

# TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE THROUGH TRADITIONAL THEATRE: THAU YONG'S SIX DECADES OF DEVOTION (1931-1991)

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*Similar to other dialect Teochew, the second largest Chinese in Singapore,*

*maintained their traditional theatre through a network of devoted amateur theatre groups. Teochew, or Chaozhou, is a town situated in eastern Guangdong Province. Teochew opera, like other cultural products of the Teochew speaking peoples, such as embroidery, handicrafts and food, is highly valued. Teochew opera is popular in the entire area of Teochew cultural influence. In China these include Chenghai, Chaoan, Chaoyang, Nanao, Jieyang, Puning, Jiexi, Huilai, Lufen, Haifeng and Yaoping, as well as all Teochew communities abroad.*

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*The theatre groups in Singapore are amateur in the sense that the participants do not receive any salary. Nevertheless, these groups are significant contributors to cultural life in Singapore. They are especially important in our time, when the lifestyle is so dominated by modern technology. Many professional theatre groups have gradually disappeared as they can no longer find the infrastructure and audience which supported them in the past.*

*Can Thau Yong continue its music and drama activities in the years to come and compete with modern media which feature western plots, characters and settings that urbanites are familiar with? Tracing past experiences will provide the clues for an answer about the future.*

#### THE HUMBLE BEGINNING IN THE 1930s.

Thau Yong was formed by Tan Kee Chor ( 陳基昌 ) and friends, in August 1931. To rent the third floor of a shophouse on Carpenter Street, the 20 founding members paid three dollars a month. Unlike other amateur opera groups of the same period, Thau Yong was not formed by wealthy merchants. Its members were relatively poor. 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 later moved to another house on the same street it had more than 80 active members. The new Chairman elected was Mr Ng Buan Song ( 黃万松 ). 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 Han opera in three nights for enthusiastic audiences.

Their great success gave them the incentive to hurriedly prepare their second show to be staged in the following year. In July 1936, three performances of a dozen opera excerpts were presented at the Third Stage of the Great World Amusement Park. Two months later, they staged three nights of opera to raise funds for China. Thau Yong's continuous success in performing opera excerpts of high standard and in drawing huge

crowds made it possible for the group to attract the wealthier businessmen to join. By 1937 it had moved again, to bigger premises on Hong Kong Street. When news of the Japanese invasion of China, on the 7th of July reached Singapore, the Chinese community, which identified themselves with China more than the place they resided then, responded with great anger. Showing their support against the Japanese invasion, numerous charity shows by schools and cultural organizations were presented to raise funds for the resistance movement in China.

#### RAISING FUNDS FOR THE JAPANESE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT.

Thau Yong organized a highly successful fund raising show in mid-September, 1937, merely two months after the invasion.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, two reputable professional actors, Mr. Lee Kwang Kwa ( 李光華 ) and Mr. Tay Song Nee ( 郑颂年 ) from China joined Thau Yong. With the devoted members, through frequent regular practices, the ensemble at Thau Yong was considered among the best in the local theatre scene and all their fund raising performances in the following years drew large crowds. Especially the one held in October 1941 at the Gay World Amusement Park, for the local invasion resistance fund. However, when the Japanese soldiers set foot on Singapore in 1942 all cultural activities ceased for three miserable years.

A year after the Japanese were defeated, Thau Yong managed to

gather enough money from some members to re-start the group. In 1946, Thau Yong rented a house in River Valley Road, with Mr. Sng Siak Hui ( 孙锡理 ) as the chairman. A professional artist from China, Mr. Tan Kay Cheo ( 谭嘉石 ) was appointed as instructor. Although Mr. Chen was with Thau Yong for barely a year, he launched four highly acclaimed productions in February, July, September and October.<sup>2</sup> The growing reputation of Thau Yong attracted more members and soon it found that the small premises rented was not enough to cope with the increased activities.

It was therefore decided that a bigger place was needed and in 1947, with donations amounting to more than \$10,000 Thau Yong moved to North Bridge Road. The membership increased to 200.

#### THE YANG DECADE

A rising star of the Teochew business circle, Mr. Yeo Seow Hwa ( 楊照和 ) was elected as Thau Yong's chairman the following year. Mr. Yeo's benevolent personality and generous financial support made him a popular leader. He served as chairman for the next decade. His leadership helped Thau Yong firmly establish itself as the most dynamic Chinese theatre group, involved in numerous fund raising projects with very impressive performances.<sup>3</sup> In the 50s, the musicians of Thau Yong were often invited by the then Radio Malaya to record Han opera music and gramophone companies to make records.<sup>4</sup> All the performances

during the Yang Seow Hwa decade, attracted huge crowds. Almost on every occasion, audiences who had to be turned away, quarrelled angrily because of their great disappointment in not being able to see the shows. Especially successful was the charity show for Nanyang University staged at the Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur in 1954. The Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur was mainly Cantonese speaking, but turned up in full force to display their support of the establishment of the only Chinese language university in Southeast Asia to be established in Singapore in 1956.

When Thau Yong celebrated its 25th anniversary, a four-night programme was presented at the Broadway Theatre of the New Amusement Park. It even invited members who resided in Kuala Lumpur to join its performances.

Thau Yong's great success in the 50's was often attributed to its members' dedication in their practice, teamwork, outstanding guest teachers, helpful senior members, and resourcefulness of the leadership in raising funds for activities. By the end of the 50s, Thau Yong, apart from gaining a reputation as the foremost Han opera presenter, had also become famous for its Chinese orchestra.

In 1960, Singapore celebrated its newly acquired self-government status with numerous multi-ethnic concerts in which Thau Yong's Chinese orchestra was invited to participate. It also staged a fund raising performance for the proposed National Theatre, a symbol of

cultural independence for the post colonial era. In October when Thau Yong staged its anniversary show at the newly renovated Victoria Theatre, audiences came in flocks from Malaya to see a popular young folk singer, Zhang Zhao Ying (張昭英) who performed in the Han opera.

When Mr. Yeo Seow Hwa insisted on relinquishing his chairmanship in 1960, Mr. Teo Chia Lin served as his successor for a year. In 1961, Mr. Huang Shi Tong was elected as chairman, a post he retained for the next ten years.

#### RISING POPULARITY OF TEOCHEW OPERA

The 60s was an interesting period for the Chinese traditional theatre scene in Singapore. Unlike the modern theatre, dance and music activities, which were often involved in the intense political rivalry of the Peoples Action Party's Government and the leftist opposition parties, traditional theatre remained detached from politics.<sup>5</sup> Before China launched its disastrous Cultural Revolution in 1966, theatre lovers in Singapore were able to see numerous well-made films of diverse regional operas. These films to a great extent provided the devoted amateur practitioners as well as professionals with valuable sources for learning. To the Teochew opera enthusiasts, the screening of four films in succession was like a treat from Heaven. These were 'Su Liu Niang', 'The Fire at the Riverside Pavilion', 'Prosecuting the Husband' and 'Liu Ming Zhu.' All of a

sudden, all groups imitated the films and at one time everybody was doing the Su Liu Niang. It became an informal competition among the groups and as a result all groups upgraded their skills in all aspects of theatre. It was in this context that Thau Yong staged Su Liu Niang, the Teochew opera rather than its usual Han opera, in 1962 for its 31st anniversary celebration at the Victoria Theatre.

Thau Yong's debut of Teochew opera was a great success. It was also the beginning of its gradual shift from Han 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 were unable to gate crash and were greatly disappointed. Thus in 1965, Thau Yong decided to move to the 3000 seat National Theatre for its double bill: Han 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 documented by local television.

Like the previous occasions, Thau Yong once again suffered from the decline in membership and activities when it moved premises to a new venue in Bukit Pasoh in 1969. There were informal dialect group boundaries in those days and the Teochew did not go to a Cantonese area. Their frequent absence at practice sessions made it impossible for

Thau Yong to stage any show at all that year. It took more than a year for the senior members to persuade enough actors to stage a show to commemorate its 39th anniversary. The choice was two Han operas at the Victoria Theatre in September, 1970.

Unfortunately, it proved to be a disaster. Han opera, without a big dialect group base, attracted mainly a smaller group of theatre lovers who appreciated its exciting, indignant, high pitched music and repertoire of historical plays. Its dialogue, delivered in stylized Mandarin, is difficult for the majority of the dialect speaking audience. The first night, it attracted less than 300 people. The following night, only over a hundred turned up. Worse still was that there was a black out because of power failure and by the time the lights came back a hour later, all the audience had gone home. The cast was devastated and Thau Yong stopped performing Han opera for a very long time.

The following year, 1971, Mr. Chng Ngee Han ( 庄义汉 ) replaced Huang Shi Tong as the new chairman and he led Thau Yong through the 80s. The new committee identified three areas of concern and reacted with practical solutions. The first was to move to a more accessible venue. By June, Thau Yong found a new place at Ord Road. The second was to persuade the inactive members to return to the practice sessions, which they managed successfully within months. Finally it was decided to launch a recruitment exercise to cultivate new talents. The vigorous effort paid off.

By the end of the year, Thau Yong succeeded in presenting a grand scale Teochew opera 'The Women Generals of the Yang Family' guided by guest teachers. It was also during Chng's first year that Thau Yong amended its constitution to call for a general meeting once in every two years instead of annually.

#### SYSTEMATIC TRAINING AND INVITATION TO NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

With the large number of newcomers, Thau Yong appointed three of its senior members to train younger members. Yeo How Jiang ( 楊浩傑 ) was in charge of instrumental music, Mr Koh Joo Chuan ( 許如泉 ) was the vocal music teacher and Mdm Ng Soi Soi was the movement instructor. At the end of the year, in December 1972, Thau Yong impressed the audience once again with another moving performance: 'Qing Yuan Chuan Dao.' Not only was it invited by television to get the show documented, the then Ministry of Culture also invited Thau Yong to repeat the show the following August as part of the National Day's Celebration to be staged at the Victoria Theatre.<sup>6</sup>

On National Day 1973, when Thau Yong offered a repeat performance of 'Qing Yuan Chuan Dao' at a temporary stage built in front of its premises on Ord Road, it attracted hundreds of spectators. Such overwhelming response prompted the Ministry of Culture to extend its invitation to Thau Yong again the following year for its National Day's Celebration. Thau Yong's choice of a

dramatic piece, 'Tragedy in the Peach Garden' proved to be a great success. A dramatically complex presentation of the 'Three High Officials from a Family' in 1975 at the National Theatre also won acclaim because of the vitality of the performers and the skillful musicians. Thau Yong's long-standing quest for well rehearsed productions and memorable stories had won the audiences' trust.

In 1976, Thau Yong once again had trouble with the premises. The Urban Redevelopment Authority required Thau Yong to move out of its Ord Road venue. To get rid of this headache permanently, Thau Yong decided to buy a three-storey building at Kim Yam Road. Unfortunately, some of the tenants refused to move out and Thau Yong was forced to adopt a wait-and-see policy with these people who stayed in that house for years. At last they agreed to move out in 1992 and hopefully Thau Yong would find a permanent place after its 60 years of existence! But in 1976, because of this dilemma, they presented no public performance.<sup>7</sup>

Fortunately by March 1977, a new place was found at North Canal Road. A recruitment exercise was conducted in order to stage the performance of the Teochew opera 'The Two Scholars' to commemorate the 46th anniversary celebration, scheduled for January 1978 at Victoria Theatre.

When the Ministry of Culture organized its First Drama Festival in 1978, Thau Yong had the honour of being the only Teochew opera group invited to participate. In that same

year, the landlord decided to take back the premises and Thau Yong had to move once again. This time, it did not move too far away, just down the road: No. 47 of the same street. This venue became the home of Thau Yong for the next decade. In November 1979 a comedy 'The Real and the Fake Couple' was staged at the Vitoria Theatre with great success.

The leading Teochew Clan Association, the Teochew Po Yi Hui Guan invited a Cantonese opera veteran Shu Jun Han in 1980, to conduct movement classes for all amateur opera groups in Singapore. It was indeed a very timely arrangement as the enthusiasts longed for an opportunity to upgrade their stagecraft. The Thau Yong members who joined the three-month training programme benefitted as their skills evidently improved in their 50th anniversary performances in 1981: a full length Teochew opera 'The Witty Maid' and a Han opera 'The Blooded Palm'. In the same year, Thau Yong was invited by the Ministry of Culture to participate in the 1st Chinese Music Festival.

The following year, Thau Yong kept its tradition of staging both Teochew and Han opera. Apart from the veteran Zhang Zhao Ying, young actor Tan Ooh Chye and Doris Chua also made an impressive debut in the Han opera, while a group of well-trained young actresses gave a convincing interpretation of a classical comedy 'The Dragon Well Jetty'. A year later, Thau Yong was once again invited by the Ministry of Culture to participate in the

Chinese Music Festival.

#### THE ACTIVE YEARS OF THE 80s

Mr. Lee Ngiam Poh succeeded Chng Ngee Han as the new chairman of Thau Yong in 1984. With a group of dedicated members led by Lim Soo Hiang and Tan Ooh Chye and excellent music teachers, Thau Yong throughout the second half of the 80s continued to present performances of high quality annually. In 1984, it was the triple bill of Teochew opera: excerpts of 'Chen San Wu Niang', 'The Encounter Beside the Well' and 'A Predestined Marriage'. A quartro bill: 'Snow at the Plum Pavilion', 'The Uprising Declaration', 'The Reunion' and 'Meeting by the Broken Bridge' was presented in 1985. It was in 1986, that Thau Yong's new talent, Lim Kim Seng, who specialized in the comic role, Chou, appeared. His enormous success in 'The Hairpin Farce', a masterpiece of traditional Teochew opera gave Thau Yong the confidence to stage a more complex full length comedy 'The Promotion of Xu Jiu Jing'. In 1988, a Yuan dynasty masterpiece which was adapted as a Teochew opera 'Saving the Fragile Lady' was performed while the following year a triple bill was presented: 'Reunion at the Nunnery', 'Execution of the Unfaithful Husband' and 'Wedding of the Dragon Princess'.

In 1990, Thau Yong for the first time, used the big auditorium of the Kallang Theatre for its performance of 'The Case the Missing Old Zither'. Like most of Thau Yong's productions in the 80s, 'The Case of

the Missing Old Zither' was collectively directed and coordinated by Lim Soo Hiang. This opera, was in fact presented to the Singapore audience by the Canton Teochew Opera Academy's Second Troupe at the same venue in 1989. Although a credible performance, the local audience tended to favour the China show. This prompted Thau Yong to consider a specially commissioned new opera for its 60th anniversary in 1991.

The 60th year of Thau Yong turned out to be a rewarding and eventful year. At the beginning of the year, Thau Yong was invited to stage 'The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea' at the Marina Park. In April, Thau Yong accepted the invitation from Mr. Gustav Adolf Frank in Stuttgart to participate in the International Youth Theatre Festival in three cities in Germany, to premiere a new opera written by the newly appointed Artistic Advisor, Chua Soo Pong. The opera, entitled 'Calamity During the Exile' is adapted from the Indian epic 'Ramayana'.<sup>8</sup> Composed by Tan Ooh Chye, Thau Yong's lead musician, and directed by Lim Soo Hiang, its premiere at Goethe Institute was well received. In September, 1991, 'Calamity During the Exile', was presented in Germany as scheduled. This was the first time a locally written Teochew opera was ever sent to represent Singapore in Europe. In November, Thau Yong premiered another full length opera specially commissioned for the 60th anniversary, 'Challenges of a Righteous Officer,' with Lin Jin Shen playing the lead role. Directed by a highly respected director from the

canton Teowchew Opera Troupe, China, the resonant opera's plot was about how a wicked couple and corrupt officials deceive people for so long a time. A play written clearly for featuring the talents of an ensemble rather than showcasing one or two lead actors, 'Challenges of a Righteous Officer' packed the house with great success.

#### ETHNIC CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN A WESTERNIZED URBAN ENVIRONMENT

However, Thau Yong's present leadership is aware of the uphill task of cultivating a strong interest among young peoples in Singapore's highly westernized urban environment. Not only does it need to vigorously look for ways of attracting young people to join in its training programmes for singing, acting and music, it has to launch productions strategically to lure young audiences as well.

The good thing is that in the last decades, visiting professional opera troupes and visiting directors, musicians and teachers from China have upgraded the standard of productions and therefore in a way helped to recruit new audiences who may not have necessarily understood the Teochew dialect. The surge of interest in Chinese opera could be interpreted as a display of ethnic awareness. The current government policies seem geared to ensure that each ethnic group retains and perpetuates its cultural distinctiveness within a general framework of national interest. Teochew opera, as an attractive form of Chinese traditional theatre would be used as an instrument which

helps to ensure ethnic cultural continuity.

#### NOTES

1. It is worth noting that during this charity show staged from the 18th to 20th of September 1937 at the third Stage of the Great World Amusement Park the musicians were moved from the back of the stage, the traditional arrangement for musicians, to the side of the stage, thus expanding the performing area for the actors.
2. The October production was performed on the 10th, which was the National Day of the Republic of China. Such a display of loyalty towards China was not uncommon among cultural groups in Singapore in the 40s as the majority of the Chinese population identified themselves more strongly with China than Singapore.
3. Apart from staging its annual anniversary performance Thau Yong was actively involved in many charity shows raising funds for educational fees for the children of the poor (1949), Nanyang University (1954), and victims of flood or fire (1956).
4. In 1940, Thau Yong was invited by a gramophone company to record music and a number of Han operas, a total of 42 records were made. Unfortunately, a dozen active members withdrew their membership at the end of assignment due to personality clash and a dispute over the honorarium. Ten years later, Thau Yong was once again invited to make a few more records. Such repeated

invitations clearly indicated the high standard of the Thau Yong performers.

5. 1963 was a year of great political turmoil. Many activists of the cultural groups which associated closely with the opposition parties were arrested. The government asserted that they were being used by the underground Communist Party. Apparently some of the musicians of the Thau Yong Chinese orchestra were motivated politically and this was soon discovered by its management committee. Thau Yong made a decision to dissolve the orchestra immediately.
6. In the early 70s, the leftist cultural groups were once again gaining momentum. To counter their presentation of theatre productions, the Ministry of Culture solicited the support of traditional theatre groups to stage a series of performances during the National Day celebrations.
7. Some would argue that, like in 1957 and 1963, when Thau Yong ceased to present its annual show, it was more because of the prevailing political climate rather than internal domestic problems. Some radical theatre groups' practitioners were arrested and subsequently confessed that they were using theatre activities as a cover for unlawful propagation of Communism. That was before the victory of North Vietnam and the take-over by the Communists in Cambodia and Laos encouraged a new surge of pro-Communist activities in Singapore in the mid-70s.

**T**he interconnectedness of all art forms is an ancient Indian concept. In this tradition the totality of an art form is the combination of its parts, which are derived from other arts.

This interconnectedness of the arts is illustrated in the story of the "Vishnu dharmottara purana."

In this story, King Vaira, wishing to worship the deities in their proper forms, decides that to do so he must be able to construct the proper icons of worship himself.

King Vaira asks the sage Markandeya to make him his disciple and to teach him the art of icon making.

Markandeya tells the king that before he can understand the principles of icon making he must first have a knowledge of painting. The king agrees. He asks the sage to teach him the art of painting. But, the sage tells the king that before he can understand the art of painting, he must first have a knowledge of dance. Again, the king agrees. He asks Markandeya to teach him the art of dance. The sage tells the king that without a good sense of rhythm or without a knowledge of instrumental music, proficiency in dance is impossible. The king asks the sage to teach him these subjects. Markandeya replies that a mastery

of vocal music is necessary before one can be proficient in instrumental music...Eventually Markandeya teaches the king all of these arts before he is taught the art of iconography.

An inter-relationship of art forms also exists in Indian dance: between music and dance, sculpture and dance, and literature and dance.

## Indian Dance and Its Relation to Other Indian Art Forms

BY SANTHA BHASKAR

These inter-relationships can be described in different ways. Dance and music can be described as two limbs of the same body. Dance and sculpture as two sisters. Dance and literature as the foreground and background of the same picture.

Music and dance are so close, they are like two limbs of the same human form. If one limb is music and the other limb is dance, they will move together because they

express the same state and mood. Similar to the musician who uses particular sounds, the dancer uses abstract movement to evoke particular emotions.

The concept of rhythm (tala) is fundamental to all Indian arts. In Indian music and dance, this is manifested in the use of the same metrical cycle. To the abstract melodic patterns in a given metrical cycle, the dancer weaves abstract geometrical patterns in space. To the words of the poem set to a specific melody (raga), the dancer interprets through stylized gestures (mudras), the content of that poetry.

The musical composition decides the dance choreography. The pattern set by the musical compositions decides the dance sequence. The composition of the literary piece determines the basic mood (sthayi bhava) and transitory states (sanchari bhava). The dancer is one who interprets through stylized pantomime the poem that is set to music.

Sculpture and dance can be described as two sisters. Every figure of Indian sculpture is, like every pose and gesture in Indian dance, its kin, highly symbolic. In both sculpture and dance all figures or poses have a particular evocative quality.

In both sculpture and dancing the human form is the instrument of expression. Everything in the figure:

the face, the hands, the postures of the limbs, the pose and the turn of the body, each accessory is imbued with an inner meaning. In both cases the human form is the vehicle of communication of a soul state.

The figures of Indian sculpture (and painting) depict the gods of Indian literature and dancing. They embody the Cosmic Being, the embodiment of an abstract idea.

From earliest time to the sixteenth century, the Indian sculptor has been fascinated by the dynamic energy of the Indian dance. It is in stone that the sculptor has tried to arrest this vital and significant movement, time and again. The prolificness of the dancing figure in Indian sculpture has given Indian sculpture a unique quality of rhythmic expression.

Dance and literature are the foreground and background of the same picture. Indian dance would be a dead technique without the rich Sahitya (verse) that forms the basis of dance. As a dancer performs, a distinct religious, literary tradition comes alive in the background. He or she portrays through movements what the writer has sought to express through words or poetry.

Bharata, who wrote 'Natyasastra,' the theory of dance and the theatre arts, accorded to dance a divine origin, and a literary and religious heritage both in thought and

technique.

The story of the handing over of the art of dance by Lord Shiva to Tanduv and then to Bharata, reflects the religious, literary and secular aspects of dance. The epic narrative method of a Kathakali performance, the lyrical manner of a Bharatanatyam



recital, the subtle renderings of the Ashtapadis of Jayadeva in Odissi and Manipuri and the 'Gata bhaves' of Kathak, the Narayana theerthar's poetry in Kuchupudi are results of this contribution of literature.

We can see this rich religious background and vast literary heritage as we practise such classical dance forms as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchupudi, Manipuri,

Odissi and Kathak. The artistes of these dances never seek to express personal human emotions. He or she is constantly representing themes relating to gods and goddesses, (Siva-Parvathi, Krishna-Radha), and the pangs and yearnings of these supernatural beings, who pine more than the devotees do, for the love of the Almighty. The separation of mortal lover from the beloved is not a topic of dance. The themes of dance are always the lives of divine beings and their battle to win over evil forces. Sociological problems of the day are not addressed.

Lord Brahma (the creator), when he went into a deep yogic trance and meditated on the essence of the four Vedas (oldest sacred writings of Hinduism), created the fifth Veda. This Veda took words from the Rigveda, gestures from the Yajus, music and chanting from the Sama and sentiments and emotions from the Atharvada. Unlike the other Vedas, this Veda was not taboo to the lower caste of people. Its main purpose was to provide pleasure and delight, both to the ear and the eye, irrespective of caste.

From these fragments we can understand the totality of an ancient tradition which conceived of all arts as interconnected, and which uses the technique of one art in the other. The aesthetic experience of the artistes and the audience is Brahmanada (Supreme bliss in full state.)