

Chinese Street Opera in Singapore

By Siobhan Cool



Opera troupe going to pray for a smooth performance, 1992; photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

During Chinese New Year and the Hungry Ghost Festival, the traditional performing art of Chinese Opera (*wayang*) is evident all over Singapore. Striped tents spring up along the streets and in open fields in heartland areas and the evenings resonate with the poignant sounds of traditional instruments and the singers' melodies.

Chinese immigrants originally brought the genre to Singapore. Owing to the multitude of Chinese dialects, there are numerous opera styles. Despite this, they are similar with variations in content and execution; each dialect group has its own history or legends to tell and some acting and singing styles are more refined than others. Beijing Opera (a.k.a. Peking Opera) developed during the Qing Dynasty and has more than 100 years of history in Singapore where it used to be the most popular form of entertainment amongst all Chinese dialect groups. Cantonese Opera and Hainanese Opera are also performed here. Perhaps the two most popular styles today are Hokkien and Teochew Opera. Hokkien Opera is a regional genre, originating in Taiwan and flourishing in Fujian, before migrating to Southeast Asia where local Malay and Singaporean communities shaped it. Hokkien Opera's popularity in Singapore may be partly because its troupe production costs are lower. A Cantonese or Beijing troupe has to travel farther – from Hong Kong or mainland China. Hokkien Opera has lately been adapted for film and television while also maintaining its Singapore theatre roots. The oldest style might be Teochew Opera



(from Guangzhou), with a history of more than 500 years. Its origins can be traced to the mid-Ming Dynasty (mid-1500s).

The operas are based on Chinese classics and myths and whilst the productions are performed for entertainment, they also contain moral messages with storylines that tend to highlight the virtues of loyalty, love and patriotism. At times, the operas are performed at temples, to observe certain religious rites or the birthdays of particular deities. The operas' stage designs, vibrant costumes and colourful make-up are heavily rich in symbolism and the performances are unashamed displays of ethnic songs, dances, acrobatics, martial arts and acting.

Whilst Singapore has a professional community of Chinese Opera artists, during the popular festival seasons of Chinese New Year and Hungry Ghosts, one will readily encounter performances by one of the many amateur troupes that help preserve the country's rich operatic heritage. Amateur singers train throughout the year, usually attending weekly classes and more when performances are due. Their lush costumes and sets are often hired, but costs are kept to a minimum where possible. The performances are free and anyone is welcome to take a seat under the tent and enjoy!

Although the golden era for Chinese Opera in Singapore was in the 1950s and 1960s, organisations such as the Chinese Opera Institute and Chinese Theatre Circle, strive to keep the art form alive with training workshops and educational programmes as well as annual seasons. Annually, the Esplanade and People's Associations stage professional and amateur opera productions during the annual *Hua Yi* (Chinese Arts) Festival. With preservation and education in mind, the Singapore Chinese Opera Museum at 52 Kandahar Street opened in 2010.

Although the majority of its audience and fan base are older-generation Singaporeans, it is hoped that efforts continue so Chinese Opera, with its beguiling sounds, visual beauty and classical stories will be more heavily patronised and appreciated by younger generations in Singapore.

