

## Reaching out for cultural roots:

A Singapore example in reviving traditional theatre

By Dr. Chua Soo Pong



In the last decade, cultural policy makers in Singapore began to worry that the increasing material affluence will lead to decreasing interest in the arts and declining tastes in entertainment. With higher disposable income and greater leisure time, many more Singaporeans seem to spend their money and energy on consuming the vacuous videos, wondering around the sprawling shopping complexes or holidaying in fabulous foreign lands. Their alienation with cultural traditions and practices are, to a large extent, due to the rapid transformation of social and political structures, their education in English language and exposure in modern media. Westernization process has accelerated the emergence of new social norms and structures, many of which tend to undermine traditional values and lifestyle, thereby provoking cultural conflicts. The government of Singapore is not unaware of the implications of these cultural conflicts and had in fact since the late 70s, taken up a more active role in promoting the arts and expressive culture.

Headed by Ong Teng Cheong, Minister for Culture then, the govern-

Left: Lou Mee Wah (right) with Joanna Wong, prima donna of the Chinese Theatre Circle, the best Cantonese opera group in Singapore.

ment began to introduce several assistance schemes to performing arts groups and organized various festivals: Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977, Drama Festival and Chinese Operas at the Hong Lim Park in 1978, and Singapore Festival of Dance in 1982. There are also the Young People's Theatre Festival, Chinese Instrumental Music Festival, Jazz Festival and Choir Festival, all launched in the 1980s. Ong Teng Cheong, since 1985, promoted as Second Deputy Prime Minister, was assigned to supervise the grand plan to fulfill a national commitment in 1999 to make Singapore a society with vibrant cultures.

Of all these cultural programmes organized by the government, the Chinese Operas at the Hong Lim Park, began in 1978 but renamed and restructured as Traditional Theatre Festival in 1986, is probably the one that attracted most of the attention from anthropologists, ethnologists, cultural specialists, arts administrators and practitioners of traditional arts. To understand fully the reasons of success in reviving traditional theatre in modernized cosmopolitan such as Singapore, one really has to examine closely the social functions, the structure of the performing groups and the nature of creative process of Chinese opera.

### Chinese Opera: A Cultural Link to the Past

Chinese opera is one of the most influential and popular art forms in Singapore extends a cultural link with the past. The significance of Chinese opera is that it serves not only as an aesthetic form that entertains the people but also serves as a means of mass education of ethics, ideology, literature and moral. Since

the early years of the last century Chinese opera has been imported to Singapore. When the Chinese immigrants settled down in Singapore, itinerant Chinese opera troupes also travelled to Singapore to perform for auspicious religious events or private functions of wealthy families. It was clear that Chinese opera was immensely popular in those days as a theatre Li Chung Yuan was built then specifically for the performance of Chinese opera. Over the decades, Chinese opera remaining a popular art form greatly appreciated by the masses as well as the literati.

The intellectuals, businessmen, and other art lovers formed amateur musical and dramatic associations. These amateur theatre groups, with very humble beginnings became the major force in the revival of traditional theatre recently. They have contributed significantly in attaining higher standard of performances and greater appreciation of Chinese opera.

Ping Sheh (Peking opera group, formed in 1940), Er Woo Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association (Teochew opera group, formed in 1921), Lak Aik Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association (Teochew opera group, formed in 1929), Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association (Teochew opera group, formed in 1932) and Siong Leng Musical Association (Hokkien opera group, formed in 1941), all have an impressive record of stretching their permit for artistic excellence for well over half a century.

### Golden Years of Chinese Opera

In the golden years (1930s-1959s) of Chinese opera, there were many different professional groups specializing in different dialects, catering for their predominantly

dialect-based audience. Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hainanese, Peking operas though share certain repertoire, each has its distinctive musical style. During this long period, with the exception of the years occupied by the Japanese (1941-1945), numerous professional Chinese opera troupes were formed by Chinese artistes who settled down in Singapore. With the wealthy businessmen as patrons, these artistes became the star performers and teachers of Chinese opera in the newly formed troupes. Although mostly illiterate, they began to train children who were "adopted" by the troupes. At that time, some poor families arriving in Singapore from Southern China Villages, reluctantly offered their children for "adoption", in exchange for a loan. Most parents were unable to repay the loan, and these children remained in these poorly paid theatre troupes. The pioneers orally taught the entire repertoire they learnt from their masters in China to the youngsters!

The enormous popularity of the Chinese opera was vividly illustrated by the fact that in the 1950s, there were more than twenty professional troupes that performed in different dialects. The better one launched regular seasons at the well-equipped theatres in the amusement parks, often with high prices for tickets. Whenever troupes performed at temple fairs or other festive occasions, they attracted a huge crowd as they were free of charge for the spectators. These performances were usually patronized by the guilds of various trades, businessmen and wealthy art lovers. There were two shows everyday. The matinee began at 2:00 p.m. and finished at 5:00 p.m. The evening

shows started at 7:30 p.m. and ended at mid-night.

In those days without television, not only old people were engrossed in Chinese opera, youngsters and children too, crowded the streets or temples to see free entertainment. They probably did not fully understand the complicated plots of the power struggle in ancient China, or the implications of the spicy ghost stories or dramatic legends or colourful romances of the faithful lovers. But they must have enjoyed the bright scenery and elaborate costumes, most certainly the acrobatic fighting scenes. Many respectable contemporary performing artistes conceded that it was the magic of these street opera performances that touched them deeply at first sight and helped them develop great passion for the stage. Only years later, could they gradually appreciate the enthralling melodies, the poetic lyrics, the wits and skills of the actors and musicians, and more important,

the philosophical and cultural values of the traditional theatre.

#### Low Tide in the Sea of Rapid Change

Rapid political and economic changes in Singapore in the early 1960s had a profound effect in all the fields of culture. In 1959, the People's Action Party, led by Lee Kuan Yew, won the elections and continuous political leadership ever since has been provided by the same team. However, in those early years of nation building, Singapore faced some major political upheavals between 1961 and 1963. The country also faced serious challenges such as the policy of confrontation by Indonesia from 1963 to 1966, the separation from the Federation of Malay and the independence of the country in 1965.

Many students and young workers were involved in the political turmoil of that time. In 1961, Chinese

school students staged demonstrations and boycotted the newly changed "O" Level examination system. The students of the Chinese Language University, Nanyang University, protested against the Government's proposed changes of the structures of their university. The pro-communist Socialist Party and the leftist Worker Unions organized large-scale drama, dance and music activities as means of recruiting students and indoctrinating them with political ideology. Their movements in those years were highly successful. A large number of students from the Chinese schools were involved in politicized performing arts activities, staging Chinese folk dance, folk songs and newly composed songs and choreographed dance dramas depicting contemporary stories. These youngsters unwittingly became alienated from the Chinese opera, till then a common form of entertainmet.

Those who did not participate in the mentioned activities were occupied with the newest craze in town: watching television. Every evening, children and adults glued themselves in front of the television set, the whole evening enjoying themselves watching the soap operas from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, as well as old Hollywood films. So Chinese opera lost their audiences to all these new competing forms of leisure activities.

One other indirect factor that contributed to the decline of Chinese opera had often been overlooked. That is, the transformation of landscape in the speedy urbanized and industrialized city state. The Economic Development Board, was set up in 1961, and its main objectives were to establish new industries, accelerate the growth of existing ones, and



A female impersonator, of the Er Wao Amateur Musical & Dramatic Association, acting in the famous opera "Reasoning with the Emperor".





*“The Patriotic Scholar”* was a memorable Teochew opera presented by The Thau Young Amateur Musical Association

develop industrial estates.

Set up in 1960, The Housing and Development Board (HDB), together with private property developers, started extensive construction projects, building housing estates, shops, factories, as well as infrastructural facilities such as industrial estates, roads, utilities, and drainage and sewerage works. By 1965, the HDB had built 54,430 housing unit. With the expansion of housing estates and stricter rules for granting permission for staging Chinese opera at open spaces by the Public Entertainment Section of the Ministry of Culture, available sites for performance thus decreased dramatically.

While urbanization and industrialization enveloped the island rapidly, lifestyles of the people inevitably changed. Chinese opera fans are now enjoying the old Chinese opera films on television as well as the new ones released in the cinemas. In the 60s, numerous new and refined opera

films from China and Hong Kong not only captured the audience but the professional theatre troupes' artistes as well. The audience thus became more sophisticated in their tastes and the performers. Influenced by the high quality performances on the films, local opera artistes upgraded their standard too. However the comfort of the air-conditioned cinema and demand for better presentations had kept the audience away from the old theatres in the amusement parks or the noisy temple grounds. With lesser ability to attract, some professional theatrical troupes were forced to dissolve. Most opera artistes changed profession while a small number moved to join the few existing troupes.

To make the situation worse, the guilds of traders and temples which previously engaged Chinese opera for their functions or the fairs during the month of the Hungry Ghosts, are now inclined to invite the new brand of entertainment group “Ge Tai”

(the singing stage)! The Ge Tai groups are not permanent professional groups like the Chinese opera.

It is fortunate that while the professional groups were fading away from the scene, the many amateur groups sprung up and filled the vacuum. These amateur groups, many of them formed decades ago by the dedicated opera lovers, have been staging free annual shows for their members and the public. Over the years, they have accumulated enormous experiences and material resources necessary for the elaborate presentation of Chinese opera. They were benefited by the visiting professional groups that came from Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 70s.

The discipline and moral instilled by the majority of the amateur groups has continuously helped to improve the standard of their performances. These have, in turn, attracted young, educated enthusiasts to join their activities. Although, the scale of popularity of the early 70s could in no way match that of the golden days, this bridge built by the amateur groups for the new generation of Singaporeans to reach the land of cultural heritage is critical to ensure the continuity of Chinese opera.

Then came 1978, The Ministry of Culture, with a sponsorship from the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, launched a series of Chinese operas at the Hong Lim Park, a popular venue for the old folks located in the city centre. The stated objectives were to preserve traditional theatre at grassroot level and to attract tourists. These performances were free for the public, and each participating group received a small production grant from the Ministry. It was a tremendous success. For the

succeeding years, the participating groups and audience enjoyed enormously the series of colourful events showcasing the young talents nurtured.

However, the cost-effective-minded Ministry officials soon decided that spending 50% of the expenditure on installation of special lighting and sound equipment at the park, erection of tent, provision of chairs, watchmen, cleaner, and re-turfing did not make much economic sense. Besides, the Parks and Recreation Department was also displeased that each performance invariably damaged the turf of the Hong Lim Park. After lengthy discussions with the amateur Chinese opera groups, the Ministry of Community Development, which replaced the then dissolved Ministry of Culture, decided to reformat the series as the Traditional Theatre Festival.

#### Multi-Cultural Traditional Theatre Festival

Racial harmony is the foundation of the political stability of Singapore. In all the cultural programmes implemented, the government made every effort to ensure balance and fairness. The consistency of including presentations of all ethnic groups can be seen in the Drama Festival and Dance Festival organized by the Ministry of Community Development. Therefore the new format to feature Western opera, Bangsawan, and Indian period play together with Chinese opera, in a bigger scale like the Festival of Traditional Theatre is understandable.

The other important change was to move performances from the Hong Lim Park to the Victoria Theatre. The rationale was to elevate the status

of the presentations, provision of better lighting and sound facilities in an air-conditioned theatre. More importantly, the Ministry was able to reduce the cost of the Festival with greater efficiency. Money was no longer wasted on the erection of tents, renting of chairs, sound system and other expenditures such as hiring watchmen and work for re-turfing the park. Besides, revenue generated from the gate tickets, could be used for sponsoring productions in the



Opera performed by the Siong Leng Musical Association, the leading group staging Hollien opera.

future.

Since the launching of the First Traditional Theatre Festival in 1986, Chinese opera groups, Malay cultural groups that staged Bangsawan, valued greatly this prestigious annual event organized by the Ministry of Community Development. As the performances are grouped under the umbrella of the same Festival, it is natural for the audience to compare the performances of the different participating groups. To some extent, the Festival intensified the rivalry already existing among the groups. But healthy competition could further stimulate the raising of standards. In the last five years, many of the amateur Chinese opera groups were permitted to invite established directors, actors or Chinese opera teachers from China to conduct training courses or to direct chosen productions. Their systematic training has helped the devoted amateur actors perfecting their stage craft. These productions, directed by artistes from China, are staged with innovative streak and technical so-



The Indian epic "Mahabharata" was staged by the dynamic bilingual drama group, Arts & Acts, with Phau Cheng How playing the lead role.

phistication. They in turn, help to bring in new and young audience. Said Miss Tong Meng Seay, leading actress of the Keng Chew Junior Association, "Last year, we were fortunate to have Mr. Huang Liang Dong, assistant director of the Hainanese Youth Opera Troupe to conduct a six-month training course for us. His tremendous experience and knowledge helped us not just acquire the skills of executing stylized movements and refined poses but also appreciate fuller the ultimate aestheticism perceived by the traditional Chinese opera masters."

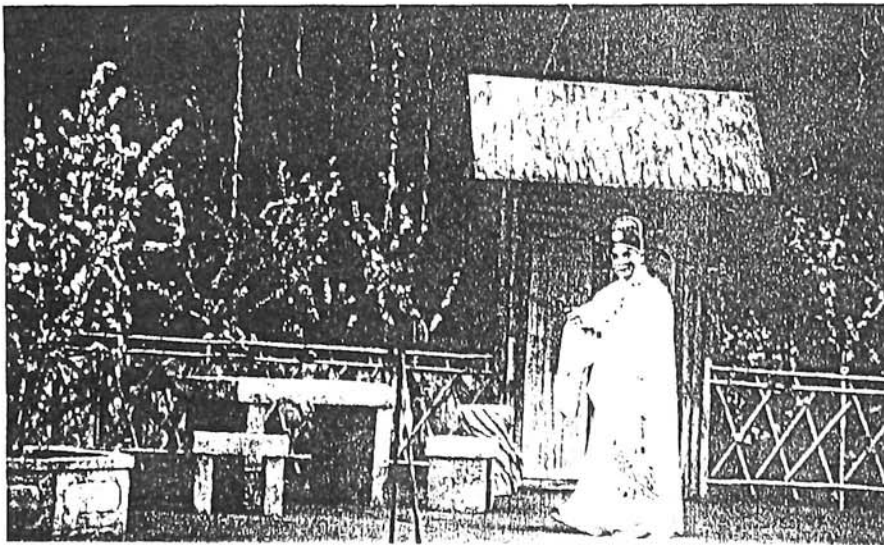
master classes and workshops, whenever they could manage the time between rehearsals. The impact of the many memorable performers is indeed difficult to quantify. Many local amateur performers, set and lighting designers and musicians were greatly inspired. Some of them became close friends of the Chinese artistes and had been visiting China to buy costumes, accessories and painted stage scenery. A few even slipped into the Academies or training schools of China and sampled a few lessons."

Loo Teck Ming, 36, active

demonstration at the Drama Centre for the public. The response was overwhelming and we hope to do this kind of 'promotion' more frequently in the future." Yow Wai Meng of Chinese Theatre Circle who studied Comparative Theatre at the Waseda University in Japan agreed. "In Tokyo, the government built a National Theatre in the 60s specifically to promote Kabuki Theatre. They staged specially designed lecture-cum-performance for the school children regularly. The effort proved worthwhile. It cultivated a new generation of Kabuki audience!"

"Reaching out to the masses is of utmost importance at the moment" conceded Liew Chin Choy, Deputy Director of Cultural Affairs Division of the Ministry of Community Development. "This year, Tung On Wui Kun brought nine Cantonese opera excerpts to four community centres. In the past, other groups such as the Chinese Theatre Circle, the Shin Sheng Choir group as well as The Teochew Opera Association had also successfully brought their productions to the people. This kind of free shows provide opportunities for the large number of dwellers of the Housing Board's Flats, who do not frequent the theatre in downtown area, to enjoy the sights and sounds of traditional theatre. We hope that the Malay cultural groups too, could feature Bangsawan at the community centres in the future."

The efficiency of the organizing committee of the Traditional Theatre Festival, the publicity generated in the mass media and the higher standard of performance had enhanced the audience pulling power of the Chinese opera and Bangsawan. Most encouraging is that it seems that greater



Excerpt of "The Cherry's Dream" performed by the SAGE's Beijing opera troupe

Mr. Lim Chin Teck, Er Wo Amateur Musical and Dramatic Association's 78-year-old vice-president, echoed "During the last decade, averagely two visiting Chinese groups from different parts of China came to Singapore. They presented spectacular productions of traditional repertoires as well as recently written scripts staged in experimental new style. Most of them brought eight to ten operas here. These visiting artistes also conducted

member of the oldest Beijing opera group, Ping Sheh, feels that staging a wonderful production is not enough. "Recruiting audience is as important as training actors, designers and musicians. We are glad that the Ministry is receptive to ideas and agreed to include public talks in the Traditional Theatre Festival. This year we had Madam Qin Xue Ling, from the Academy of Beijing opera, with us and she held a talk-cum-



interest for Chinese opera had been generated. It helped to inject new blood for the many amateur Chinese opera groups, hitherto managed by aging veterans. Many key personnel of the amateur groups are bright graduates with great organizational skills. This structural change within the Chinese opera group will certainly help the groups formulate better training and promotional programmes and strategy to further enlarge the network of traditional theatre lovers.

But there is one obstacle needed to be removed. That is a lack of cross ethnic communication at both levels, the audience and the performers. Unlike the free flow of food, cultures among different ethnic groups, high arts and folk arts of various communities are still communally based. Bangsawan and Chinese operas are colourful. Their elaborate gestures, movements, costume and patriotism, spectrum of motifs: chastity, filial piety romance would transcend the barrier of language. The similarities of Bangsawan and Chinese operas would undoubtedly enchant Chinese and Malay audiences. The Ministry of Community Development could perhaps explore the possibility of cooperating with the Ministry of Education in bringing a large number of school children to see specially devised lecture-cum-performance regularly in the hope that a new generation of art lovers will emerge. The amateur groups too, could take the initiatives to contact their counterparts in different ethnic groups. If they could seriously learn to appreciate the beauty and magic of the arts of their counterparts, then they would certainly be more aware of the rich cultural heritages of their land and obtain new sources of inspiration and creativity.

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