

Function of traditional culture in contemporary society: A case of Teochew opera in Malaysia

Ziqiao Lin¹, Songli Li^{1*}, Xinchao Huang¹, Siyu Long¹

¹*Department of Music, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia.*

*Corresponding author: Songli Li

Abstract

This article examines the function of Teochew opera in Malaysia and its significance for society, groups, and individuals. The study uses qualitative methods such as fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews to explore how this traditional art form maintains its relevance in a rapidly modernising society. The findings indicate that Teochew opera in Malaysia is not merely entertainment but serves multiple purposes: it serves as a vehicle for cultural identity preservation and amoral education within Malaysian Chinese communities and plays a crucial role in religious practices. Despite challenges such as declining interest among younger generations and the pressures from contemporary entertainment trends, Teochew opera remains an important cultural practice. It fosters intergenerational connections and sustains the community's traditional values, contributing to the ongoing vitality of Malaysian Chinese cultural heritage.



Full Text Article



Copyright (c) 2024 The author retains copyright and grants the journal the right of first publication. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Keywords: Malaysian Chinese culture; Teochew opera; traditional Chinese music; Cultural function and significance

Introduction

Teochew opera, a traditional Chinese theatrical art form, has a long and storied history, with cultural roots extending back a thousand years to the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD) in China (Wu & Lin, 2015). Originating in the Chaoshan region of Guangdong Province, this unique form of opera evolved within a distinctive cultural and linguistic context, shaped by the Teochew people, a sub-ethnic group of Han Chinese. Over the centuries, Teochew opera has developed into a highly specialised expression that reflects the values, traditions, and social realities of the Teochew community.

Teochew opera is distinguished by its intricate blend of performance styles, vocal techniques, and instrumental accompaniment. Its music draws heavily on traditional Teochew folk melodies, with a unique tonal structure that reflects ancient Chinese music theory.

Performances often feature a range of traditional Chinese instruments, such as the gong, yehu, and pipa, which create a distinctive sound ensemble that enhances the emotional and narrative depth of the stories being told. The vocal style, often sung in actual falsetto switch and the Teochew dialect, adds authenticity and challenges performers to convey complex emotions. The use of the regional dialect also serves as a critical link to the Teochew identity, as the subtleties of the language play an essential role in shaping the performance's dramatic impact. Thematically, Teochew opera encompasses a broad spectrum of stories drawn from Chinese classical literature, historical tales, folklore, and mythology. Common themes include loyalty, filial piety, and moral integrity—core Confucian values that have long permeated Chinese culture. The art form also incorporates aspects of local religious rituals and practices, often performed during temple fairs, festivals, and communal celebrations, reflecting its deep connection to the community's spiritual life. In this way, Teochew's opera serves as a source of entertainment and a vehicle for transmitting cultural values, shared memories, and social norms across generations (Lin, 2019).

As Teochew people migrated from southern China, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, they carried their traditions. Teochew immigrants, especially those who settled in Southeast Asia, played a significant role in preserving and propagating their cultural practices abroad. Malaysia, in particular, became a vibrant centre for the Teochew diaspora, where communities maintained strong ties to their ancestral heritage (Lai, 1993). Teochew opera was one of the most important cultural exports, serving as a means for immigrants to preserve their identity in a foreign land. In Malaysia, the opera has become a cultural cornerstone, performed during Chinese festivals, religious ceremonies, and community events, where it functions not only as entertainment but also as a crucial cultural link between generations of Chinese Malaysians and their Teochew roots (Kang, 2005; Lin, 2023).

However, despite its historical and cultural significance, Teochew opera's role in contemporary Malaysian society remains underexplored in academic literature. Like other traditional practices, the art form faces challenges in maintaining its relevance in a rapidly modern society. The rise of modern entertainment forms and the declining use of the Teochew dialect among younger generations have contributed to its waning popularity. The shift towards a more globalised culture has also weakened traditional practices, including Chinese operatic art forms. In Malaysia, where diverse ethnic groups and cultural influences coexist, the preservation of Teochew opera faces competition from more dominant cultural narratives, often relegating it to the periphery of national cultural discourse.

Considering this context, it is essential to examine how Teochew opera in Malaysia has adapted to these changes, its current roles within the community, and its importance as a cultural medium amidst the forces of modernisation and globalisation. Without a deeper understanding of these elements, Teochew opera risks becoming a cultural relic rather than a living, evolving tradition. The study seeks to elucidate the role of Teochew opera in Malaysian society and the significance it holds for various groups and individuals.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the functions and significance of Teochew opera in Malaysia. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study as it facilitates an in-depth examination of the lived experiences, cultural practices, and community perspectives associated with Teochew opera. By engaging with practitioners, audience members, and cultural experts, this research aims to capture the complex and nuanced role that Teochew opera plays in Malaysia's multicultural landscape. The focus is not only on understanding the functions of Teochew opera but also on the emotional and symbolic meanings it holds for the Teochew community and its audiences.

The research sites were Penang and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where the researcher conducted year-long fieldwork from December 2022 to December 2023 to examine local approaches and efforts to sustain Teochew opera. The site selection prioritises the frequency of Teochew opera performances. At the beginning of the study, the researcher contacted the agent of the Lao Yu Tang Teochew Opera Troupe in Malaysia. Initial inquiries revealed more frequent Teochew opera performances in Penang, totalling 86 performances hosted by Lao Yu Tang from January to September 2022, with 67 occurring in Penang. These performances were primarily held on gods' birthdays, such as the Kwun Yum, Mazu and Tien Kung; and during traditional Chinese festivals, including the Hungry Ghost Festival (Jiang, personal communication, September 11, 2022). Additionally, the researcher communicated with Ling Goh, a cultural bearer of Teochew opera in Penang, who noted that Teochew opera is performed not only during rituals and traditional festivals but also at Malaysian cultural festivals. Goh mentioned that she is often invited to Kuala Lumpur to give cultural presentations of Teochew opera (Goh, personal communication, September 10, 2022).

The study used participant observation and semi-structured interviews for data collection. Ethnographic participant observation was conducted during Teochew opera performances and rehearsals, involving attendance at both formal events, such as cultural festivals, and informal settings, including temple gatherings and rehearsals. The focus was on observing interactions between performers and audiences, the preparation involved in staging performances, and the opera's role within communal rituals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of participants, including Teochew opera performers, cultural scholars, community leaders, and audience members. The interviews aimed to explore participants' personal experiences with Teochew opera, its role in their lives, and their views on its cultural and social significance. The study is designed to span 12 months, encompassing three key phases, as shown in Table 1.

Phase	Duration	Target
Preliminary research and networking	1 December 2022 to 28 February 2023	This phase involves reviewing existing literature, identifying key stakeholders, and establishing connections with local Teochew opera troupes, cultural organisations, and community leaders. Initial field visits were conducted to each research site to gain an understanding of the local context and refine the research questions.
Data	1 March to	In this phase, qualitative data collection was carried out

collection	31 August 2023	through interviews and participant observation. This period was used to attend Teochew opera performances, interview performers, organizers, and audience members, and collect oral histories from community elders. The data collection took place during significant cultural events such as Chinese New Year, the Hungry Ghost Festival, and temple fairs, where Teochew opera is traditionally performed.
Data analysis and write-up	1 September to 1 December 2023	The final phase was focused on the thematic analysis of the collected data, synthesizing findings, and drafting the final article. Data coding and analysis were iterative, allowing for adjustments and refinements in the interpretation of findings as new insights emerged.

Table 1. Research schedule.

This study conducted a comprehensive analysis of the function and significance of Teochew opera in Malaysia, using Merriam’s (1964) theory of the functions of music as a framework. Merriam’s theory, which identified ten distinct roles that music played across different cultures (as shown in Table 2), provided a valuable lens for examining how Teochew opera had contributed to the Malaysian context’s cultural, social, and individual experiences. The study explored how these functions had manifested within the traditional performances, rituals, and community practices associated with Teochew opera, offering insights into its enduring cultural relevance and evolving role in Malaysian multicultural society.

Function	Description
Emotional Expression	Music serves as an outlet for the expression of emotions, both individual and collective
Aesthetic Enjoyment	Music provides a form of artistic and aesthetic pleasure to both creators and listeners
Entertainment	It serves to entertain individuals, often in social gatherings or for personal enjoyment
Communication	Music can convey messages or express ideas, functioning as a medium for non-verbal communication
Symbolic Representation	It represents cultural symbols, ideas, or values through sound
Physical Response	Music often induces physical reactions like dancing, moving, or clapping
Enforcing Conformity to Social Norms	It reinforces accepted cultural and social values through lyrics, themes, or rituals
Validation of Social Institutions and Religious Rituals	Music is often used in ceremonies to validate and reinforce social and religious practices
Contribution to the Continuity and Stability	Through tradition and oral transmission, music helps preserve and maintain cultural identity

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14224306>

Lin, Z., Li, S., Huang, X., & Long, S. (2024). Function of traditional culture in contemporary society: A case of Teochew opera in Malaysia. *Journal of Modern Social Sciences*, 1(2), 121–136.

of Culture	
Integration of Society	Music fosters social bonding, creating a sense of unity and shared identity within groups

Table 2. Music function theory. (Source: Merriam, 1964)

Results and Discussion

Teochew opera functions differently in Malaysian society, depending on the context in which it is used. Based on Merriam's (1964) musical functions, the actual functions of Teochew opera are divided into communication with the gods, entertainment and edification, retrospective review of collective memory, and construction of identity.

Communication with the Gods

The Malaysian Chinese achieve communication with the gods through the performance of Teochew opera during rituals, which is a concept of music connecting the human and divine realms (乐能通神) that has been passed down from the primitive rituals of ancient China (Wang, 2006). Notably, the music here refers to a musical behaviour associated with performativity, embodied in the combination of music and dance, not just singing or instrumental playing. However, this musical and performative function is not unique to the Chinese, as almost all kinds of religious activities are accompanied by music, such as Hymns in Christianity, Sufi Music in Islam, and Buddhist music. Thus, there seems to be a consensus on the ability of musical performances to communicate with the gods (MacMillan, 2000; Irama & Weintraub, 2011).

Rituals construct a realm of communion between humans and gods, and the communicative function of Teochew opera needs to be interpreted from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, Teochew opera is dedicated to the gods as an offering—a manifestation of etiquette—to bring mortals and gods closer together so that the gods can perceive their pious devotion to the maximum extent possible. Individuals offered what they considered to be the finest musical performances to the gods in exchange for the fulfilment of their wishes. The presentation of Teochew opera transforms people from the unequal unilateral solicitation from the gods to the reciprocal exchange of benefits, in which case, at least in the Malaysian Chinese conception, well-prepared Teochew opera performances can reduce the “alienation” between human beings and the gods, which can establish a more smooth and effective communication.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Malaysian Chinese, the presentation of secular wishes—exorcism, promotion, wealth, pregnancy—in the form of dynamic performances is more accessible and receivable by the gods. The distance between the transcendental and mundane thresholds is bridged by the medium of Teochew opera, and human beings communicate more closely with the gods as shown in Figure 1. In addition, through music and performance, the gods more directly perceive realistic aspirations, increasing the probability of their fulfilment.

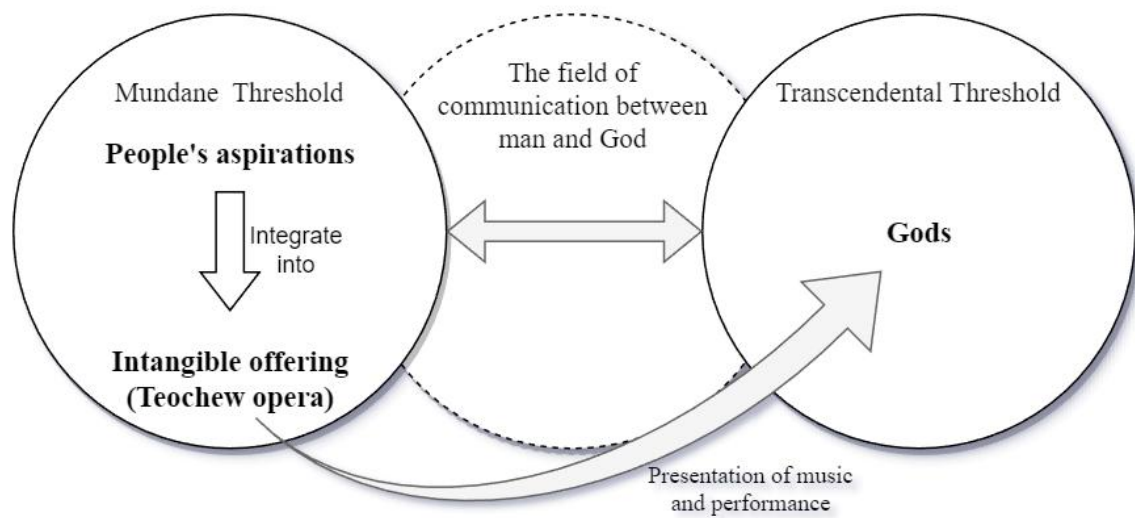


Figure 1 Teochew opera bridges the distance between the transcendental and mundane thresholds.

On the other hand, communication requires presence, which implies that the god—at least in human perception—has to be precisely “existent” (Maddrell, 2013). Although the god statue in the ritual represents a medium that transforms absence into a pictorial presence, this presence remains insufficiently tangible for the participants. As a result, the Malaysian Chinese chose to use Teochew opera to embody the presence of the deity, which is something possessing a body. Performers of Teochew opera symbolically invoke the gods (or are possessed) to bless the masses by acting as the gods. In this ritual process, the image of the god undergoes a transformation from absence to presence as shown in Figure 2. More precisely, through the Teochew opera performances during the rituals, the gods are activated, and a sacred dimension of human-god communication is created through the function of Teochew opera.

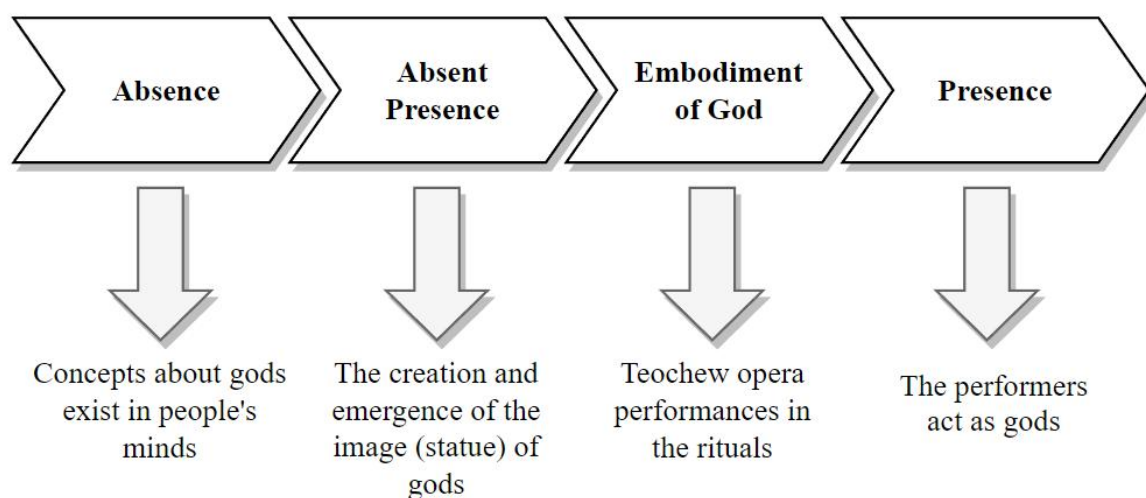


Figure 2. God is embodied through Teochew opera performances.

Retrospective Review of Collective Memory

French sociologist Halbwachs (2020) proposed the concept of collective memory, which he considered to be a collective selection and forgetting of memories by a group of individuals, essentially a social behaviour of reconstructing the past based on the present. In the conception of Halbwachs, the memory of oneself is formed and solidified in communication and contact with others. He emphasised the dependence of memory on society. He stated that collective memory is a framework in which individual thoughts exist and are integrated into those memories that can be evoked. Isolation from the group leads to forgetfulness; human memory is collective, and memories rely on evocating others, even if they are of things that people experience alone.

Despite the abstraction of thoughts, the process of recollection is concrete, and only when thoughts become concrete and perceptible can they enter the memory and become the objects of memory, with concepts and images becoming one in the process. It is essential for truth to acquire a concrete form, either in the form of a specific person, a certain event or a particular place, if it is to be retained in the group's memory (Assmann, 2015). In turn, if an event is to remain in the memory of the group, it must be enriched by the richness of an important truth, and each character and historical fact is transformed into a truth, a concept, or a symbol when it enters this memory. As a result, memory acquires significance and becomes part of the social system of thought.

Teochew opera in Malaysia is precisely a cultural form of the collective memory of the Chinese. In the past, living experience bearers and communicators passed on cultural memory, and it was a short-term social memory which was prone to fracture or blurring in the transmission process. However, when memory is retained in a cultural form, realised utilising symbolic objects, it can span thousands of years because the bearers of this memory are songs, dances, symbols, and words (Assmann, 2015). Fearful of forgetting their traditions, the Chinese have combined religious beliefs, customs, and morals with song and dance performances to form an actual, collective memory of Teochew opera (as shown in Figure 3), an aggregation of Chinese culture.

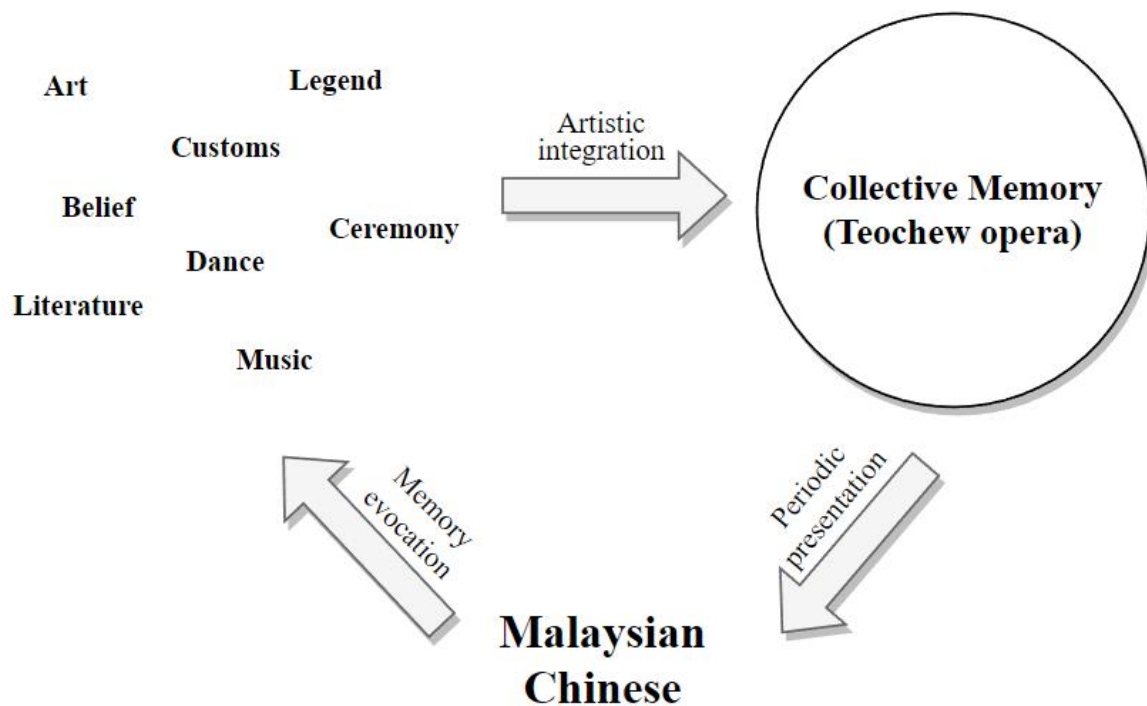


Figure 3. Teochew opera as a collective memory of the Malaysian Chinese.

Meanwhile, the image of recollection requires a specific space to be materialised and a specific time to be present; hence, the image of recollection is always concrete in both spatial and temporal dimensions. On the one hand, memories are invariably centred around original or significant events; on the other hand, memories possess a cyclical rhythm. For example, Teochew opera performances in Malaysia are connected closely to the Chinese deity's birthday festival and are staged in improvised "temple theatres". The Chinese settled as a group in Malaysia. They tried to find ways to create some of these sites for themselves—sites that provide memories—and to preserve them as these sites provide not only places for various communications among group members but also symbols of their identity and recognition and clues to their memories, which require locations and tend to be spatialised (Assmann, 2015).

Teochew opera performances in Malaysia are a review of the collective memory of the Chinese, and the time, occasion, sound, movement and plot evoke retrospective contemplation. It is multifaceted, of which the most obvious manifestation is in folklore. Folklore is the totality of oral traditions shared by particular communities, which includes stories, myths, legends, poems and other oral traditions, but also material culture, the actions of folk beliefs, and the forms and rituals associated with celebrations (Ben-Amos, 1971). Chinese folklore is embodied in traditional festivals, which share a common feature of using visual forms through a series of formally programmed contents and rituals to repeatedly arouse the excitement of people's visual nerves, impact their emotional dams, and demonstrate the cultural connotations accumulated in the deeper layers of the consciousness of the ethnic group.

Teochew opera in Malaysia is precisely such a form of visual and auditory fusion, which adequately demonstrates Chinese folklore and evokes the deep cultural memories of the Chinese through periodic performances. Through the festivals, the opera activities enabled Malaysian Chinese to have a more precise and more explicit understanding of the sequence of Chinese deities and traditional customs; through the music, they were reminded that apart from Western musical elements, there is also a familiar and unique mode of scales and instrument configurations; and through the performances, the symbols of movement, dress and language were sequentially presented to correspond to the schemas in the Malaysian Chinese conceptual world, thus reinforcing the symbolism of various types of symbols for the Chinese. In Teochew opera performances, the cultural memories of the Chinese are evoked, and a solid cultural boundary is constructed within the community to resist the force of assimilation of other cultures in the multicultural context.

Entertainment and Edification

In Malaysian society, Teochew opera is an entertainment alternative for the Chinese to relieve the bitterness of their lives, to get rid of spiritual dilemmas such as indifference, accidents, and fatigue, to gain happiness, and to reinvent themselves. Meanwhile, Teochew opera also integrates traditional Chinese moral education with entertainment, a form of edification that is both educational and entertaining as shown in Figure 4.

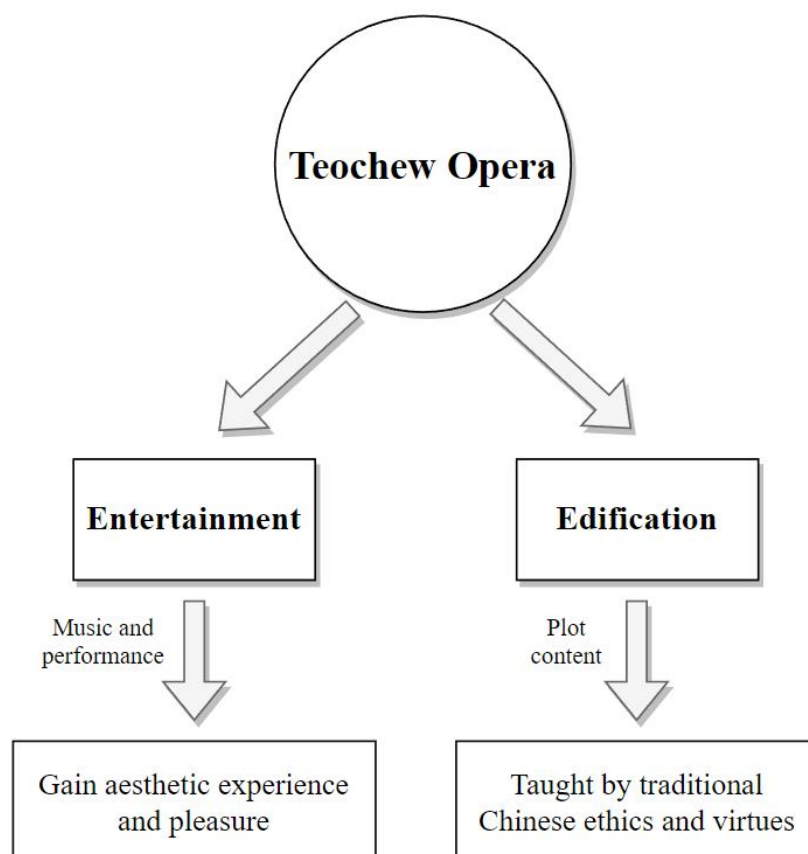


Figure 4. Entertainment and edification in Teochew opera.

In terms of entertainment, with its virtuality and advocacy, Teochew opera enables the Chinese to release the emotions they cannot, dare not, or are inconvenient to vent to in reality with the help of participating in or watching Teochew opera. In this manner, they gain psychological freedom and inner strength to control themselves and find consolation for their frustrations in entertainment, although this consolation may not always be adequate. It is the unique function of Teochew opera and why Chinese people appreciate it. Teochew opera has long played the function of bringing pleasure to people and is an essential part of the Chinese entertainment culture. According to Shi (2002), opera, as a public aesthetic entertainment, tends to enable people to enjoy it by immersing their whole physical and mental being.

Wang (2006) stated that opera has the function of entertaining oneself and others and that it can bring pleasure to creators, performers and audiences. Stimulated by the demand for public entertainment, the creators rely on the art form of Teochew opera to express their feelings, get rid of the limitations of time and space in their imaginations, and put their inner feelings and emotions into words and music to obtain the experience of “self-entertainment”. Their operatic productions reflect the playwright’s indictment and criticism of society or human character, pour out the playwright’s pity and sympathy for the underclass, and vent the playwright’s inner depression and resentment.

Meanwhile, the performers adopt Teochew opera as a medium to satisfy the public’s entertainment desire through artistic means and forms. Teochew opera performance is a playful behaviour. Through dressing up, the performers shape stereoscopic characters with their artistic attainments and accomplish the function of entertaining others through heart-warming stories and melodic singing. Performers emphasise their strengths in response to the audience’s different entertainment preferences, either by focusing on their singing skills or by enhancing their movement performance to achieve the entertainment purpose of the audience’s visual and auditory enjoyment. In Teochew opera performances, performers present comical actions and lines to amuse the audience and bring aesthetic pleasure to those present. The Chinese pursuit of entertainment in opera expresses an optimistic attitude towards life and a spiritual orientation towards a pleasant and healthful life.

In addition, regarding indoctrination, Teochew opera contains the Chinese nation’s excellent ideological and moral traditions. With the help of artistic, singing and dancing forms of entertainment expression, it invariably raises the moral realm of Malaysian Chinese and leads to the construction of value systems. Art is supposed to provide beneficial inspiration, but instead of being rigidly didactic, it ought to be revealed naturally from sharp, vivid images (Wang, 2008). Teochew opera is a cultural crystallisation of the Chinese mind, which contains the personal thoughts and feelings of the playwrights and the ethics and morals commonly shared by the Malaysian Chinese. These ethics and morals, however, subconsciously influence people’s thoughts and behaviours. They serve a significant function in edifying individuals and maintaining the harmony and stability of Chinese communities. Teochew operas performed in Malaysian society can be classified into historical, family, trial, and romantic repertoire based on the contents involved, and the functions are shown in the Table 3.

Types	Contents	Edification Function
Historical Repertoire	The theme of historical events or figures, often through the implicit praise and criticism of the narrative functions to pass on the moral concept. It also evaluates historical events and figures by praising the good and depreciating the bad.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultivate correct moral values, good and evil; 2. Cultivate the national spirit of patriotism (ethnic affinity); 3. Cultivate the virtues of “truth, goodness and beauty (真善美)”.
Family Repertoire	It is based on the theme of marriage and family relations and expresses the moral and ethical concepts of the family.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultivate the traditional ethics of the father’s kindness and the son’s filial piety (父慈子孝); 2. Cultivate the traditional ethics of loyalty of husbands and virtuousness of wives (夫义妻贤); 3. Cultivate the traditional ethics of brotherly harmony (兄友弟恭).
Trial Repertoire	It depicts the story of officials vindicating wrongful convictions and doing justice to the people. To a certain extent, the trial plays are metaphors for social problems, reflecting the desire of people living in the lower strata of society for a fair and just society.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Emphasise the social ethos of punishing evil and promoting good; 2. Emphasis on the moral quality of honesty and fairness of those who serve as officials.
Romantic Repertoire	Love between men and women is the main content. Such plays mostly reflect the discrimination against women and the deprivation of their basic human rights in feudal society. The moral concept of freedom of marriage and love is expressed.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The inculcation of the concept of freedom in love; 2. The inculcation of the morality of fidelity in love.

Table 3. The edifying function of different types of Teochew opera repertoire.

The edification function of Teochew opera in Malaysian society is embodied in persuading people to be virtuous and punishing the vicious. Virtuous in this context refers to all kinds of Chinese moral excellence and norms, including filial piety, respect for brothers, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, incorruptibility, and shame, and behaviour that

violates these norms is called vicious. In the early period, when immigrants to Malaysia could not acquire opportunities for quality education, watching Teochew opera became the primary way the Chinese acquired knowledge of history and society. In the present day, Teochew opera is a manner of edifying the younger generation. Through performances, the younger generation of Chinese are educated about excellent Chinese morals, historical stories and traditional customs. Through the opera, the Chinese gain cultural sustenance and find spiritual satisfaction. Loyalty and treachery, beauty and ugliness, kindness and wickedness in reality are instantly simplified and vividly illustrated on the stage. Teochew opera adopts the ending of the story that no-good deed goes unpunished and no evil deed goes unpunished and portrays well-defined excellent and evil characters to inspire Malaysian Chinese to develop a belief in goodness and to teach them how-to do-good deeds by following the example of the characters in the opera.

In general, the role of edification in Teochew opera is manifested in both the individual audience and the society as a whole. Teochew opera is traditionally based on the tenet of enjoin good and forbid evil, with loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness as the standards of good and evil. By promoting the moral ethics of good and evil, let the individual be good, from each good individual to form a good whole to make the society harmonious, stable and orderly positive development.

Construction of Identity

The Teochew opera is a multifaceted construction of identity. On the one hand, in the process of participating in Teochew opera performances, the Malaysian government's recognition and respect of Chinese culture is progressively sensed by the Chinese, and they are gradually reinforcing the construction of their national identity; the Teochew opera on the other hand, is a visible manifestation of Malaysian Chinese ethnic identity and a cultural symbol that distinguishes the self from the other in a pluralistic community. In a country dominated by Malay culture, Chinese culture has long been on the periphery of mainstream culture in the past and confronting the twin dilemmas of exclusion and assimilation. However, in present-day Malaysian society, the fact that the Chinese have the opportunity to organise and participate in cultural activities of Teochew opera performances, especially those organised by the official government, undoubtedly indicates the recognition and acceptance of Chinese culture by other ethnic groups, which is indeed at least valid to a certain extent. This inclusionary cultural policy has contributed to strengthening the national identity of Malaysian Chinese, which is essentially a political identity of Malaysia (Wang, 2001).

In retrospect, although most Chinese immigrants joined Malaysian citizenship after Malaysia's independence (1957), the Chinese's national identity with Malaysia was not as firm and intense as they thought it would be. The interviews conducted for this study revealed that the Chinese in Malaysia had political identity problems mainly stemming from their frustration with their incomplete citizenship in the context of indigenism. The policies formulated by those in power in the past Malaysian government, such as the Unitary Culture, the New Economic Policy (1970) and the Quota System (1971), have severely restricted the rights of non-indigenous citizens, including the Chinese, in terms of their right to education,

political participation and even in terms of employment and livelihood. These past policies have pushed the Chinese and other non-indigenous communities to the status of “second-class citizens”, which has undoubtedly affected the Chinese’s sense of belonging and national identity in Malaysia.

Focusing on Malaysian society at present, although the government has not granted the same “privileges” to the Chinese as to the Malays, the restrictions that hinder the development of the Chinese community are gradually decreasing. In Malaysian society, Chinese folklore festivals are officially recognised, and the Chinese can present Teochew opera in their festivals. Simultaneously, the Malaysian government promotes Chinese culture, including Teochew opera, in official cultural events. While participating in Teochew opera performance activities, Chinese people sense the respect and recognition of Malaysian officials for their ethnic cultures and the government’s practice of multiculturalism. The complaints and dissatisfaction of the Chinese with Malaysian policies have subsequently diminished, and their identification with the nation has intensified.

Furthermore, Chinese dialect groups participate in and experience Teochew opera culture together, proving that they belong to the same group and constructing and strengthening their cultural identity. According to Zhang (2007), cultural identity is recognising a common culture among people or between individuals and groups. It is based on sharing the same cultural symbols, the following common cultural concepts, and adherence to standard modes of thinking and norms of behaviour. The cultural identity of Malaysian Chinese is primarily manifested in the recognition of the same cultural background, cultural atmosphere and cultural behaviours. People from different communities sharing identical cultural backgrounds come together to participate in Teochew opera as a cultural behaviour in the cultural atmosphere of folk festivals, which is a way of constructing cultural identity. In Malaysia’s multicultural context, Teochew opera performances by the Chinese are a recognition of Chinese culture and a reflection of the identification and acceptance of other cultures. For instance, the Chinese are willing to participate in Teochew opera performances during Na Tok Kong worship rituals or gladly accept Teochew opera scripts adapted from Malaysian or Indian legends and stories.

Cultural identity is the pursuit of self-identity. In the context of multiculturalism in Malaysia, the Chinese, on the one hand, need to establish the general impression of the community by confirming the legitimacy and acceptability of their self-identity. On the other hand, it is also essential to distinguish the self from the other and to demarcate the cultural boundaries between different races by setting limits on the self. In performing Teochew opera, the constant emphasis and reproduction of traditional Chinese cultural symbols with shared memory serves as a way of identity for the Chinese community. After the Chinese community recognises these symbols, they, in turn, evolve to become an integral part of the Chinese identity.

The performance of Teochew opera is a group activity that transcends clans, families, and the neighbourhoods in which the Chinese live, creating occasions for communication and interaction among the various dialect groups of the Chinese. On the one hand, during their activities, the Chinese broke through the limitations of their daily lives, and Chinese from

different states, neighbourhoods, and clans came together in a manner that broke the original pattern of population distribution dominated by dialect clusters. In this way, the collective power is brought into play, the unity of the Malaysian Chinese is ensured, and the strength of the Chinese community in Malaysian society is manifested, which is the direction that the Chinese community has been striving for a long time. Teochew opera performances, on a spiritual dimension, can play a role in promoting communication and enhancing the relationships among members of the community.

On the other hand, the performance activities of Teochew opera are also an occasion to review the kinship structure of the Chinese family or clan. The Chinese have permanently attached importance to titles. However, due to human and geographical isolation, the Chinese in Malaysia have traditionally been quite ambiguous about the titles of different generations and kinships, coupled with the long-standing use of English to refer to kinship, for example, Shu (叔, an elder younger than the father) and Bo (伯, an elder older than the father) are both called uncles in English, has led to a blurring of the hierarchy in the family. During the exhibition of Teochew opera, in which characters of different generations and statuses of the Chinese community interacted, the Chinese also reviewed the family hierarchy. The interaction clarifies the usual Chinese names for different identities, including the intricate system of honorifics and nicknames, which also illuminates the intertwined web of various identities and grasps the social relationships among the members, which is undoubtedly highly beneficial in strengthening the community's affinity.

Additionally, language is the most essential tool for communication among members of a society, and the centralised use of the Chinese language is an effective way to promote ethnic cohesion. Teochew opera was usually presented in the theatre space in dialect, and the Chinese used the Chinese language system to express their ideas, wishes and demands to each other, which, together with the mutual visits during festivals and the generous invitations that often accompanied the performances, further materialised the exchange of feelings among the Chinese. With a common language expression, coupled with other means of expression and support, such as opera performances, communication among members of the Chinese ethnic group will be smoother, and the conscious identification and reinforcement of the membership will be accomplished quickly. This identification with traditional culture maintains and fosters a sense of belonging among the Chinese, and the community cohesion is thus consolidated and reinforced.

Conclusion

The function and significance of music lie not in the composition itself but in the musical activity, that is, what people do in musicking (Small, 1998). We can only appreciate the essence of music by understanding what people do when they engage in musical activities. Overall, the fact that Teochew opera has been able to sustain itself under the pressure of multiculturalism in Malaysia is inextricably associated with its social function and significance.

Through this study, the primary function of Teochew opera in both sacred and secular contexts in Malaysian society is symbolic representation. Through Teochew opera, a

perceptible form, the deeper meaning is conveyed in a manner accessible to humans. Teochew opera performances construct meaningful performance situations through visual and auditory symbols, from which the participants revisit and experience these meanings and derive spiritual solace. Besides, Teochew opera is regarded as the best offering to the gods in Chinese rituals, a manifestation of Chinese sincerity and a means of enhancing the effectiveness of the rituals. Through this combination of song and dance, the gap between the earthly and divine realms is temporarily dissolved under the effect of the rituals, and the gods more effectively accommodate the utilitarian aspirations of the Chinese.

Meanwhile, the fact that Teochew opera can be presented in Malaysian society represents official recognition and respect for Chinese culture, which implies that the cultural rights of Malaysian Chinese have been realised to a certain extent. The Chinese periodically review the collective memories—traditions and folklore, beliefs and worship, the aesthetics of music and dance—in their deeper consciousness through regular performances of Teochew opera in Malaysian society. In the multicultural context of Malaysia, the Chinese have a clear sense of “who I am” through their participation in Teochew opera activities. Teochew opera constantly reminds Malaysian Chinese of their identity, preventing them from losing themselves and building a solid identity structure. It resists the forces of cultural assimilation from other ethnic groups and maintains the individuality of Chinese culture.

Teochew opera is also a recreational and indoctrination tool for the Malaysian Chinese. The Chinese are immersed in the songs of Teochew opera performers, enjoying the charm of traditional Chinese music, experiencing the plot interpreted by the actors, and marvelling at the profundity of Chinese culture. While fulfilling aesthetic needs, Teochew opera is also a means of indoctrination. Through storytelling, it inculcates traditional virtues and morals in Malaysian Chinese. By using artistic means, it demonstrates the ethos of the Chinese ethnic group within the Chinese community and even to other ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Hence, it is possible to understand why Teochew opera can be sustained in Malaysia. For the Chinese, Teochew opera is irreplaceable owing to its benefits to the Chinese community—identity, power, status, and entertainment.

Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my appreciation to the members of my research committee, for their time, critical feedback, and suggestions, which helped refine this work. I would also like to thank my interviewee Ling Goh and her Teochew opera troupe for providing a substantial amount of material for the research. Thank you all for your support. This thesis is a reflection of your contributions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Assmann, J. (2015). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* [Cultural memory]. (Jin, S. F., & Huang, X. C. trans). 北京大学出版社 [Peking University Press].

- Ben-Amos, Dan. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context." *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 331 (1971): 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/539729>
- Halbwachs, M. (2020). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago press.
- Irama, R., & Weintraub, A. N. (2011). Music as a medium for communication, unity, education, and dakwah. In *Islam and popular culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (pp. 185–192). Routledge.
- Kang, H. L. (2005). 潮剧在马来西亚的流传与发展 [The circulation and development of Teochew opera in Malaysia]. *艺苑* [The Arts], Z(1), 78–85. <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/61482x/2005z1/4000353581.html>
- Lai, B. J. (1993). *东南亚华文戏剧概观* [An overview of Chinese opera in Southeast Asia]. 中国戏剧出版社 [China Theatre Press].
- Lin, C. J. (2019). *潮剧见闻录* [Observations recorded of Teochew opera], 暨南大学出版社 [Ji'nan University Press].
- Lin, Z. Q. (2023). From sacred to profane: Teochew opera in the Malaysian Chinese community. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(1), 167–77.
- MacMillan, J. (2000). God, theology and music. *New Blackfriars*, 81(947), 16–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2000.tb07819.x>
- Maddrell, A. (2013). Living with the deceased: Absence, presence and absence-presence. *cultural geographies*, 20(4), 501–522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013482806>
- Merriam, A. P. (1964). *The anthropology of music*. Northwestern University.
- Small, C. (1998). *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Shi, X. S. (2002). *中国戏曲审美文化论* [On the aesthetic culture of Chinese opera]. 北京广播学院出版社 [Beijing Broadcasting Institute Press].
- Wang, F. B. (2001). 二战后东南亚华侨华人认同的变化 [The changes in Chinese identity in Southeast Asia after World War II]. *南洋问题研究* [Studies on the South Seas], (4), 55–66. <https://www.cqvip.com/qk/83427x/20014/6681596.html>
- Wang, G. W. (2006). *宋元戏曲史* [The history of Song and Yuan operas]. 中国书籍出版社 [China Book Press].
- Wang, C. (2008). 《礼记·乐记》与贺拉斯《诗艺》的比较阐释 [A comparative interpretation of Rituals and Music and Horace's Poetic Art]. *中外文化与文论* [Chinese and Foreign Culture and Literature], (1), 185–193. <https://www.cqvip.com/qk/71426x/2008001/690878787200801022.html>
- Wu, G. Q. & Lin, C. J. (2015). *潮剧史(上)* [A History of Teochew opera (volume 1)]. 花城出版社 [Hua Cheng Press].
- Zhang, Y. P. (2007). 文化权: 自我认同与他者认同的向度 [Cultural rights: dimensions of self-identification and other-identification]. 社会科学文献出版社 [Social Sciences Literature Press].