famines and disasters. The overpopulated but land scarce Chaoshan farmers were forced by circumstances to go abroad and seek a living. Another reason was that colonisers were recruiting workers from China's south-eastern coastline to develop the Nanyang islands. Bankrupt farmers and unemployed urban residents responded to the recruitment and received a sum of money as commission and left it with their families whilst they went abroad to work. In 1860, Shantou opened its port and was designated as a foreign trading port, providing immigrants from Shantou to Fujian tremendous convenience. Thereafter, there were gradually more stories of Teochew Opera troupes going abroad to perform. There were a few characteristics of Chaoshan immigrants of this period. Firstly, relatives or townsmen living in the same area would travel together. Next, regardless of the timing of arrival at the destination, fellow townsmen or clansmen would settle together to watch out for one another and to help one another to tide over times. Thirdly is to bring over the guardian spirit of the clansmen or townsmen to the settlement for common worshipping and to enhance the cohesion of the ethnic group. Once circumstances permit, temples will be built, sculptures will be made, and regular worshipping will be held according to stories from hometown. Since the gods that are invited from the hometown had always watched over and protected followers in foreign lands all year long, devotees must give their thanks and worship. A major part of thanking and respecting the gods would include opera performances, and Teochew Operas would be performed where Teochews settle. The elders of the clan would be responsible for matters such as raising money to invite the troupe from their hometown and arranging the performances.

Whilst the Westerners have used arts such as beautiful singing, vivid illustrations and sculptures to praise God in churches, people in Chaoshan erect stages right across the temples and used the deafening drums, wind and string instruments, beautiful singing, and colourful makeup found in the art of Teochew Opera to give thanks to the gods for their protection and blessing. "Chinese Operas originated from a long history of traditional folk dancing.....it's roots can be found in the

ritualistic dancing rites of primitive times. It is both singing and dancing, and part of it encompasses an element of performance. For example, the hunting dance is a ritual to thank the gods after a hunt or to show respect to the gods before embarking on a hunt. In the festivals of every tribe, this type of ritualistic dancing rites is an all-encompassing type of activity." (See Note 3)

Today, Teochew Operas are performed in folk ceremonies such as worshipping ceremonies in the villages of Chaoshan. This is a continuation of customs from old times. The survival of art gains a certain level of assurance when it becomes an indispensable part of ceremonies, pursuing exquisiteness whilst not ruling out the crude.

Every monument of Western arts is tied to religious beliefs, in its intent in cleansing the soul and pursuing sublimation of one's thoughts. The definition of Chinese Operas is to give thanks to the gods, to entertain the people and to educate masses by incorporating teachings into entertainment, thus allowing the souls of the audience to be baptised while enjoying the opera.

As there were already a significant number of Teochews that had settled in Singapore in the late 19th and early 20th century, holding operas to thank the gods spread quickly. "Lao Yu Lou Chun, led by Chen Chengzhi, was the first Teochew Opera troupe that came to Singapore, more than 10 years before the arrival of Lao Sai Yong Feng. In other words, Qing Nang Chao Ju Lao Yu Lou Chun were established in Singapore by early 1900." "Many troupes, big and small, came one after the other to the south to perform between 1920 to 1940. They include troupes such as Lao Yi Zhi Xiang, Lao Yi Tian Xiang, Lao Yuan He Xing, Lao Zheng Tian Xiang, Lao Zhong Zheng Shun Xiang, Lao Sai Bao Feng, Lao Yi Li Chun, Zhong Zheng Shun, Lao Mei Zheng Xing, Zhong Sai Tao Yuan, Lao Zheng Chun Xiang and Xin Sai Bao Feng. Teochew Opera in Singapore seemed to be a thriving scene. Other than performing in Singapore, these troupes also toured many places in Nanyang, for example Malaysia, Thailand and the Dutch East Indies islands (Indonesia), and they led a wandering troupe life." (See Note 4)

Singapore is a city that has many types of theatres. In the early days there were Tong Le Yuan and 3 other opera houses. Not only were the southbound Teochew Opera troupes engaging in open air performances, described by the locals as street shows, they also performed in theatres. However, just as what Li Zhong Yu had said, "Only countrymen would

watch the shows and the prices were very cheap”, therefore these troupes would have to tour about Nanyang and lead wandering lives.

2. Migrant and Local

Teochews who go abroad to seek a living in the past would dig up some sand from the well in their hometown, dry it and kept it on them. When they reach their destination, they would toss it into the well there. Teochews believed that this will enable them to adjust to the local conditions. This is called “fu shui tu” (lit. acclimatise to the water and soil) in Teochew. When Teochew Opera troupes came to Singapore, despite having exchanges, it was still temporary living in a foreign country. However, I believe that the sweet-tasting well of Chinatown has received the well soil brought by the Teochews. Even though they are staying temporarily, they still must fit in, to fu shui tu! However, the harsh child actor (Tong Ling) system was brought to the attention of the English colonial government in Singapore. “The Secretariat for Chinese Affairs Department ordered the prohibition of child actors from performing in 1931, causing Teochew Opera troupes to face difficulties”, despite the relevant societies request to the authorities to delay the execution of the order, “the authorities repatriated 14 young actors from two Teochew Opera troupes to their country in June 1934.....The troupe Zhong Zheng Shun Xiang was unable to perform in September 1936 as 39 child actors were unable to gain residence permits. This matter was escalated to the High Court where the final judgment was that the troupe leader had to bring these child actors back to Shantou within 3 weeks.” (See Note 5)

Learning and performing the arts are artistes’ way to survival. Other than the occasional clan troupes, troupe leaders manage troupes to make a profit. Through buying and grooming child actors to perform, human capital costs are reduced to the minimum whilst maximising the room for capital profits. The cruelty of the child actor system lies in the agreement which both buyers and sellers contract that contains a disclaimer of liability for death. Poor families would sell their child of about 10 years of age (almost all of them boys) to the troupe. The period of bondage is usually fixed at 7 years and 10 months as the child would be at his voice changing period when the contract is up and would no longer be suitable to perform as a child actor. During the term of the contract, parents are not allowed to enquire on the child’s life or death, and the troupe could

use cruel corporal punishment to drive the child to learn opera singing. Even if the child passes away due to illnesses or accidents, the troupe, specifically the troupe leader, do not bear any legal responsibility. This is not tolerated by Singapore’s colonial government. The National Museum of Singapore has such a document in its collection where the contents state “Contracting parties Deng Qifang, Chen Yaguo is willing to let their daughter Chen Yamei, aged 11 to be sent to Teochew Opera troupe Lao Sai Tao Yuan to learn the arts. It is agreed that the term of employment shall be seven years, salary in the first year shall be ten dollars, and an increment of three dollars every year. A loan of three hundred dollars is taken from the troupe leader, if any party wishes to extent the contract when it is up, an agreement can be negotiated based on the current market rate. If (the child) wishes to leave the troupe when the contract ends, anything owed to the troupe leader must be listed clearly and compensated to the troupe leader for all losses, otherwise (parties will be) willing to let this matter be dealt with according to the government’s laws. If any accidents were to occur during the term of contract, it shall be fate and shall not be used as an excuse to cause trouble. As oral agreements are no proof, thus a copy of this written agreement shall be held by both parties as evidence. It is agreed that (the child) would follow the troupe leader should the troupe goes to another state.” Below the contents were the signature and thumb impressions of the contracting parties and introducer, and right at the bottom was “Signed on the seventeenth day of the second month of the thirty fifth year of the Republic of China”. This contract was signed sometime towards the end of 1946, and the header states that it is a contract for the learning of arts. “Essentially it is a deed of bondage. As the buying and selling of humans was a crime in those days, it was stated on purpose that the contract was to send the girl to learn the arts while disguising the selling price as 10 dollars monthly salary. The contract borrowed the local government’s laws to ensure the troupe leader will not suffer a loss and for the child to obey the troupe leader’s instructions and used the Republic of China’s dating methods to highlight the nationality of the contracting parties to avoid the checks into the contract by the laws of the country they are in.” (See Note 6)

There were many large Teochew Opera troupes that came to Singapore mainly to serve Teochew immigrants. From the early 20th century till 1940, these troupes came on and off the stage consecutively, staying amongst the masses or staging street shows or performing in

theatres or for benefit performances. Some of these troupes stayed for a short while before returning to their home country as they could not adjust; some troupes disbanded in foreign lands due to poor management; some were bought over by local magnates, becoming local troupes. Teochews call creatures and objects that are found or born locally and that has geographical advantage as Zhen Tu. If troupes that come to and from Chaoshan, China to Singapore to perform are known as migrant Teochew Opera troupes, then those troupes that are invested by Singaporeans, registered by the government and recruit locals to learn opera are Zhen Tu Teochew Opera, therefore also Singapore Teochew Opera. The “Contract to Learn the Arts” as stated above contains similar messages. One, it is for the troupes to survive according to law; and secondly to recruit girls to sing, therefore breaking the tradition of male actors posing as female characters and resolving the problem of singing with the same tone and tune in Teochew Opera. For operas, the latter is a significant reform. Therefore, after New China was established and the child actor system in Teochew Operas was abolished in the early 1950s, a batch of young Teochew Opera female character actors went back from Singapore and other Nanyang countries to their home country to participate in troupes and to perform.

If a certain performing art is unable to conduct artistic reform to adapt to its surroundings, then it will simply continue to shrivel to its extinction. Singapore Teochew Opera is self-aware in this regard. As China Teochew Opera has long lived in the open fields of agriculture, it’s art is filled with the fragrance of mother earth. As Singapore is an urban city, for Teochew Opera to stay, it must produce Teochew Operas that suits the citizens’ culture. Mr Lin Ru Lie (1906 – 1981), who started teaching opera since he was 19, has a sharp nose for the arts and strong implementation capacity. Silent films were only beginning to popularise in mid 1920s, other than “giving people novel experiences, it is still far from ideal if you wish to use artistic techniques to resonate with audiences. Therefore, Mr Lin absorbed the themes of silent films and adapted modern titles that were screened at that time such as “The Lucky Dolt” and “Tears of Qiuxin” into modern Teochew Operas. Thus, monochrome images became stage art with sounds, colours, arts, dialogues, lyrics and music, winning enthusiastic response.” “Thereafter he directed several shows such as ‘The Iron Tree Beauty’, ‘Filial Girl Takes Revenge’, ‘Out of the Hell’, ‘Selling the Cow to Open a Shop’, ‘Femme Fetale’, ‘Daughter of a General’. Among these films were modern and historical period films.” (See Note 7) The

significance of Mr Lin Ru Lie’s works should not be underestimated. Not only did he explore ways to improve Teochew Operas, he also created Teochew Operas of unique Singapore flavours. He is comparable to the Thai Youth Awareness Society of the same era. A group of youths of the Thai society, Youth Awareness Society, led by Chen Tiehan advocated the improvement of Teochew Opera and production of new titles. Chen was the first to adapt Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” into Teochew Opera.

After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War due to the 7th July 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, Teochew Opera troupes in Singapore organised benefit performances one after the other to raise funds in support of their home country’s war against the Japanese invaders.

3. Classical Favourites and Beloved Fads

Singapore fell shortly after the outbreak of the Pacific War on 7 December 1941. Industries withered under Japanese Occupation and Teochew Opera troupes scattered, leaving troupes like Lao Sai Tao Yuan languishing.

After Japan’s surrender, Singapore began its reconstruction immediately. Many migrants who left pre-war but were unable to return to Singapore due to the war, returned with the aid of the United Nations relief agencies together with new immigrants from the Chaoshan region. Teochew Opera troupes sprouted like bamboo shoots after the rain as the economy recovered quickly. The Teochew Opera Society and the Teochew Opera Workers Union that were established in 1951 and 1955 respectively had about 6 or 7 performing troupes. These professional troupes performed on the streets, in the theatres and toured Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, contributed to the re-prospering of Singapore Teochew Opera.

The unique geographical location and cultural environment allowed Singapore’s economy to develop rapidly during peacetime. An abundance of material civilisation and international cultural exchange prompted the people to continually put forth new requests of the arts and aesthetics.

In contrast to other localised Chinese Opera such as the Cantonese and Hokkien Opera, professional Teochew Opera troupes were obviously

lagging in terms of management and production of new operas, and the child actor system inhibited its development. That is why despite painstaking management, the quality of operas was low, there were little investments and with the weakening of the pool of acting talents, there exist a great disparity between the actual performance and the expectations of the audience.

After “The Fire of Linjiang” in 1958 came China Teochew Opera films such as “Su Liu Niang”, “Chen San Wu Niang”, “Swallows Greet the Spring”, “Blooms by the Han River” and “Suing my Husband”. The distinctive themes, plot twists, elegant lines, touching aria, vivid performances coupled with melodious music and just the right packaging, intoxicated the audiences who left their hometown at a young age and were used to watching child actors performing Teochew Operas, leaving them in exclamation, “So, Teochew Opera can be this beautiful!” What fuelled this wave of Teochew Opera fever was the extraordinarily quick production of Hong Kong Teochew Opera movies. In the 1950s, Hong Kong Teochew Opera picked up on the achievements of the reform of China’s Teochew Opera and was reborn and presented to local audience with a new look. Many Hong Kong Teochew Opera actors were involved in and familiar with both operas and movies, they shot movies one after the other to be screened on the market as a head start. Thereafter, troupes such as Xin Tian Cai, Zhong Yuan He, Xiang Jiang and Sheng Yi went abroad. Xian Tian Cai, led by actor Chen Chuhui, would perform more than a month in Singapore and have large number of fans.

The China Teochew Opera movies that gave rise to the Teochew Opera fever shook Singapore’s show business. Even though mainland China’s Teochew Opera troupes were still unable to come and perform locally, but the continued blows from the entry of Hong Kong Teochew Opera troupes severely extruded the local professional troupe. Local professional Teochew Opera performances termed “Vibrant Development 20 Years Post-War” (See Note 8) faced a cliff like drop.

However, despite facing the same shock, the Singapore Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association responded positively.

There were already Amateur Musical and Dramatic Associations in the early 20th century, with the members mainly Teochews. Members would gather and play music, rehearse and perform Wai Jiang Xi to entertain themselves and others, and took to themselves to promote Chinese

culture. In China, from the capital city to local districts, from officials, merchants to the intelligentsia and common folk, there existed people who Wan Piao, i.e. amateur fans who learn to sing operas to prove their refinement. There were only fans that played Han music and sang Wai Jiang Xi (Cantonese Han Opera) in the past in Chaoshan district. These fan organisations were called Amateur Musical and Dramatic Associations. To certain groups of people, fans were only dignified if they sang Wai Jiang Xi as Wai Jiang Xi was performed by adults that sang in the Zhongzhou dialect (Mandarin Chinese), with the tone and tune belonging to the Pihuang Qiang, which is a one of the four great characteristic melodies in Chinese Operas. Teochew Operas were performed by child actor troupes and sung in local dialect and was deemed gauche. Some felt Teochew Operas were not worthy of appreciation and would not watch Teochew Operas. The problem is Zhongzhou dialect differs from the Putong Hua or Mandarin Chinese that the country advocates, hardly anyone in Singapore would use it in their daily lives. Therefore, the audience base was weaker. The Teochew Opera fever changed the Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association inherent view of Teochew Operas. Associations such as Liu Yi, Thau Yong and Er Woo started to rehearse and perform Teochew Operas. At the same time, Nam Hwa Opera, which was set up in 1963, started recruitment under the Teochew Opera banner. Mr Yeoh Liew Kung (1912 – 2004), who was hailed as the pioneer of Teochew Opera reform, established the Teochew Drama Association in 1983 and served as the first president. Suddenly amateur Teochew Opera societies were in great strength and they pursued a higher class of arts by performing exquisite works of China Teochew Operas, and a new Teochew Opera scene that adapts to the times was formed.

Teochew Operas has approximately 500 years of history and can be deemed a time honoured Chinese Opera. However, if not for the great reform in the 1950s, it would not have gained a place in New China nor have such great influence overseas, including Singapore Teochew Opera. The amateur Teochew Opera associations in Singapore put in consistent efforts, actively responded to challenges of time to nurture talents with the aim of producing new operas and achieved impressive results.

4. Faint Nostalgia and Wings of Ideals

1979 was the first time China Guangdong Teochew Opera troupe performed in Singapore. Audiences, especially the Teochew audiences,

got to see many much-adored famous actors whom they saw in movies at their doorstep, and they were in a festive mood. Every seat in each performance was fully sold and the spacious National Theatre was filled. This was a long-awaited arts banquet, and it fully embodied the artistic charm of the most top-of-the-line Teochew Opera performances in contemporary times. However, it must be admitted that another reason was the Teochew audiences then hoped to alleviate the homesickness that had been long accumulated by going to the theatres to watch the operas sung in their native language.

As cultural exchanges with New China grew increasingly close, China Teochew Opera appeared on Singapore stage consecutively. As time goes by, those who seek the faint nostalgia in theatres lessen, while more and more people started to appreciate the arts critically.

“Singapore’s economy developed rapidly after 1980. Some districts were requisitioned in succession during the process of urban renewal and this had an unprecedented influence on traditional opera troupes that performed street shows traditionally. As the Chinese community and the language environment changes, coupled with modern information technology and the influence of globalisation, the audience for Chinese local Operas decreased, along with the number of performances and its spread.” (See Note 9) Due to the passage of time, the space for professional Teochew Opera troupe activities decreased, leading to the eventual exit from the market and its demise. Amateur performing arts associations such as the Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association continued to keep the drums of Teochew Operas rolling by willingly performing new Operas yearly in order to inherit and carry forward the art of Teochew Operas.

Singapore stipulated Mandarin as one of its official languages after gaining independence in 1965. Even though local operas are sung in various dialects, the value of it as a form of Chinese cultural art in this multi-cultural country is unquestionable. Therefore, Teochew Opera can represent the country in international cultural exchanges.

“Many countries in the world have their own folk plays. On closer examination however, there are three main origins: firstly, ancient Greek drama; next, Indian classical drama; and the other, Chinese Opera. Chinese Opera is the only living ancient drama remaining in this world.” (See Note 10) Operas combine various artistic elements such as literature, music, dance, acrobatics and art into one, forming a unique

style of opera that “use songs and dances to perform a story” (by Wang Guowei), which has been widely sought after by Chinese audiences over the years. If we are to start tracing from the Song Zaju (a form of Chinese Opera), Chinese Operas has been constantly refining and developing itself through the years. Every time it reaches any place, it blends with the local folk arts to form a variety of local operas with its unique tone and tune. During the Qing Dynasty in the mid-17th century, operas has developed into a massive family with many different branches. Not only has it spread across China, “It also played a part in influencing dramas in Southeast Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam, forming an independent system of drama culture.” (See Note 11) Singaporeans who love Teochew Operas are aware of this. When the second and third generation of Teochew immigrants became the pillars of society, many of them could not speak Teochew well and images of China and homesickness became faded. Perhaps it became a memory of a symbol despite greater accessibility and the relative geographical closeness of their hometown. How can they gain interest in the art of Teochew Opera that originated from their hometown? Firstly, self confidence. To believe that this ancient form of drama has unlimited vitality, to believe the Chinese can nurture operas into a performing art that contains local characteristics. That is why there are people working hard for local operas such as the self-confident Cantonese Operas and Hokkien Operas.

Reform comes next. For more than ten years, amateur Teochew Opera associations had taken advantage of Singapore as the world’s metropolis to break through the traditional structures and absorb the strengths of other performing arts such as the style of performance of Shanghai Yue Opera, modern dance, large scale folk music accompaniment. These artistic elements that are widely accepted by contemporary youth audiences are used appropriately in the production of Teochew Operas to modernise and add to its colours. The most common practice was to select operas that had undergone examination in China’s theatres and to conduct artistic reforms on them to adapt to the local audience before presenting it on the stage of Singapore Teochew Opera. In addition, operas such as Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association’s adaptation of the Italian Opera Turandot and Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association’s adaptation from Indian epic poem Ramayana, named “Fang Shan Jie” were bold steps in the production of their own operas.

Thirdly is to expand the room for performances. Almost all the amateur Teochew Opera troupes are producing their own programmes

these few years and representing Singapore to present it on international stages such as the China Teochew Opera Festival. These are contributions to the promotion of international cultural exchange.

The selfless contributions by Singapore amateur Teochew Opera troupes are commendable. However, these efforts would not change the fate of their decline in Singapore.

Opera is a popular art and will not survive without the support of a broad audience, nor will it continue to live without professionals or amateur enthusiasts. Teochew Operas need people to appreciate them and to strengthen itself. Therefore, what can be done to resolve the predicament that it faces, the lack of audience and practitioners?

The registration and establishment of Nam Hwa Opera Private Limited in 2015 opened a new path. By mobilising social forces and fighting for the government's support, the company started a business according to the country's regulations to ensure the survival of performing art organisations through joint efforts. The company possesses foresight, clear direction and effective measures. To curb the lack of audience, they

entered school campuses and handed the keys to opening the treasure box of the art of Teochew Operas to primary and secondary students by way of performances and publicity. To deal with the lack of practitioners, they forked out funds to recruit young people to participate in training. Soon, these young men and women shall become backbones of art, from producers to actors and accompaniment. Nam Hwa holds activities frequently and produce new shows annually. Through more than half a decade of efforts, they transformed from an unknown amateur Teochew Opera research team into an amateur musical and dramatic association to the private limited today. They exemplify the organisers' perseverance in promoting the art of Teochew Opera and embodied the group's artistic talents. The current Nam Hwa management's wish is to carry out reforms to stay relevant to the needs of times and to produce artworks that are relevant with the times.

Looking to the future, perhaps Singapore Teochew Opera might still carry a hint of homesickness. However, under the diligent nurturing of a group of unyielding gardeners, Teochew Opera will continue to bloom, just like the beautiful orchid. Ideals will take off with wings.

(translated from Chinese)

Note:

- (1)(2) Chen Yu, *Brief Overview of Overseas Teochew Opera* (Beijing: China Theatre Press)
- (3)(10)(11) Zhang Geng and Guo Hancheng, *A General Theory of Chinese Drama* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature And Art Publishing House)
- (4)(5)(8)(9) Ma Yan, *History of Chinese Opera* (Singapore: Chinese Opera Institute)
- (6) Shen Xiangqu, *History of Teochew Opera* (China: Social Sciences Academic Press)
- (7) Xiu Qing, *Interviews with Teochew Opera Director Lin Rulie* (Nanyang Siang Pau supplement)

“Liu Niang Fever” – Cross-establishment Interaction of Teochew film “Su Liu Niang” in Singapore

Su Zhangkai

Foreword

“Su Liu Niang” has been played since the publication of “Chong Bu Zhai Jin Chao Diao Jin Hua Nv Da Quan” (Fu “Su Liu Niang”) (Translator’s note: Re-amended Complete Essence of Teochew Tunes Golden Flower Girl with Su Liu Niang appended) in the Wanli years of the Ming Dynasty (1573 – 1620 CE). Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, acts such as “Yang Ziliang Gets Married” and “Taohua Crosses the River” from “Su Liu Niang” were frequently performed on stages. When China was pushing strongly for opera reform in 1956, Zhang Huayun and Xie Yin rearranged the scripts according to oral description by actors and from old handwritten notes, providing an excellent script for the Teochew movie “Su Liu Niang” produced by Hong Kong Hongtu Film Company. Till date, “Su Liu Niang” is considered a Teochew opera classic and has been performed repeatedly, corroborating the Teochew proverb “if you want to eat a good fish, eat rabbitfish; if you want to watch a good opera, watch Su Liu Niang”.

China’s opera reform in the 1950s led to the laying of good developmental conditions and foundation for the birth of Teochew opera movies. The Teochew dialectal movie “Su Liu Niang” gave rise to the “Su Liu Niang Fever”, thereby greatly influencing the local Teochew opera industry. The effects of the screening of “Su Liu Niang” in Singapore in 1960 is unprecedented. Not only did opera troupes start to imitate this movie, other organisations such as getai, cultural entertainment societies, night clubs and even film companies competed to bring similar shows on stage. This article attempts to use “Su Liu Niang” as an example to briefly analyse how Teochew movies hot up the local Teochew opera industry through 6 different establishments, namely professional opera troupes, getai performances, amateur musical and dramatic associations, news publishers, film companies and record companies.

1. Professional opera troupes

Teochew operas are localised operas performed using the Teochew dialect. If one were to date Teochew operas from the publication of “Chong Kan Wu Se Chao Quan Cha Ke Zeng Ru Shi Ci Bei Qu Gou Lan Li Jing Ji Xi Wen” (t/n: Re-publication of the drama Li Jing Ji with the addition of speech and gags of Chaozhou and Quanzhou, poetry, Northern Songs and Dances), which is the world’s oldest drama that has a script handed down, that is to say from the 45th year of the Ming Dynasty Jiajing era (1566 CE), then Teochew operas would have more than 440 years of history.¹ Following the migration of Chinese population from the start of the 19th century, Teochew operas spread to the eastern part of Guangdong, southern parts of Fujian, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Hainan Island, Leizhou peninsular, and countries with Teochew speaking Chinese immigrants and descendants such as Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia and Vietnam, becoming an important opera type for overseas Chinese.

According to the book “Journal of Local Customs of Singapore” written by Qing Dynasty official, Li Zhongyu, there were Teochew opera performances in 1887:

There were male and female troupes in the theatres, about four or five at Dapo, one or two at Xiaopo, and all of them were performing Cantonese Operas with the occasional Min Opera and Teochew Opera.²

The quoted text above shows that there were already Teochew opera performances in the end-Qing era. In the entire history of Teochew opera development in Singapore and Malaysia, there were two periods of time where Teochew opera peaked.³ The first period of prosperity was between the twenties to thirties. During this period, there was an increase in the number of performances by mainland China Teochew opera troupes in Singapore, some of these well-known artistes had even relocated to Singapore and organised new opera troupes locally, promoting the development of local Teochew operas. Troupes that

stayed on for further development did not face any problems with manpower shortages as China had a strict training system for actors and good quality actors will be sent to Nanyang.⁴

The second golden period was between end-fifties and early sixties. This is due to the “Teochew opera movie fever” at the start of 1959⁵, pushing local Teochew operas to another peak. Local traditional Teochew opera troupes imitated Teochew movies and reproduced the movies onto opera stages, creating a golden era for local Teochew opera post-war. Chinese Teochew opera researcher Lin Chunjun said of Teochew operas of this era:

The second period of reform of the local (author’s note: Singapore) Teochew opera is between the 50s to early 60s where Teochew operas was at its peak. This could be seen from several aspects, firstly the filming of the Teochew opera movies “The Fire of Linjiang”, “Su Liu Niang”, “Suing My Husband” in mainland China and the release of many record labels in Singapore caused local professional and semi-professional opera troupes to learn and imitate these films, thereby reforming aspects such as the repertoire, performances, music and singing; artistic reforms were also made on stage designs such as costumes, settings and lightings, giving a new look to local Teochew opera.⁶

In addition, Teo Liang Chye, a veteran of Singapore Teochew opera, provided a similar view when he spoke of the past developments of local Teochew opera, confirming Lin Chunjun’s views:

China’s first Teochew opera movie “The Fire of Linjiang” was screened in Singapore in 1958 and was well received by audiences. The most noteworthy is that all aspects of the lyrics, music, singing and performance in the three movies “Su Liu Niang”, “Suing My Husband” and “Chen San Wu Niang” were critically acclaimed. These few movies changed the views of people that Teochew operas were vulgar. Strangely, there was a sudden wave of interest in watching Teochew operas.⁷

It can be clearly seen from the two quoted texts that “Teochew opera movie fever” is a crucial topic when discussing the history of the development of local Teochew opera. This “fever” also carried a form of milestone effect. Not only did it cause the local Teochew opera industry to enter its peak period, it also significantly enhanced the overall quality of local Teochew opera troupes, to the extent that new Teochew opera

troupes were also born due to this “fever”. Movies had a great effect on stages performances then. “Movie adaptations”, “Movie-lisation”, “Imitation Movies” became novel ways to perform and to attract audiences.

I have browsed copies of Nanyang Siang Pau dated September 1959 to December 1961 and listed opera tropes that tabled performances imitating movies, through advertisements taken out by opera troupes and other relevant news reports.⁸

The Fire of Linjiang	Su Liu Niang	Suing My Husband
28/06/1961 Yuan Zheng Feng Troupe Teochew Puppet Show	26/05/1961 Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe	16/09/1961 Lao Zheng Tian Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe
02/07/1961 Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe	27/06/1961 Lao Yi Zhi Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe	01/10/1961 Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew Opera Troupe
13/09/1961 Xin Rong He Xing Teochew Opera Troupe	05/07/1961 Xin Tao Yuan Chun Teochew Opera Troupe	18/10/1961 Lao Yi Zhi Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe
	23/07/1961 Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew Opera Troupe	14/11/1961 Xin Rong He Xing Teochew Opera Troupe
	02/08/1961 Lao San Zheng Shun Teochew Opera Troupe	
	08/08/1961 Lao Zheng Tian Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe	
	12/09/1961 Xin Rong He Xing Teochew Opera Troupe	
	13/09/1961 Lao Yu Chun Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe	

Table (3): An overview of three Chinese Teochew Opera Movies performed on stage by local opera troupes

(Information from: Nanyang Siang Pau 1961)

From the table above, we can see that the movie “Su Liu Niang” is an imitation movie opera that many opera troupes “must perform”. There were 8 opera troupes that advertised on the Nanyang Siang Pau to announce the public performance of the opera “Su Liu Niang” in the short span of 8 months. The influence of the movie is as such. The results above also confirmed a comment then made by Gao Yun in the Nanyang Siang Pau:

In a bid to adapt to times, Singapore Teochew opera troupes competed and rehearsed the famed opera “Su Liu Niang”. Troupes that have already performed or broadcasted the opera include Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe, Xin Tao Hua Chun and Lao Yuan Zheng Xing. The script is the same as those adapted by Guangdong Teochew opera troupes, which is separated into 8 major segments.⁹

On the topic of the changes in the choice of subject for operas, I visited the former troupe leader of Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe, Mr Chua Hong Kee, to understand the situation then. Mr Chua indicated that Singapore was under the “Teochew Opera Movie Fever”, and troupes has to cater to the audiences’ taste to survive. The troupe must perform “Su Liu Niang” if the audience likes “Su Liu Niang”.¹⁰ Lao Yu Chun Xiang advertised the following in the papers when they were performing “Su Liu Niang”:

The wheel of times rolls by rapidly, so do the operas. Our troupe shall be performing an imitation of the entire movie “Su Liu Niang”.¹¹

Many companies or organisations would typically pick and choose the opera to be played when they engage an opera troupe for performance. If a troupe wishes to take on the assignment, the troupe would have to rehearse whichever Teochew opera movie was picked. For example, the preparation time required for rehearsal would be proportionate to the duration of the performance.¹²

All Teochew opera troupes are competing to perform “Su Liu Niang” during this year’s opera performances to thank the gods at the Hungry Ghost Festival to cater to audiences’ taste and people are jostling to watch “Su Liu Niang”.¹³

The example from the text above shows the significant impact Teochew opera movies have on the local Singapore Teochew opera industry. The sensation caused simply by a movie, “Su Liu Niang”, would be enough in proving its strong and powerful influence.

Not only are the music and lyrics refreshing, another significant influence Teochew opera movie have on local Teochew operas was the style of performance for the entire Teochew opera, such as its stage setting, lightings, costumes and make-up, they were more particular than before. The point was to ensure the style of performance “imitated the movie”, “imitated the Guangdong Teochew opera troupe”. Moreover, troupes enticed and hired overseas talent to boost the overall performance levels of local troupes. I discovered a relevant news report in the Nanyang Siang Pau:

The social status of Teochew opera has risen since the arrival of “Su Liu Niang”. The entire cast and the director of local Teochew opera troupe, Xin Rong He Xing, invited renowned dramatist Mr Chen Mingzhen from Chaoshan to bring together the best of the current Teochew opera in Guangdong.¹⁴

We can also see how Teochew opera troupes manage to reproduce the same setting that appeared in the movies. The advertisement Lao Yi Zhi Xiang Teochew Opera Troupe took out in the papers when they were performing “Su Liu Niang” stated the following:

Our humble troupe specially imitates the original movie “Su Liu Niang” by Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe...and have set designer Liang Xuanhua of Number 35 Ganmin Road, Fulian Studio to design the entire set of the opera, including the Jingbei Jetty scene, the Guo Family Garden scene, the Hall of the Su Family, the Chaozhou Xiangzi Bridge scene, the Three-Dimensional Virtuous Lady Pavilion scene, the Room of Liu Niang scene. Gorgeous costumes and accessories were also specially made for the entire opera...¹⁵

The abovementioned scenes were the exact scenes used in the “Su Liu Niang” movie. Therefore, we can conclude that not only were the equipment used imitating the movie, even the entire performances and scenes like the movie. For example, the July 1961 performance by Lao Sai Tao Yuan troupe was:

All the actors’ lines and scores were imitating the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe, the set design was ingenious, the whole stage

was three-dimensional and grandeur. Famed Xianjing (former name of Bangkok) director Chen Shuixian was specially recruited to be the Art Director.¹⁶

The same situation happened to other traditional opera troupes in Singapore. For example, when Xin Rong He Xing was performing “Su Liu Niang”:

An imitation of the treasured opera of Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe, all actors’ line, tunes, actions, narration, music, scores, taking the best of operas and movies while creatively reproducing a three-dimensional set. Book your seats early to avoid disappointment. An intense plot with action scenes and poetic scenes, touching tunes and lyrics, and every line a classic.¹⁷

Zhi Yun Teochew Opera Troupe painstakingly rehearsed an improved adaptation of the Teochew opera “Su Liu Niang” and held public performances in places such as the Singapore New World, Federal States and North Malaya, winning plaudits from the general Teochew opera lovers. In an article to express their gratitude, they state:

Despite the less-than-accomplished performance, it was reassuring to the troupe to know that the carefully studied set design, lighting, costumes, characters, music and folk art pleased the audiences’ eyes.¹⁸

It is clear from the quoted text above that details such as the setting on the stage, the lighting effects and the costumes of the actors were influenced by Teochew opera movies and became highly exquisite. This was also a main selling point to attract audiences. Whenever each troupe advertised, they loved to highlight “imitates the actual movie, reformed Teochew opera, three-dimensional background, colourful lighting, novel costumes”¹⁹, “Imitate and adapt the entire movie ‘Su Liu Niang’, the gorgeous costumes, the movie equipment, with renowned artistes putting up a grand performance”²⁰ and other words to such effect. This gradually became the style of performance for Teochew opera troupes then.

2. Amateur Musical and Dramatic Associations

The so-called amateur musical and dramatic associations were mainly set up by amateur hobbyists who love the operas, unlike the

professional opera troupes who mainly perform commercial shows. The earliest amateur musical and dramatic association in Singapore was Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association which was set up in 1912. Its purpose was to promote Han opera, to study music, develop cultural entertainment, connect the masses, assist with charitable causes and to serve society. In 1929, Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association was established, the meaning of its name was taken from “Music is a form of art”. In 1931, Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association was founded, and its aim was to mould the body and mind through music and to achieve unity and harmony. Xing Hua Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association was set up in 1935 and its purpose was to study Han opera music with a view to serve society.²¹ These amateur musical and dramatic associations have a long history and were initially performing Han opera (also known as wai jiang xi). However, since the frenzy caused by Teochew opera movies such as “Su Li Niang” in Singapore, they gradually switched to perform Teochew operas to catch up with times.

Singapore used to be a migrant society in its early years and Han opera, or wai jiang xi, followed in the footsteps of immigrants to Singapore. Singapore and Malaysia Teochew scholar Xiao Yaotian once said, “Many (Teochew) intelligentsia and elderly people look down on local operas performed in Teochew dialect but advocated the foreign Wai Jiang Xi, thus distinguishing the latter as ya and the former as zheng.”²² Yazheng is a literary quotation from the classic “Shijing” (Classic of Poetry), and ya refers to pure, elegant music, or the so-called orthodox music; while zheng refers to the immoral zheng sounds, or the so-called decadent music. It can be inferred herein that wai jiang xi holds the cultural and moral high ground in Chaoshan. A similar situation can also be seen amongst the Singapore amateur Teochew musical and dramatic associations. Yap Wee Cheng pointed out in his research into Singapore amateur Teochew musical and dramatic associations that wai jiang xi was a form of noble musical activity in Singapore and “Teochew literati, merchants and officials who are passionate in studying wai jiang xi were able to mould its elegant cultural image”.²³ Mr Yap believes that Teochew merchants used wai jiang xi as a form of identity and social status. Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association termed the period of cross-establishment interaction caused by the mass fervour due to the Teochew movie “Su Liu Niang” in the association’s history as “The metamorphosis of change mandated by the Heavenly cycle”.

Especially for Teochew Dialectal Opera (Chao Zhou Bai Zi Xi), it underwent a few improvements post-war. Chaoshan and Xiangjiang produced many famous actors, their vocals were excellent and never seen before. There was furore every time they performed, coupled with the production of many renowned operas that were filmed into movies and screened in Singapore and Malaysia, they were all the rage. Its vibrancy was like the surging rivers and it came in great strength and impetus. Due to the abovementioned reasons, all of us in the society gradually shifted our opera activities toward Teochew opera and its study over the years with immense interest.²⁴

Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association also followed in the footsteps of the “Liu Niang Fever” by immediately performing “Su Liu Niang” after its transformation to overwhelming response.

After the entrance of Teochew movies from China, our fellow brethren were mesmerised by the superb art. Every local amateur musical and dramatic association felt that it was an honour to perform Teochew opera and competed to perform Teochew opera. In view of this, our association also started learning Teochew opera to enable us to perform publicly during the association’s celebration. As a result, we performed our maiden Teochew opera “Su Liu Niang” on the 19th, 20th, 21st and 22nd of July for four consecutive nights at the Victoria Theatre...the performances on those four nights were like never before, and the house was full. It was even livelier on the first night, those who were late could only walk up to the topmost seats of the second floor to enjoy the performance.²⁵

Other than the transformation of the abovementioned amateur musical and dramatic associations to perform Teochew opera, various organisations such as Nam Hwa Opera and Yio Chu Kang Road Villagers Mutual Aid Society were also set up and developed during the “Liu Niang Fever” in the sixties. Nam Hwa Opera stated in its brief introduction the following:

Singapore Nam Hwa Opera was founded from the Singapore Huang Clan Chichang Association. There was a group of people from the Singapore Huang Clan Chichang Association in 1963 that loved Teochew opera who would ordinarily like to perform Teochew music and to sing Teochew tunes. The consecutive screening of the Teochew opera movies that were hugely popular in China such as “Suing My Husband”, “Su Liu Niang”, “The Fire of Linjiang” and “Chen San Wu Niang” in

Singapore deeply mesmerised local audiences. Therefore, members of the Association founded an opera study group to satisfy their craving for acting and rehearsed “Su Liu Niang” to perform during celebrations.²⁶

It is clear from the information above how great the charm of “Su Liu Niang” was to cause the “lords” of those times to give up Han opera and to perform Teochew opera. Subsequently, these amateur associations were invited by the television station to record Teochew operas, and in 1964, Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association performed “The Assassination of Liang Ji” at the cultural centre for live television broadcasting to great success. This was the first-time local Teochew opera appeared on television. Television also shot its first Teochew film “Chen San Wu Niang” in the same year, and its actors were also from Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association. Troupes that completed filming thereafter include Nam Hwa Opera, Liu Yi Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association and Er Woo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association. In 1968, the television station started to promote a “mass compilation of local opera” project which was helmed by 4 studio directors from the Chinese section who took on the recording job and set up a stage on television and invited professional and amateur Hokkien and Teochew opera troupes to perform. From then on, local operas started its leap into television.²⁷

We would not know whether Singapore Teochew opera would be able to make headway down the halls of television if the “Su Liu Niang” craze was unable to take off and amateur troupes did not switch over to perform Teochew opera. Nor would we be able to know that one movie could have such huge influence and caused cross-establishment interaction.

3. Performing groups

Long before pre-war Singapore, there were already presence of performing groups that originated from China that came to the Nanyang region to perform, gradually forming performances that we now call “getai”. Due to the Korean War in the 50s, there was a huge increase in demand for rubber, many Nanyang merchants thus gradually made their fortune. With the increase in fortune came an increase in demand for entertainment. Getai thus sprouted like bamboo shoots after the rain and many restaurants set up getais specially to attract customers. Entertainment industry in Singapore entered its peak period.²⁸

The irresistible “Liu Niang Fever” witnessed how people overwhelmed the cinemas when the movie “Su Liu Niang” was screened. The movie achieved a record of 107 consecutive screenings during the first week with the total audience numbering more than a hundred thousand. Box office had already crossed the hundred thousand dollars mark in one week’s time, marking it as the most outstanding autumn film of those times.²⁹ In addition, newspaper articles also stated that for the past year, institutions such as the education industry, opera industry and charitable organisations used the movie as a blueprint for rehearsals and performances.³⁰

While “Su Liu Niang” was officially screened on 12th October 1960, Dongfang Huayuan Getai put up an advertisement ten days later to announce that they are going to perform the “Taohua Crosses the River” act from “Su Liu Niang”.³¹ Related performances that were released shortly after included the then relatively large reborn getai performances. It was stated in the advertisement on the performance: For three consecutive nights starting tonight, we shall be putting up a grand public performance of one of the most exciting acts, “Taohua Crosses the River”, of the renowned Teochew opera movie “Su Liu Niang”. It shall be performed in Teochew and is full of gags.³²

Other than getais, some hotels or nightclubs that has a stage for performance were also influenced by this “Liu Niang Fever” and rushed to perform the “Taohua Crosses the River” act of “Su Liu Niang”. Sanle Hotel stated in its advertisement: Per the request by our audience, our getai is performing the most exciting act, “Taohua Crosses the River”, of the Teochew opera “Su Liu Niang” for two consecutive nights, starting tonight. Genuine Teochew xishi xiaosheng (t/n: xishi refers to the name of a beautiful lady in ancient times; xiaosheng commonly refers to an actor playing the role of a young male) will be cross dressing and performing.³³ Dongfang Night Club wrote the following: An adaptation of the Teochew opera movie “Taohua Crosses the River” brought to you by a combined performance with Teochew laochou (lao means old while chou usually refers to the role of a comedic character) and Teochew huadan (huadan refers to either young or middle-aged female character in Chinese opera).³⁴ Even the People’s Action Party had performed “Taohua Crosses the River” during its entertainment party held at the stadium.³⁵ This shows the massive effects of the cross-establishment interaction.

It is likely that due to the duration or time constraints that these types of performing groups would generally not play the entire “Su Liu Niang” opera, but only its most popular and exciting parts, such as the “Taohua Crosses the River” in the abovementioned examples. It can also be seen from the advertisements above that all of them simultaneously highlighted phrases such as “performed in Teochew”, “Genuine Teochew xishi xiaosheng, Teochew laochou and huadan”. Undoubtedly this is to differentiate them from the many other performances that were performed in other dialects, and to correspond to the “Liu Niang Fever” to roll out programmes that will be loved and followed by the public to successfully draw crowds.

4. News publishers

Many Teochew opera hobbyists wrote in to the papers due to this “Teochew Opera Fever” to discuss their views on Teochew opera reforms or to express their views after watching certain opera troupes perform certain operas. Gao Yun wrote six feature articles titled “Teochew Opera Improvement in Progress” for Nanyang Siang Pau to discuss the transformation of Singapore Teochew opera at that time.³⁶ On the other hand, Han Shuichang wrote seven articles titled “Yao Xuanqiu’s Artistic Life” for Min Pao Daily to share with readers the rapid improvements of Teochew opera.³⁷ There were also readers such as Song Fu and Xiu Xing that wrote in to the papers to express their views on local opera troupes performing Teochew operas after watching it.³⁸

In addition, the “Liu Niang Fever” also brought along a series of related products. According to the information and relics I collected³⁹, there were already various types of publications that were related to or were of the “Su Liu Niang” theme. These include various libretti that recorded the lyrics of the Teochew film “Su Liu Niang” (inclusive of libretti that solely recorded “Su Liu Niang” or compilations of the libretto of different Teochew opera movies), musical scores, albums made up of stills of the posters or the actors from the movies, beautiful photographs, calendars, greeting cards. As the span of 72 consecutive days of screening of the movie “Su Liu Niang” in Singapore was between 1960 to 1961, it coincided with the Chinese Lunar New Year. Therefore, items such as calendars and greeting cards became available.

It must have been unimaginable that one Teochew film could have ignited such massive cross-establishment interaction. Therefore, great sensation must have been caused by the film such that many later publications such as books related to Teochew opera and libretti frequently used scenes from “Su Liu Niang” as its cover.

5. Film companies

The sensation caused by the Teochew movie “Su Liu Niang” in the Nanyang region those years would be unprecedented. Between the first screening in October 1960 to the early 1961, “Su Liu Niang” was screened a total of 593 times over 72 consecutive days, claiming the record of best-selling Chinese or Western film.⁴⁰ Thereafter in the month of July of the same year, it returned with the slogan “movie audience will never forget” and officially launched its grand opening and midnight shows for a second time, which is unprecedented in the history of Singapore Teochew films.⁴¹ This movie was still screened regularly in the Nanyang region up till the seventies, and there were even screenings with Malay language subtitles in Singapore.⁴² This shows that there were a number of audience who would watch the film repeatedly, without getting tired of it.

As Hong Kong Hongtu Film Company achieved great results upon the screening of “Su Liu Niang” in Singapore in October 1960, the entire Dongshan Teochew Opera Society led by Fang Qiaoyu, launched their version of “Su Liu Niang” three months later to fight for the Malaya market.⁴³ (The film used the title “Taohua and Su Liu Niang” when it was screened in Thailand) Shortly after this, Hong Kong Tailan Film Company invested heavily and recruited famed Hong Kong actors such as Li Yihong to film what they term as the “authentic” “Su Liu Niang”. This was screened in Thailand before the Chinese New Year in February 1961.⁴⁴ One can imagine how popular “Su Liu Niang” was in the Nanyang region for 3 different film companies to launch their own version of “Su Liu Niang” in the short period of 4 months.

The local Teochew opera industry subsequently flourished because everyone was racing to perform “Su Liu Niang” and their performances were generally well-received. Quick thinking film companies who saw the vast market both locally and in the Southeast Asia region began to give strong support to Hong Kong film companies to film Teochew opera

movies. This fever helped to drive the strong development of Teochew opera movies in this region and a series of Teochew opera movies were produced. Yang Xiuqing spoke of this in an article found in “Fifteen Years of Local Teochew Opera”:

Another influence brought by China Teochew opera movie was the influx of Hong Kong Teochew opera movie following China Teochew opera movie’s entrance into the local market.⁴⁵

Between end-1961 till 1962, Dongshan Film Company received the support of Shaw Brothers, Kong Ngee Motion Picture Production Company and Cathay Organisation to acquire film rights, produce and release films.⁴⁶ Kong Ngee even stated in a local advertisement that:

After the release of the authentic Teochew opera “Su Liu Niang” in colour which was fervently received by the public, Kong Ngee is now adding a Teochew production team whose first production, “Chai Tou Feng”, has already arrived in Singapore...carefully produced to improve the quality of Teochew film, guaranteed to satisfy audiences.⁴⁷

The strong support of film companies facilitated the birth of nearly 200 Teochew opera movies in the first half of the sixties. Of which, Dongshan Teochew Opera Society and Xin Tian Cai Teochew Opera Troupe participated in the performance for most of these films, forming a duopoly that almost dominated the market.⁴⁸

On the other hand, Singapore and Malaysia provided capital for this new wave. The wave caused by the screening of China Teochew opera movies locally pushed Teochew opera into a new stage of prosperity, causing many people to begin to appreciate Teochew operas and to fall in love with this type of “operas on screen” performances. As such, local film companies begin to invest in Hong Kong film companies while some companies also set up their own Teochew production team to grab its share of the market. Other than the three abovementioned local film companies, Eng Wah, who had filmed numerous Xiamen Hokkien films in the late fifties, also set up its own Teochew opera production team and managed to recruit the director of “Su Liu Niang”, Luo Zhixiong, to be the team’s director. The Teochew films released by Eng Wah also highlighted Luo Zhixiong as the director of “Su Liu Niang” in its publicity, calling the director an authority among Teochew movies. It was clear that Eng Wah intended to use the success of “Su Liu Niang” to be one of the selling points of its films.⁴⁹

Another favourable condition Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand provided to the new wave was the massive Southeast Asia market. According to the research by Yu Muxue, many Teochew opera movies produced by Hong Kong was not official screened in Hong Kong. Its market was the audience in Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ Many news articles published by the Hong Kong paper, Nanfang Evening Post, expressed similar views: there is an increase in the annual production of Teochew films and the market for Teochew films in Southeast Asian markets is huge. Films can sell for forty-five thousand dollars in the Nanyang region, making film makers salivate. The main reason for the rise of Teochew films in Hong Kong is the great success of the screening of *Su Liu Niang*.⁵¹

In fact, there was no local market to speak of for Teochew opera movies. Before the screening on “*Su Liu Niang*” in Singapore, between 1955 to 1960, there were only 12 Teochew films and 17 Teochew-dubbed films screening in Singapore, and they totalled less than 30 movies in 6 years.⁵² Therefore, the “*Liu Niang Fever*” that swept Singapore did plant its seed and injected life into Singapore’s Teochew opera movies, giving birth to nearly 200 Teochew opera movies in about six years. The interaction between them can be seen at a glance.

Another thing of note is the so-called “Teochew Opera Movie Star” effects of Chen Chuhui and Zhuang Xuejuan. The reason why Hong Kong-made Teochew opera movie sell so well was largely due to the so-called “movie star effect”. The charisma of Chen and Zhuang mesmerised many audiences and thereafter enhanced the value of Teochew opera movies and Teochew operas. This is the second whirlwind following Yao Xuanqiu’s “*Su Liu Niang*”. Their intricate interaction can also be observed through this example.

6. Record companies

The entry of China Teochew opera movies also spurred the development of Teochew opera recording industry. For example, before the official screening of the Teochew film “*Su Liu Niang*”, The stage recording of Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe’s performance in Hongkong was sold on the market.⁵³ However, in order to satisfy market demands, Tang Nan Ah Company invested heavily to fly the records in to coordinate with the impending screening of the movie “*Su Liu Niang*” in countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. The company also repeatedly state in their advertisement that it is “guaranteed to be the original

movie recording...huge difference between this and the recordings of other performances...make your purchase quickly as the movie is due to screen shortly.”⁵⁴ Subsequently when there was an increase in the production of Teochew opera movies, the demand for original movie soundtrack correspondingly increased. Each time a movie was screened, record companies would rush to launch the original movie soundtrack.

Subsequently each record companies would even cooperate with film companies to compete against its competitors by giving away exquisite film stills of the movie stars with every record purchased to increase sales volume. Tang Nan Ah Company advertised: special gift: One photograph of Dongshan Film Company’s star with every set of Da Zhong Hua brand record purchased. While stocks last.⁵⁵ Guangsheng Record Company stated: one film still free with every record purchased, while stocks last. Buyers be advised to buy Huanle brand record with its colourful cover.⁵⁶

Even record companies started to join in the production of Teochew opera movies because of the cross-establishment development. Of which, “*Zhi Jiao Mei*” which was first screened on 22nd April 1964 was a combined production by Dongshan Film Company and the local Tang Nan Ah Company by filming the record company’s best-selling opera record.⁵⁷ In the publicity of “*Zhi Jiao Mei*”, it was stated: “The best-selling Teochew recording for the past ten years and the most successful Teochew movie of the past ten years! He who has listened to the Teochew record *Zhi Jiao Mei* must watch the Teochew film *Zhi Jiao Mei*”.⁵⁸ This slogan clearly reflects the cross-establishment interaction that this article wants to discuss.

I spoke to the current owner of Tang Nan Ah Company, Guo Tuli. He confirmed that his father had a very close working relationship with Dongshan Film Company in those years and had invested in some of the proposals. When the General Manager of Dongshan Film Company came for an inspection in November 1961, he had clearly stated that all the gramophone records of the movies their company produced were recorded by Singapore’s Tang Nan Ah Company.⁵⁹ Roxy Records also faced a similar situation, but Roxy Records partnered with a film company that worked mainly with Xin Tian Cai Teochew Opera Troupe.⁶⁰ This shows that such cross-establishment interaction is actually worth further research.

Conclusion

After traditional Teochew opera was reformed and reorganised, the seeds for Teochew opera movies were planted and favourable growth conditions were provided, thus leading to the birth of the blockbuster “Su Liu Niang”, and further caused the appearance of the so-called “Teochew opera movie fever”. While this fever was running through Singapore, it also nourished the pre-existing traditional Teochew opera performances in Singapore, giving it fresh nutrients. Under

such influence, Singapore Teochew opera industry reached a golden period. Not only did the interaction affected these two industries, it also influenced the record and publishing industries and created a new wave of Hong Kong-made Teochew opera movies. Not only did these Teochew films flourish, many generations of Teochew stars were born, and many classics were produced, thus creating another important chapter in the history of Chinese movies.

(translated from Chinese)

Note:

- 1 Rao Zongyi, *5 types of Ming Dynasty Teochew Operas* (Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Publishing House, 1985), p4-18.
- 2 Li Zhongjue, *Journal of Local Customs of Singapore* (Singapore: Nayang Bianyi Suo, 1947), p13.
- 3 I have referred to : Lin Chunjun, *Appreciating the Art of Teochew Opera* (Shantou: Shantou University Press, 1997), p82-89; Teo Liang Chye, *Teochew Opera in Singapore and its Prospects, see Special Performance Publication for “Hong Luoshan” by Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Troupe* (Singapore: Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan, 2000), p12-17; Office of Shantou City Arts Research *Teochew Opera Research – 100 years of Teochew Opera History (1901 – 2000)* (Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2001), p291-302.
- 4 Same as above.
- 5 Many articles based the start of the so-called “Teochew Movie Opera Fever” at 1958. This is because “The Fire of Linjiang” was shot in 1958. However as “Fire” was only first screened in September 1959 in Singapore, hence I have used 1959 as the start of said fever in this article.
- 6 Lin Chunjun, *Appreciating the Art of Teochew Opera*, p85-86.
- 7 Teo Liang Chye, *Teochew Opera in Singapore and its Prospects, see Special Performance Publication for “Hong Luoshan” by Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan Teochew Opera Troupe* (Singapore: Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan, 2000), p14.
- 8 Information collected from *Nanyang Siang Pau* published in 1961.
- 9 Gao Yun, *Teochew Opera Improvement in Progress – Visiting Zhi Yun Opera Troupe’s Su Liu Niang Performance, See Nanyang Siang Pau, 10th July 1961.*
- 10 Oral interview with Chua Hong Kee, 19th March 2008.
- 11 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 13th September 1961, p8.
- 12 Oral interview with Chua Hong Kee, 19th March 2008.
- 13 Song Fu, *Drawbacks of the Improving Teochew Opera, see Nanyang Siang Pau, 29th September 1961.*
- 14 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 14th February 1961, p6.
- 15 Same as above, 27th June 1961, p7.
- 16 Same as above, 29th July 1961, p15.
- 17 Same as above, 22nd August 1961, p11.

- 18 Same as above, 7th July 1961, p7.
- 19 Same as above.
- 20 Same as above, 11th July 1961, p7.
- 21 I have referred to the information found in anniversary publications of each Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association, the history and brief introduction of the association published in the performance publications. I shall not list them down as I have perused a large amount of publications.
- 22 Yap Wee Cheng, *A study on Teochew music clubs in Singapore* (Singapore: Master's Thesis of the Department of Chinese of National University of Singapore, 2000), p33.
- 23 Song Wangxiang and Ye Shude, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1993), p9.
- 24 Translated by Yang Shusong, *Brief History of Our Association*, see "Publication in Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association" (Singapore: Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association, 1987), p79.
- 25 Shen Yuguang, *A Brief History of our Association*, see "Special Publication in Commemoration of the Golden Jubille of Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association" (Singapore: Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association, 1981), p33.
- 26 Edited by Lin Wendan and Feng Qinglian, *Brief History of Singapore Chinese Clan Associations* (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 2005), p219.
- 27 Information consolidated from: Xu Yongshun, *Singapore Teochew Opera and Han Opera: 1963-1983* (Singapore: Xu Yongshun Studio, 2008)
- 28 Information consolidated from: Wang Zhenchun, *History of Singapore Getai* (Singapore: Youth Book Co., 2006)
- 29 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 1th October 1960, p13.
- 30 Same as above, 25th July 1961, p7.
- 31 Same as above, 23rd October 1960, p12.
- 32 Same as above, 18th February 1961, p7.
- 33 Same as above, 11th March 1961, p7.
- 34 Same as above, 31st March 1961, p12.
- 35 Same as above, 31st May 1961, p6.
- 36 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 10th July 1961, p5; 20th July, p4; 15th August, p5; 20th August, p5; 14th September, p5; 1st October, p5.
- 37 *Min Pao Daily*, 15th October 1960, p3; 19th October, p3; 22nd October, p3; 26th October, p3; 29th October, p3; 2nd November, p3.
- 38 *Song Fu A Look on Maladies of the Improving Teochew Opera*, see *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 29th September 1961; *Xiu Xing Watching Lao Sai Tao Yuan Perform Suing My Husband*, see *Min Pao Daily*, 28th October 1961.
- 39 I shall not list every Item stated in the article as they belong to my personal collection.
- 40 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 25th July 1961, p7.
- 41 Same as above, 20th July 1961, p12.
- 42 An observation made by myself after observing the introductory texts on my personal collection of movie posters and dates printed on programme booklets.
- 43 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 24th January 1961, p12.
- 44 *Sing Sian Yer Pao*, 2nd February 1962, p4.
- 45 Yang Xiuqing, *15 Years of Local Teochew Opera*, see "Publication in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association" (Singapore: Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association, 1972), p140.
- 46 *Nanfang Evening Post*, 22nd March 1962, p3.
- 47 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 11th November 1961, p8.
- 48 See list of Teochew movies compiled by Hong Kong Film Archive for the detailed list of films.
- 49 An observation made by myself after observing the introductory texts on my personal collection of movie posters and dates printed on programme booklets.
- 50 Yu Muyun, *History of Hong Kong Films, Volume 5* (Hong Kong: Subculture, 2001), p212.
- 51 *Nanfang Evening Post*, 22nd March 1962, p3.
- 52 I have calculated the statistics by referring to the movie advertisements found in Singapore's *Nanyang Siang Pau* between 1955 to 1960.
- 53 I have made my observation by referring to the advertisements by record companies found in Singapore's *Nanyang Siang Pau* between 1955 to 1960.
- 54 *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 30th September 1960, p7.
- 55 Same as above, 22nd August 1961, p7.
- 56 Same as above, 29th August 1961, p7.
- 57 Same as above, 22nd April 1964, p8.
- 58 Publicity leaflet of Zhi Jiao Mei
- 59 Oral interview with Guo Tuli, 2nd November 2005.
- 60 Oral interview with Lin Xinliang, 2nd November 2005.

Teochew Opera through the Decades

Ang Chai Soon

In the early days, Teochew opera was very popular in Singapore. There were at least 20 troupes performing all over Singapore from the 1950s to the 1990s. According to the director of a Hungry Ghost Festival Committee, as soon as one year's performances were over, organisers had to book the troupes for next year's performances, especially the popular ones like Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe, Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe. That was the golden era of Teochew opera.

One of the troupes, Lau San Chai Soon Teochew Opera Troupe, had many outstanding performers. Especially memorable was their performance in the black and white television series "Justice Bao" which made fans fell in love with them. One only had to watch their performance of "Rescue by seven sons" at Toa Payoh Lorong 2 to understand the nature and losses of war. The performance of "Iron faced official" at Toa Payoh Lorong 1 was also a classic.

Any self-respecting Teochew opera fan would also know of Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe, one of the most renowned in Singapore. The troupe had some outstanding performers, from the early ones such as Jiumei, Xixi, Yuhua and Huang Ximei to the later ones like the Chen sisters (Chen Qiaoluan and Chen Qiaolian), Cai Xiuzhen, Cai Qiaofeng and Cai Qiaozhen. Those who have watched Jiumei and Xixi perform the roles of Cilang Zhou and Zhang Tingfang would know just how amazing they were. They could hold their own against the troupes from China anytime. The 1970s and 1980s saw a slight decline in their performances, often staging "Saving Hongzhou" and "The Pearl Phoenix". In the latter days, the Chen family was also very outstanding. Ever watched their versions of "Zhang chunlang", "The traveler and the ghost", "Sister Empress", "Farewell to a warrior", "The witty maid" and "suing her own husband" etc.

Did you also catch a performance titled Lady Liu Mingzhu that was staged by Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe from 19 to 21 February 1998 at Hong Lim Park? This extravaganza cost \$150,000 to

produce, and the effort and dedication of a huge team of people. This was one of the highlights of the 1998 Chinese Cultural Festival. It was a pity that I did not manage to catch the live performance. Thank goodness it was recorded.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of witnessing one of Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe's a-cappella singing session. It was also an opportunity to get to interact with Mdm Chen Qiaoluan, her sisters, and the rest of her family. I also took to the stage with a rendition of "The traveler and the ghost". For me, it was an experience of a lifetime.

In the early 1980s, another popular troupe emerged, the Kim Eng Teochew Opera Troupe, with almost half of its members having jumped over from Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe. This was a difficult period for Sin Yong Hua Heng. When Kim Eng was established, it staged a lot of outstanding shows, from "Butcher scholar" and "Beheading 18 Hanlin" to "A family with three scholars", "The traveler and the ghost" and "Lady Liu mingzhu". Do the names Deng Daolan, Li Meizhen, Chen zhenzhu and Jiang Xiulan ring a bell?

Not long after my oldest child was born, I brought my wife, mother and son to Yishun to watch a performance by Kim Eng called Fenzhuang Tower. At that time, my mother even tripped and fell. Thank goodness she was alright, but it gave us all a scare.

Was there also a Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe in Singapore? Yes, there absolutely was. I am not certain though, if Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe had the same boss as Sin Jit Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe. I once watched Sin Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe stage "Zhao Shao Qin" in Yishun and the performance was average. Sin Jit Tian Chye Teochew Opera Troupe on the other hand, was different. Its heyday was in the 1970s and 80s. Then, it was said that a veteran actor by the name of Lin Xi had joined the troupe, and when the troupe staged the play "Sword Lending", the show became a successful hit.

My favourite troupe though, was the Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe. I often said to Mdm Chen Qiaoluan that the in charge in Toa Payoh must have favorable with Chit Hoon. When I was living in Toa Payoh, the troupe seemed to be performing there all the time. Or it could be that Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe was too popular and overbooked, which was why the people living Toa Payoh did not have a chance to see much of them. There was only one place to catch them, which was at the Toa Payoh Seu Teck Sean Tong, for two performances during the eighth month of the lunar year.

Among Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe's repertoire, the play "Wang Bao Chuan" had left the deepest impression on me, simply because I was also studying this play in school at that time. The troupe's performances of "Liu Hai meeting the deity", "Furen Cheng" and "General Mu Guiying" and others were also shown on television, as black and white broadcasts. They could even be considered as the earliest series that was shown on national television.

In the past, Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe used to take two days to complete the performance of a play. This is unlike performances these days, which could take less than two and a half hours. Chit Hoon also had a big repertoire. Episodic plays included "The Snow Prince", "The secret of Tang Palace", "Princess Renyi" and later on "The Royal Swop". The troupe also staged very epic performances, such as "The Yanzi Spirit" which was adapted from a movie. Through the use of special techniques, the stage was transformed into a mesmerising set, attracting thousands of people. Could it be said then that a different way to present Teochew opera can draw a bigger crowd? Another play, "The Condor Hero" was also very well received. The play had four parts, so it was not possible that everyone could finish watching the entire performance.

When we were dating, my wife and I would also go to Toa Payoh Lorong 5 to catch "The real and the imposter" put up by Chit Hoon Teochew Opera Troupe.

Another well-known troupe was the Lau Jit Kee Hiang Teochew Opera Troupe. They too, had been invited to produce a series for television. At its peak, the troupe had over a hundred members. In the 1980s, their most popular works included "Yang lingpo" and "Zhonghua

Wuyan". In the later stages, after their performance of "San Fu Ma", the troupe's popularity went into decline. At that time, Huang Yanmei was still a young performer in the troupe. She had acted as Li Wenjun. Afterwards, Mdm Huang jumped ship to Chit Hoon. Her performance with Zhu Hua in "Saving Guo Ziyi" was unforgettable. To this day, Mdm Huang is still acting with Lau Sai Thor Guan. Does anyone remember that Lau Jit Kee Hiang Teochew Opera Troupe also had a second lead actress? She still performs with the Sin Ee Lye Choon today..

It seems that Lau Gek Lau Choon Teochew Opera Troupe did not have many performances in Singapore. At that time, there were also Lau Gek Lau Choon, Sin Yong Goy, Lau Tong Chia Soon, Lau Gek Lye Choon, Tor Kang, Tong Guan Hua Heng, Lau Chia Tian Hiang, Lau Poo Ghwee Choon and Chia Tian Hiang.

I have to mention Mdm Huang Yanmei once more, who should have come from Lau Gek Choon Hiang. When she performed "Lu Wenlong" she simply mesmerised the audience. Sin Yong Gor did not perform for a long time, probably at Toa Payoh Lorong 2 when they performed "Dragons for Phoenix" at Toa Payoh Lorong 4 when they had invited Mdm Yu Hua to perform "The Rain". My mother used to say that the Sin Yong Hua Heng Teochew Opera Troupe had four beauties, and Yu Hua was one of them. Lau Sai Thor Guan was also an established troupe with a wide repertoire. I had the chance to see them perform "Force to return to Chang An" in Toa Payoh, and it was most entertaining.

In the past, the boss Mr Lee used to be very enthusiastic, often arranging for troupe members Ying Zi and Fang Zhanrong to perform and give talks at secondary schools. When they were there, the actors also had the chance to perform the impressive ladder climbing scene in "The traveler and the ghost" Mr Lee even arranged for his actors to help my wife and I with the makeup for our wedding portrait. On the day we were shooting the portrait, I was dressed as a scholar and my wife was dressed as the lady. Some passersby saw us on the stage and had even thought that we were new actors rehearsing a scene.

Years later, when there was a change of boss, the performance repertoire, I often went to watch the Lau Sai Thor Guan perform, so much so that many of the actors recognised me then. Later, when the Lau Sai

Thor Guan took the stage at the Wai Hai Cheng Bio temple, I would take the afternoon off to watch them perform “Six Imperial Official”.

The lady boss Qiu Yufeng contributed in many ways, from conducting vocal training classes to setting up the troupe Sin Sin Yong Hua Troupe is also one of the rare Teochew opera troupes still in Singapore today. In the early days, I would even go all way to the west of the country to watch the troupe perform “Luo Shui Fairy”. Recently, the troupe launched two of Tan Chor Hwee’s masterpieces, “The precious Red book and Sword” and “The top scholar on patrol”

I have also gotten to know the lady boss and several of the actors.

Having watched Teochew opera for so many years, I would say that the golden era for Teochew opera in Singapore was from the 1960s to 1980s. The actors, costumes, scripts and skills were on par with the troupes in China and Hong Kong. However, as with most traditional arts, the popularity of Teochew opera today has waned. If not for some of the professional actors I have gotten to know, I might have been too lazy to continue following Teochew opera. The good news is, there seems to be a rekindling of interest in Teochew opera in China in the recent years, especially with the up and coming Bai Hua Chaoju Troupe. This reminds me greatly of the past glory and splendour of professional Teochew opera troupes in Singapore.

(translated from Chinese)

Interview with Patrick Png by Chen Yuhang

1. My background

I was born in 1962 and liked Teochew opera from a young age. In those days, street opera was common in Singapore, so I always followed my parents to watch. As I grew older, however, my curiosity about Teochew opera drove me towards research and artefact collection. Having grown up with Teochew opera, I took to research in this field easily. My view is that opera should not be judged as “good” or “bad”. All of it has historical value, especially as many things today are lost to history. In the last few decades, whether in Singapore or China, people have been seeking to preserve the artistic value of Teochew opera. They are beginning to want to learn and understand opera. But understanding the art requires one to have experienced and interacted with it – then it will be easier to go through historical materials and make conclusions from them.

2. The history of Teochew opera in Singapore

Before we talk about Teochew opera in Singapore, we have to examine its origins. There is research today that suggests that Teochew opera is about 600 years old. Previously it has always been said to be about 400 years old, based on the age of the script “Chen San and Wu Niang” which was believed to have been written during the Ming Dynasty.

At that time, there was already a script for the play “Liu Xibi and A Gold Hairpin”, but it was seen as a *zhengzi* opera rather than a *baizi* opera (the theatrical genre linked to Teochew opera). More recent findings, however, suggest that the “Liu Xibi and A Gold Hairpin”, script is originally from Chaoan, with significant dialogue in the Teochew dialect, indicating that this was a Teochew opera. While more digging is needed before experts can come to a consensus, we can conclude Teochew opera is at least 400 years old. Since it could not have been formed in a vacuum, one theory is that it had evolved, or was adapted, from *zhengzi* opera, which was a more complex form of opera with various tune

systems. On top of this came various local influences that eventually gave birth to a new theatre form.

Teochew opera has always centred on child actors, who play both male and female lead roles. As they age, they may move on to comedic parts or other roles. The children were contracted for work for seven years. After that, troupes usually do not want them anymore, because their voices would have changed. If actors wanted to stay in the industry, they would have to learn percussion or pick up a more “adult” role. If that does not work out either, they will quit the trade and return home. But troupes never had a problem recruiting new child actors in those days. One batch leaves and another one takes over – that was how they operated.

Teochew opera’s early roots were in *baizi* opera. But *baizi* opera does not exclusively refer to opera only from Hailufeng (Shanwei, Haifeng and Lufeng), although it would appear so from the accent of the performances. In fact, all over the greater Chaozhou region, vocal styles and tunes are similar in opera. In the 1910s, there were opera records printed with the words “Shantou” to suggest the style was different from that of Hailufeng. Eventually these would be seen as one. After the founding of modern China in 1949, the genre became known as Teochew opera or *chaoju*.

Troupe names are difficult to trace. There may be more than one Lau San Chia Soon but it is not the same troupe. However, if one Lau San Chia Soon leaves and does not return, someone else can set up a Lau San Chia Soon. Teochew troupe names are often similar, because if a person likes a troupe name, he can just change the first character to form a new troupe name. Alternatively, a troupe may be so successful that it forms three troupes with similar names. However in China if there are two troupes in the same area with the same name, it means one performs opera while the other performs shadow theatre. There are no repeated names for the same genre.

Teochew opera belongs to the *nanxi* dramatic form, which was developed in the Southern Song dynasty. As such, it inherited *nanxi*'s elegance. Its tune system is influenced by a few systems, including *kunqiang*, which results in a word being “pulled” long when it is sung; and *yuyaoqiang*, which is sung without music accompaniment – a feature of Teochew opera. The tradition of *yuyaoqiang*, which originated from Zhejiang, is already lost. But these few tune systems, when combined with traditional Teochew folk tunes and woodblock playing, gave birth to Teochew opera.

By the late Qing Dynasty, you can hear records of Teochew opera because there were gramophones. Subsequently, there were photographic records of Teochew opera, which gave us a glimpse of how they were staged. The early Teochew opera plays such as “Story of White Hare” “Unchanged hearts” and “The Story go Pipa” were relatively short, involved few personnel and utilised a smaller stage which was supported by six pillars. As the stage grew bigger, the pillars increased to nine, then 12. They needed brighter lighting, more workers and longer plays.

As productions got bigger, plays went from a single act to multiple acts in the mid-1920s. Then in the 1930s – both in China and abroad – Teochew opera troupes started residing in theatres. To keep audiences coming, troupes staged plays for as long as possible, stretching to more than 100 acts by adapting longer wuxia or imperial court scripts. Longer plays tended to use traditional Teochew folk songs, because they were ready-made materials easily adapted for opera – even child actors could easily pick them up. Plays such as Lau Sai Thor Guan’s “Xiao Peng-er” and Lau Sai Por Hong’s “The Stable Country” were all long plays. The 1930s marked the pinnacle of Teochew opera.

The setup of Teochew opera in its early days was simple. Up to the 1920s, based on what we hear from records, plays mainly used the *yehu*, or “coconut” two-stringed bowed fiddle. In the 1920s, two musicians from Lau San Chia Soon – Lin Mingxian and Hong Bing – took inspiration from *waijiang* opera (Guangdong Han opera) and worked together with musical instrument makers to use the *erxian* in Teochew opera. A stringed instrument, the *erxian* produces louder and clearer music. Other musical instruments that were gradually incorporated into Teochew opera include the *yangqin* (Chinese hammered dulcimer), the *suluo* gong and Chinese drums, showing the different influences that it absorbed.

During the late Qing Dynasty, Teochew opera troupes from China

began travelling overseas. Their first stop would either be Singapore or Thailand. If they wanted to go to Malaysia, they would go through Singapore. According to oral history records from old Teochew opera artistes, Lau Sai Thor Guan and Sin Yong Hoe Heng troupes came around the same time during the 19th century. Other troupes that arrived include Lau Guan Hua, Chea Lung Lau Gek Lau Choon, Lau Jit Kee Hiang, Lau Sai Yong Hong, Lau Sai Poh Hong, Sin Sai Poh Hong, Lau San Chia Soon, Lau Yee Lye Choon, and the famous Lau Tong Chia Soon, which caused a sensation when they performed in Singapore for a month. At that time, there was no concept of country or citizenship since Singapore was a colony. But these troupes were not considered “local” – they were all “from China”. Still, troupe members did not require passports and could freely move about. If your troupe could make a living you stayed, otherwise you would move on, sometimes to Malaysia or Thailand, and then come back at a later time. If things did not work out, troupes may disband and go back to China.

Child actors were usually contracted to work for seven years, after which they would be sent back to their families and replaced by another batch of child actors, who had undergone training in Shantou before coming to Singapore.

According to accounts from old artistes, Lau Sai Thor Guan once travelled to Thailand and stayed in the country for 12 years, indicating that they did very well there. Indeed, the troupe released many records during the early 1930s – and all of them were recorded in Thailand. Lau Sai Thor Guan also pushed the boundaries of Teochew opera by being the first to use laser lights for their stage set. To flesh out dramatic scenes depicting water and fire in their play “Xiao Peng-er”, they hired dance choreographers from Shanghai. To keep up, other troupes followed suit.

Like Lau Sai Thor Guan, other troupes also spent time in Thailand. This was the time when Teochew opera in the region was at its most glorious. But the music swiftly fell silent during World War II. There were practically no records of Teochew opera released during that turbulent period. After the war, many of these troupes returned to Singapore – from then on they were viewed as Singapore troupes.

Around 1946-7, Lau Sai Thor Guan invited renowned Teochew opera teachers Lim Joo Liak and Hong Yunlin from China. They were both very accomplished and wrote many good plays for the troupe. At the time, Lau Sai Thor Guan and Sin Yong Hoe Heng both performed in theatres,

had strong line-ups and produced many famous actors, most of whom were young and hired from China. Sin Yong Hoe Heng in particular became known for their beautiful actresses. These two troupes were influential and released many records. A third notable troupe was Sin Thor Huay Choon, which was formed with actors originally from Lau Sai Thor Guan, who left after the troupe underwent major changes and hired many new actors. Sin Thor Huay Choon could not compete with Lau Sai Thor Guan's acting because it could not match its scale, but they boasted strong vocal talents and had a faithful following. As such they released many records as well, often using musicians from Lau Sai Thor Guan. Together, these three troupes were the top record producers here. As for actors, this was the period when Singapore's own actors came into their own, because after the founding of modern China in 1949, immigration ground to a halt. Troupes either worked with whoever they had, or sourced for new talent locally. That was when Teochew opera troupes became Singaporean, even though they had Chinese roots. Then around the 1950s, medium-sized troupes such as Lau Gek Choon Hiang were formed. This was around the time street opera began.

3. Singapore's Teochew opera troupes

Lau Sai Thor Guan was booming when it hired renowned Teochew opera teachers Lin Rulie and Hong Runlin from famous troupe Lau Gek Lye Choon. At the time they were staging long-running plays in theatres, such as "Guo Hun", "San Men Jie", "Yang Silang", "Diao Chan", "Caogeng Lei". Many of these were turned into records. Meanwhile, Sin Yong Hua Heng had "Er Du Mei", "Tang Bohu", and "Farewell to my concubine". Both troupes produced many famous actors. Lau Sai Thor Guan had Baozhu, Bixin, Xiulan, Yangtou, Dabai, while Sin Yong Hua Heng discovered Jiu Mei, XiXi, Qiaojiao.

Each troupe had its own strengths. They often performed in theatres at Tiat Hng, Ee Hng, New World and Great World. The Shaw organisation once hired Lau Jit Kee Hiang troupe to perform at Great World. Indeed, many troupes performed in amusement parks in those days.

During this period, Teochew opera still used the "child actor" style. Through their singing, you can tell that they were still imitating the melody and tune of this style. This continued for a while.

At the same time, there was a break in ties with China. After 1949, Chinese troupes did not come and vice versa. Singaporeans could only

listen to their records. But in the late 1950s, China shot a few Teochew opera films, namely "Burning of the Riverside Pavilion", "Chen San and Wu Niang" and "So Luk Neung". When these films came to Singapore, they had a huge impact, because in the mid-1950s, Singapore banned child actors and used only adults. This changed the style of Teochew opera, bringing a level of maturity to the script and emotions. Earlier plays were sometimes a bit wishy washy for commercial reasons, because it wanted to drag on the plays and keep audiences coming back. China's new Teochew opera films, however, were much more refined and had such beautiful songs. The pacing was also faster. This prompted Singapore troupes to change.

This can be said to be one of Teochew opera's high points. During the end of the Qing Dynasty, given the few options available, Teochew natives would all watch Teochew opera. The 1930s were a high point and watching Teochew opera was the entertainment activity of the day, because few would watch movies or go to bars. World War II was a low point because there is no way to perform. But after that everyone started watching opera again. By the 1950s, they were faced with competition from other entertainment sources such as movies, popular music and Hollywood films, so Teochew opera performances in theatres slowly declined. Even renowned troupes such as Sin Yong Hoe Heng and Lau Sai Thor Guan had to perform religious thanksgiving ceremonies to make a living.

It was said that when Lau Sai Thor Guan was doing well in the 1950s, you would need to use your store as monetary guarantee before you can hire them. This is because they often were hired to act in Malaysia and Indonesia, so it would only perform if there was significant benefit for them. That demonstrates how good that period was for Teochew opera.

By the end of the 1950s, audiences started feeling that plays were too long. But just then, Yao Xuanqiu's Teochew opera films presented Teochew vocal music in a different form, which was refreshing to audiences and led to a resurgence in popularity.

Every troupe in Singapore was staging plays adapted from China's Teochew opera films, such as "Burning of the Riverside Pavilion", "Chen San and Wu Niang" and "So Luk Neung" and "Farewell to the warriors". It was a period of reform for local Teochew opera, as they followed China's Teochew opera closely during the 1960s. Unfortunately the Cultural Revolution broke out soon after. Traditional opera was banned in China

and replaced by revolutionary plays. Given the anti-communist stance of Singaporean politics, revolutionary plays were not allowed here. But there were still movies and records from Chen Chuhui and Zhuang Xuejuan, who were idols who have performed often in Singapore.

In the 1960s, many troupes who followed China's Teochew opera style switched to follow Hong Kong's. Previously, Teochew opera costumes featured Chaoshan embroidery and makeup styles. After switching to follow Hong Kong, the costumes took on a stronger Cantonese flavour. We had to change because it was no longer possible to go to China and make these costumes. Hong Kong-style costumes could be made in Singapore by a man called Chen Bin. Everybody knew to find him for costumes. He was from Shanghai, opened his business in Hong Kong and was making costumes for different opera styles. Then he moved to Singapore and opened a shop here. So Teochew opera's style changed again in the 1970s because of this influence from Hong Kong. Many of the plays we staged were based on Hong Kong scripts, which troupes like Sin Tian Chye left here after their performances. Or we interpreted musical arrangements based on their records. Up to the 1970s, our plays were all produced by ourselves without hiring external help. Troupes taught their own actors so for new actors without experience, you just follow the older trainees or teachers and slowly learnt. This trend persisted for a while.

Another big difference between troupes arose after World War II. Before the war, all Teochew opera troupes were from China. After the war, you had "Thailand troupes", "Singapore troupes" or "Malaysia troupes". One distinguishing feature of Malaysia troupes is that they would often change their names, unlike Singapore troupes.

Malaysia had a big market for Teochew opera, especially in Johor Baru and Bukit Mertajam in Penang. Before 1965, when the two countries were one, Lau Sai Thor Guan, Sin Yong Hoe Heng and Chek Hoon Teochew Wayang – which were seen as "Singapore troupes" – would often go to Malaysia for performances. Malaysia had its own famous troupes too, such as Lau Chia Tian Hiang, Tong Gek Lau Choon. In any case, actors from Singapore and Malaysia mixed freely – the same person could belong to more than one troupe and could perform in either location. The distinction only became clearer after 1965 when Singapore gained independence. One set of citizens became two, so actors had to officially belong to one of the countries.

4. Interaction and influence of overseas troupes

In the 1950s, the troupes under our local trade unions were not enough to cope with market demand. Malaysia's famous troupes such as Lau Chia Tian Hiang, Tong Gek Lau Choon would often perform here during the 7th and 8th lunar months, which are busy festival periods. The 7th month is the Hungry Ghost Festival, while the 8th month is a period of thanksgiving to the gods. At that time, there were many performances at temples and many people still wanted to watch Teochew opera. The format and scripts used at the time were from Hong Kong, because of the break in ties with China. Without being able to compare to another country, we could not tell if Hong Kong's Teochew opera was good or not, we just followed them till the early 1980s, when China resumed performing traditional opera. Many watched the performances of the Guangdong Teochew Opera Troupe and felt it was better, and hence slowly began looking towards China again.

For scripts, because some of the older generation artistes died and the younger ones do not know how to write scripts, Singapore's troupes would often just use whichever script they felt was better, regardless of where it originated from. For makeup, we stuck with Hong Kong's style. But for costumes there was a switch from Hong Kong's glittery costumes to the more subdued, embroidered styles from China.

So it is not that Singapore "liked" Hong Kong, but we had to look somewhere when the link to China was broken. When links resumed, China's influence returned.

Another problem was the lack of scripts, since there were no locals to write them. But with the increase in plays from the China, Singapore troupes could get their hands on Chinese scripts. We watched video tapes, which unknowingly served as our "directors" as Singaporeans listened, watched and learnt from them. The downside to this trend is that Singapore's Teochew opera could not form its own style. We always thought, watching Teochew opera from China, that it was always better than ours. But some people like watching local opera because they know our actors and feel a sense of familiarity.

5. Recent developments in Teochew opera

Why did Teochew opera become less creative? How did it start going downhill? The first reason is because the Housing Development

Board went into full swing in its activities during the 1980s, moving and demolishing buildings and temples. Now, temples are one of the main reasons for the existence of opera troupes. They hire troupes to stage plays for the Hungry Ghost Festival and religious thanksgiving. Funds are collected from households in an area during the 7th lunar month to stage plays – if you have more money you hire a more famous troupe, otherwise you hire a lesser one. The second reason is simple economics. Twenty years earlier, a troupe charged \$2,000 to stage a play. Twenty years later, it still commands only \$2,000. As Singapore industrialised, people realised they can make more money working in factories. There was no need to perform at night or have to make trips to Malaysia as part of a troupe. As everyone started to quit their opera jobs, there was a shortage of actors. Those who remained are older ones who are not keen to work in factories. So troupes were ageing, which led audiences to view their art as old-fashioned and inferior. With fewer plays being staged, actors were no longer hired full-time because troupes could not afford to. They were hired only when there was a play to be staged, unlike in the past where they were paid a salary whether or not there were shows. So Teochew opera on the whole went into decline.

Teochew opera are the roots of the Teochews, so it will never disappear, but it will always change its form. So how did it change?

The 1960s was a golden period for Teochew opera troupes, which were staging plays from China. It was during that period that amateur groups began switching from Guangdong Han opera, or *waijiang* opera, to Teochew opera. They inherited the practice of singing *waijiang* opera, but when Teochew opera flourished because of the popularity of Teochew opera movies, groups like Er Woo, Thau Yong and Lak Aik all began switching to Teochew opera. Many of their members were Teochew anyway, so they liked it – Teochew opera was close to their hearts. Meanwhile, Nam Hwa has been staging Teochew opera since it was formed, although they performed only during their anniversary, or at most two to three times a year. After all, since they were amateurs, the main objective was to get together, practise and make sure everyone donates money and gets to perform a little during the group's anniversary. Starting from the 1960s, amateur groups have been making continuous progress relative to professional troupes, which regressed because of a lack of professional actors. Amateur associations, on the other hand, still attracted many participants.

In the 1980s, amateur groups invited numerous professional troupes from China to come to Singapore to perform. That was when they learnt what putting on a Teochew opera entailed. Professional troupes on the other hand were limited by funds and manpower. Stages became smaller and public housing areas have practically no space to stage a Teochew opera. So the setup was simple and plays did not really look like proper plays. But those were the conditions professional troupes faced. Without funds, they can only gather limited actors and show standards will invariably decline.

It was different for amateur groups, which only put on one show a year and so had higher expectations and were willing to put in more effort. In the 1960s and 1970s, amateur groups were happy just to get local professional troupe trainers to teach them. But later on they demanded more and would hire directors, musicians and choreographers from China, make their costumes from China and keep improving their standards, until today. So now amateur groups are the ones that stage plays that are of theatre standards, while professional troupes are relegated to street opera. It is not that professional troupes did not have good actors, but the conditions did not allow their trade to develop. The crisis that these troupes faced was a lack of succession because the industry had no money. To hire professionals, you need money. If you cannot pay, nobody will want to go into your trade.

Amateur groups had their own set of problems. Singaporeans were encouraged to speak Mandarin, so younger generations did not speak Teochew. It would be difficult to attract them and teach them to perform – and they were not interested anyway. After the 1980s, there were plenty of other entertainment avenues. Amateur groups had a limited pool of actors to tap on, so you could see the same actor performing for different groups.

In recent years, the government has attached greater importance to the preservation of traditional culture, so Nam Hwa's donations are matched dollar to dollar, which is a new method of funding. Everyone can see that art needs to be preserved and when the government pays attention, other people do as well – and this becomes the new situation. But while funding may have increased, the future for Teochew opera is still uncertain. It requires hard work from the current generation not to give up on this important task.

Historically, Teochew opera has never really taken root here. Why do I say this? If you study the history of Teochew opera in Singapore, you will see that in its early years, from the late Qing Dynasty to World War II, troupes from China just came and left repeatedly. They were here to make money, not to develop the art. After World War II, one group of troupes – such as Lau Sai Thor Guan and Sin Yong Hoe Heng – stayed, because the route back to China was severed. These actors were skilled but their roots were Chinese. The first Singaporean roots were planted by groups like Chek Hoon Teochew Wayang and veteran opera Lin Rulie, who trained a batch of young actors from Malaysia and Singapore. This group of actors were developed locally and can truly be said to have roots here. If you ask them to go on stage today, they can still act.

But these young saplings were quickly uprooted. Industrialisation and urban development hit the profession hard in the 1970s, before they could flower or bear fruit. Once destroyed they could not be rebuilt. That is why I say Teochew opera never took root in Singapore, even though those in the industry hoped it would. When it comes to art, if there is no compelling reason for our government to support you, it will just leave you to fend for yourself. If you can survive, you survive. If you cannot, you perish. What form it survives in is determined by the market – that is how Singapore chose to handle it.

It is unlike China. In Chaoshan, they will feel that Teochew opera is part of them and that the government must support its preservation.

Singapore today has this awareness as well, that we cannot lose all our Teochew opera – at least we must preserve some roots. I feel the best way to do this, is to go back to our past methods and hire professionals from China to come here. Whether they are from opera schools or professional troupes, they will know how to put on Teochew opera. Invite them to Singapore and hope that they will become Singaporeans.

This would then be a “ready-made tree”. After you plant this tree, you can use it to attract Singaporeans in a more professional manner and build on it. This is a feasible solution because you cannot find amateurs and expect them to save Teochew opera. It is impossible – they are not qualified to teach others. It will be unrealistic to make demands about how big we expect Teochew opera to become here. But as long as it continues to be performed, and people want to listen and be involved, we should seize this opportunity to give it a better platform to realise its dreams.

Author's postscript: In our interview, Mr Patrick Png also spoke about the development of the Malayan Teochew Theatrical Trade Union and the journey of Chek Hoon Teochew Wayang troupe. As a collector of Teochew opera vinyl records, he also touched on the production of Teochew opera records, the location of the recording, as well as troupes and actors who released records. For details, please refer to the book's main text, as they will not be repeated here.

(translated from Chinese)

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