

Tradition in Modern Singapore: The Inauguration of The Chinese Opera Institute

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Introduction

The inauguration of The Chinese Opera Institute on 19 May 1996 was a landmark event in the history of Chinese opera in Singapore. In line with current trends to rejuvenate cultural heritage, promote traditional arts and inculcate Asian values in the country, the Institute is an invaluable educational resource, dedicated to the furtherance of Chinese opera as scholarship and performance in Singapore.

The Chinese Opera Institute was established in August 1995. It is a non-profit organisation supported by the National Arts Council. The Institute is a training and research centre that encompasses the multi-farious characteristics of Chinese opera. As an educational

or-organisation, the Institute complements the activities of the numerous Chinese opera associations in Singapore by providing a platform for performers, musicians, scholars, connoisseurs and aficionados to contribute their talent and experience in this art form to the larger community.

The Institute

Since its establishment, The Chinese Opera Institute has organised many activities that include a Forum series (October 1995 to April 1996), a training course on the role of the *wusheng* (military, male character) by Pei Yan Ling and seminars on Teochew, Hainanese, and Hokkien-Pear Garden operas.

The Institute has an active Arts Education Programme whose primary role is to bring Chinese opera to schools and community clubs. The Programme organises workshops, lecture-demonstrations and performances, and assists these organisations in their productions of Chinese opera.

A biennial newsletter featuring Chinese opera in Singapore and overseas will be launched, together with a journal that feature research (on opera) by academics, dramatists and composers. There will also be three new publications that include a directory of Chinese opera associations in Singapore and papers presented at the above-mentioned Forum series. Finally, the Institute will organise a performing ensemble that will

present approximately one hundred and twenty public performances annually.

The Inauguration

The Chinese Opera Institute Inauguration and Fund-Raising Dinner was held on Sunday, 19 May 1996. The occasion was graced by the Guest-of-Honour, Mr. Wong Kan Seng, Minister for Home Affairs and Patron of the Institute. There were more than a thousand in the audience that evening who responded enthusiastically to the performances of numerous Chinese opera excerpts.

The performing casts included ten eminent performers from Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, and musicians from ten opera associations in Singapore. Among the operatic types presented during that evening were Teochew opera, Hokkien opera, Cantonese opera, Hainanese opera and Kun opera. Two contrasting styles of Hokkien opera were performed: the Pear Garden opera from the Hokkien province in southeastern China and the *Gezai* Opera, a Taiwanese operatic form said to be indigenous to the country.

There are different stylistic variations of the Pear Garden Opera: that which was presented during the inauguration dinner is known as "Little Pear Garden," that emphasizes subtle movements and vocal styles, somewhat akin to the "classic" Kun opera. What was interesting about the evening's performance of the Pear Garden opera was that it re-enacted an excerpt ("Pursuit of the Golden Deer") from the Indian epic, Ramayana, written in 1991 by Chua Soo Pong, currently the Director of The Chinese Opera

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Institute. Pei Yan Ling, a much respected, leading artist from China who specialises in Peking opera, Kun opera and *Bangzi* ("Clapper") opera, presented an excerpt from the Kun opera that evening, a form that is now rarely performed. Kun opera was a popular operatic form especially among the Chinese literati during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but gradually declined when Peking opera came to accepted as the "Capital" opera.¹

With performances ranging from the "classic" Kun opera to con-temporary adaptations of historical epics, from presentations of well-known stories of the Peking

opera to the lesser known Hainanese opera, the evening's performance was certainly a melange of Chinese operatic styles, majority of which are actively practiced in Singapore. Such a varied presentation may be said to symbolise the ideology of The Chinese Opera Institute in its pursuit to encourage training, research and performance in "traditional" operatic forms, as well as creativity and experiments in contemporary styles.

Chinese Opera and the Concept of "Tradition" in Singapore

"Tradition" is a concept often used to denote a phenomenon that remains unchanged and constantly attached to the past. It is a notion that is constantly used to explain and justify present actions. Conversely, the present is capable of altering our perception of the past.² In other words, the history is not necessarily static, but is part of a creative process in the present that constantly invents its own past.³ Chinese opera, among many other types of performing arts, is a form of tradition that serves as a musical arena where one can observe the interpolation of traditionalism, modernism and social identity in Singapore.

Singaporean Chinese constitutes the largest ethnic group in Singapore, followed by the Malays,



Indians and Eurasians. The imagery of these four ethnic groups is often used to evoke multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism in the country, that is, the Singaporean identity. The ideology of a national identity is linked very closely to individual ethnic cultures, which, in turn, is often represented through the arts. There are, therefore, many occasions such as the annual *Chingay* parade, National Day celebration, Cultural Month and other religious and ethnic festivities that celebrate the presence of the numerous ethnicities in Singapore. In these activities, the focus of ethnic representation is on their "tradi-

tional" aspects. The Traditional, therefore, becomes iconic of these ethnicities. Likewise, traditional arts such as the Teochew opera, Hokkien opera, Hainanese opera in Singapore, for example, may be said to symbolise the ethnic identity of the respective ethnic groups among the Chinese population.

Focusing on traditional arts, however, does not imply a lack of creativity or experimentation. For example, Bell Yung (1989) has shown that in the music of the Cantonese opera, performance is defined by a continuous creative process. Likewise, Pei Yan Ling is well known for her creative and distinctive interpretation of

stereotyped opera characters in her performances. In other words, the Traditional is reinscribed in the modern context as being innovative, at times departing from its past, but always related to it.

In an Asian context like Singapore with a colonial history, the Traditional becomes crucial in creating a national identity. Modernisation is often construed as Westernisation. Even as the colonial era dissipates, the notion that the West is modern and the non-West is traditional lingers on. In Singapore, however, as well as in many other developing countries in Asia, the Traditional, especially the Asian tradition, is not only part

of its modernisation process, but is central to it. In other words, the Modern is redefined in Asian terms. Traditions, specifically the traditional art, therefore become important cultural tools of identity politics in a modern society.⁴

Conclusion

The Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore is, therefore, a context in which Chinese opera forms a cultural and artistic arena that facilitates and encourages the engagement of broader socio-cultural issues. As a creative platform for exchanges



Photo by Chua Soo Pong

between local and foreign Chinese opera practitioners, the Institute will continue its role in furthering Chinese opera research and performance in contemporary Singapore. Through such activities, the Chinese Opera Institute hopes to expedite the formation of a national Chinese opera company in Singapore soon. ■

Notes

1. The Mandarin name for Peking is Beijing, where "jing" means "Capital". Peking opera is known in Mandarin as jingju, which literally means "Capital opera". For an interesting discussion on the name of Peking opera used in Taiwan, see Nancy Guy (1995).

2. Bell Yung (1987) provides an illuminating example of the interdependency between the past and present in the music of the Chinese seven-string zither, guqin.

3. On the concept of "invented traditions," see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1995[1983]).

4. Chua Soo Pong (199) notes that the surge of interest in Chinese opera in Singapore in recent years is in line with government policies to ensure cultural distinctiveness among ethnic groups, framed within the ideology of a national identity.

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