Musical practice of Wayang in Singapore

As with all definitions, there are problems of meaning, connotatively and denotatively. Wayang here refers to the numerous dialect-based musical theatres found in China with further sub-groups in each dialect tradition. However, this excerpt from the Straits Chinese Magazine in 1903 entitled **Wayang Kassim** seems to offer an alternative view of it being entirely Chinese:
The Malay theatre has been engaging the attention of the public of all classes and nationalities for some time from the highest to the lowest in the land. His Excellency the Governor patronised one play in company with the U.S. Admiral and both were believed to have found much to please them. Personally, I do not think much of the Malay Theatre, indeed I do not expect any good of any kind from the Malays! If the Governor and a certain portion of the public found any pleasure at all from Malay theatres, it must be due entirely to the novelty of the thing, and perhaps also as an encouragement to the management of these theatres to move onwards and make some progress; as for any real intrinsic worth in themselves I am sure there is none. The Indra Zanzibar Theatrical Co., have certainly gone ahead of their kind and deserve recognition for their work; but what is good in them is not themselves but the Dutch girls whom they have called in to their assistance. I should personally wish to see improvements made in the Malays themselves, for then would all the honour and glory belong to them as of right.[1]

Most of the records of the performances of Chinese Wayang in 19th century Singapore appear in reports, letters, memoirs and various lost works, all written by overseas English J.D. Vaughan author of "Manners & Customs of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements, Singapore, described in great detail the performances of Chinese Wayang. Vaughan came to Singapore in the early part of 1842.[2] His impressions were that the Chinese in the Straits were all ardent fans of wayang; turning up night after night to watch the performances. He pointed out that the performers of Chinese Wayang at the time were mainly Cantonese, Teochews and Hokkiens and males impersonated female roles. In Vaughan's opinion, the convincing performances caused the audience to be lost in them. He reserved highest accolades for the clowns (*chou*), claiming that they were on par with the comedians in Great Britain. He also mentioned children roles suggesting that like adult roles, their roles also encompassed a variety of characters. He gave the following account with regards to the performance of wayang:
'*A xiyuan is actually a structure with a stage and a backdrop of about 10 feet. There are two doors on the stage for the actors to make their entrances and*

exits. There are some very simple stools for the audience to sit on during performances. The entrance fees range from 5 cents to a dollar…While the performance is going on, the audience usually smoke as they chat nosily. However, once the performance comes to an interesting part, they will be very attentive…For a Westerner, it is an unforgettable experience once he walks into this mass of polluted air in the hazy xiyuan.'[3]

Vaughan believed that because everyone seemed to differ in their opinions as to what the stories were, no one seemed to know exactly what the plots were about. Besides performers of "theatres" at regular locations, Vaughan also mentioned open air performances. He mentioned stages for open air performances which usually did not have backdrops. The band consisted of four to five people playing simple percussion instruments like wooden clappers, gongs and cymbals. Although there were no backdrops, the actors were able to deliver the performance symbolically. Even though the stage design was simple, the costumes worn by the actors were extremely elaborate; robes of silk with dragons, phoenixes and floral designs sewn on with golden threads. Charles Wilkes, head of the American Trade Commission watched performances of Chinese Wayang on his visit. He reached Singapore in early February 1842. His short stay coincided with the Chinese New Year, so he got to watch Chinese Wayang and it left a deep impression on him. Wilkes observed the dialogue of the actors had a strong rhythmic feel to it because of the accompaniment provided by percussion instruments like clappers, gongs and cymbals. *There was also a conductor who controlled the band.*[4]

It is very likely that the Chinese Wayang described by both Vaughan and Wilkes was actually a form of thanksgiving to the gods; especially so since Chinese immigrant workers often built temples, held rites and staged shows to thank the gods/deities for their blessings in a strange land. Staging performances along the streets in Singapore was problematic because the colonial government was wary of possible security compromises as wayang drew large crowds. As a result, in 1850, 87 leaders of the Chinese community, including Tan Kim Seng and She Youjin petitioned to the colonial governor in the hope of gaining permission for Chinese to freely stage Chinese Wayang in front of temples during festivals.[5] However, the colonial government passed the Police Act and Conservancy Act in 1856 resulting in strict control of Chinese gatherings, street performances and demonstrations. The non-compliant had to pay fines ranging from 100 to 500 dollars.[6] This measure antagonized the Chinese community. With the support of secret societies and merchants, a mass strike took place on 2 January 1857, almost all the Chinese shopkeepers on the island took part in the strike as a form of protest.[7] Riots were also organized in the middle of March because the police had chased spectators who were watching street performances.[8] From then on, the colonial government realized politically, it

was not advisable to interfere in the customs of the Chinese immigrants. Moreover, these practices were to be seen as acts of thanksgiving meant for deities and not for a general audience.

Singapore was in the midst of rapidly developing its agriculture and mining industries and engendered demand for labour bringing a further influx of Chinese migrants. The number of Chinese in Singapore by had risen to 164,041in the early 20th century from 54,572 in 1871 and rose to 418,866 by 1931.[9] Census Reports of 1881 recorded the presence of 240 Chinese artists in Singapore (including actors and painters). With the ease of migration at that time, most of the actors who came from China had **wayang** background. An interesting observation in the census was the categorization of wayang actors as "professionals"; much the same category as teachers, doctors, engineers and government officials who accounted for only 4.8% of the total population. This was in stark contrast with their lowly status in China and as would have been in Chinese culture and value systems. There were already women actors at the time, 14, according to the census.[10]

The period from the 1880s to the 1930s is best described as a golden period for the development of wayang in Singapore. Its rise in popularity was commensurate with the influx of Chinese migrants to Singapore. It was naturally an endearing thing for these migrants to be able to watch on foreign soil, performances from their hometowns. This also was their primary pastime. At the same time, these performances also gained popularity among the upper class Chinese, particularly so among the merchants. Thus, troupes of various sizes were established and there were also frequent changes of troupe owners.[11] Many of the troupe owners were actually Chinese merchants who had profited considerably from the entrepot trade in Singapore. This expense on wayang seemed a partial indulgence of their fortune on their recreation. One of the earliest Chinese newspapers, **Le Bao** illustrates the attitudes of the merchants by describing the lavish gifts such as high quality costumes and accessories given by the merchants to the performers and musicians of wayang.[12]

An excerpt from the Singapore Free Press gives us an idea of the way in which wayangs formed part of an opulent setting:
*On Saturday night last night the 'spirits of the departed' were suitably entertained by the Hokkien Ghee Hin Kongsee, whose display of the good things of this part of the world was one of the largest and most magnificent that has been held this year…There were altogether **21 sets of wayangs** in full play placed at a good distance from one another, including **several Chinese concerts**. Notwithstanding this unusually large number, there were enough spectators to see and criticise the merits of each. Their genial headman Mr, Gun Kum Lian, assisted by Mr. Gun Chok, received a large number of residents*

at the Kongsee house, who were most hospitably entertained. We understand that the amount expended for the whole affair exceeded $3000. This closes the sumbayang season of 1886 which has been altogether very successful and creditable.[13]

Troupes could also be hired to perform at the residences of rich merchants. For example, She Liancheng threw a feast in his house in celebration of the lawsuit he won for his late father She Youjin in 1891 and he also hired a Chinese Wayang troupe to perform on that occasion. Naturally, the audience at such a performance was limited to invited guests.[14] Chinese Wayang troupes were also hired to perform during important festivals in the Straits colonies. For example, the 50th and 60th anniversaries of Queen Victoria's coronation were celebrated in 1887 and 1897 respectively and there was Chinese Wayang being performed on almost every street in Singapore on both occasions.[15] In addition, even the officials serving on the colonial government often brought important foreign visitors to watch Chinese Wayang.[16]
One such visit is summarised below:
The entertainment given in honour of the marriage and Accession of H.I Majesty and Emperor to the Throne of China, by the Consul to the principal merchants and his friends of the "Celestial Reasoning Association", "Straits Chinese Recreation Club" and also the "Tong Locke Whee" at the Consulate was a brilliant success. The Chinese here are evidently making the event a gala day and are decorating and illuminating their houses. They have also ***theatrical performances on stages*** *in different parts of the town. It is the express wish of the Chinese that we should take this opportunity of acknowledging their great obligation to the government for the permission to have these performances.*[17](emphasis mine)

Most troupes are believed to have been hired from China or Hong Kong. Before a performance, the troupe owners would often advertise in the papers for the sake of drawing more crowds, often making grand claims about the skills of these actors.[18] That however, did not prevent wayangs from being the subject of the public nuisance complaints from those who had no inclination for it. Section 268 of the Penal Code for instance declared that:--*A person is guilty of a public nuisance who does any act…which causes any common injury, danger or annoyance to the public or the people in general who dwell or occupy property in the vicinity…or annoyance to persons who may have occasion to use any public right. If the inhabitants of a district are persistently annoyed a petition of house-holders to the Chief Police Officer should set the law in motion. The authority of Yahayah Merican v. Khoo Hock Leong 1878. July 29, reported in Kyshe's Reports, the Court will at the suit of a private neighbour restrain by perpetual injunction the performance of a* ***wayang*** *or* ***Chinese theatre*** *in a house adjoining his if it causes a nuisance.*[19]

In actual fact, a relatively uncomplimentary reception of wayang performance was recorded by H. V. Pederson who wrote "Door den Indischen Archipel (it was translated into Dutch and published in 1902). In it, there was a part in which he described his experience of watching Chinese Wayang with his friend:
In the evening, we strolled to the nearby temple to watch a street play. In the large open space in front of the stage, there were about over 200 people with pigtails sitting on the ground while watching the play. The stage was very high. Tonight's story seemed to be centred on fighting plots. The actors wore masks that suggested aggression…They gave a loud cry and started fighting. The offensive one directed his spear at the opponent while the defensive opponent used his shield to protect himself…Subsequently, a few elders in long robes appeared. They violently tossed their long beards and started to sing as if in dialogue. Next, a few performers that looked like they were doing aerobics appeared, making somersaults and jumps onstage. Their agility was truly impressive. In the whole show, the most important part had to be that of the main singer. There were about 4 to 5 musicians in the band. They sat at the rear side of the stage. ***The music they played were a cacophony of metallic and wooden sounds, not very pleasant for the ears***…[20] (emphasis mine)

During the late 19th century, wayang underwent a transition from mobile traditional art performance to one with a fixed venue. As such several performance venues were specially meant to be rented out to Wayang troupes. They were known as *xiyuan* (theatre garden/ theatre). As early as 1878, the Chinese Ambassador to Great Britain Zeng Ji Ze (son of Zeng Guo Fan), also an envoy to Great Britain and France, made a stopover at Singapore and he wrote the following in his diary:
'There are around 100,000 Chinese and 70% of them are Hokkiens, 30% are Cantonese…There are corridors, clans, restaurants and stages. All these can be found.[21] Li Zhong Jue, who came ten years after Zeng Ji Ze, also wrote the following in his famous work "Customs in Singapore":
There are both male and female troupes in the xiyuan. There are about four to five of such places in dapo (presumably South Bridge Road today) *and about one to two in xiaopo* (presumably North Bridge Road today). *They mainly stage Cantonese operas; there are also Hokkien and Teochew ones.*[22]

In a drawing of the "Map of the City District of Singapore" by Major H.E. McCullum (an engineer for the colonial government) in 1893, spaces marked as *xiyuan* in the which existed in the 1880s,identified three *xiyuan:* Smith Street; Wayang Street; and New Market Road.[23] These early *xiyuans* were usually very simple and they were often overcrowded too. The municipal council conducted checks on *xiyuans* once every six months. It was thus discovered that some *xiyuans* even had actors and their families living in them:

There are 20 to 80 people living in some of the xiyuans. Some sleep in cubicles formed by dividing the room using wooden boards. The others either sleep along the corridors or at any empty space they can find. All sorts of rubbish can be found in the corners of the house and no one bothers to clean the place up. Buildings like this often have not been cleaned for years. [24]

The natural consequence was the Straits Settlement Government Gazette, October 25, 1895:
In this Ordinance "theatre" includes any theatre room booth or other place open to the public or any class of the public in theatre which there is carried on any stage-play circus conjuring dancing, ***wayang****, mayong, mundu, joget, ronggeng or other operatic or theatrical performance of any sort whatever.*[25]

From 1 January 1896 onwards, all newly built *xiyuans* were required to possess blueprints and certificates issued by the municipal council to show that they were up to standard. Existing owners had to abide by the following terms in order to renew their licence biannually:
1. The building had to be used as a *xiyuan* and approval had to be given by the municipal council. In order to be given approval, the building had to satisfy certain requirements. For example, the walls had to be built with bricks or stainless steel and not wooden boards.
2. The aisles and staircase in the *xiyuan* had to be at least 4 feet wide.
3. Each seat in the *xiyuan* had to have an area of at least 3 square feet.
4. All actors, their families, employees and owners were not to reside in the *xiyuan*.
5. The *xiyuan* had to stop its operations every six months for the purpose of spring cleaning and refurbishment. Only when the municipal council was convinced that the requirements had been met could the licence be renewed.[25]

Although most facilities in the *xiyuan* did improve after the passing of the law, the problem of overcrowding was not eliminated. In the annual report of the municipal council in 1915, it was pointed out that:
Although regular and spot checks are conducted frequently at the xiyuans, they still often appear to be overcrowded. The main reason behind this is that the xiyuan owners sell both entrance tickets and seating tickets. Thus, we are in the midst of forming a committee to examine the modifications made to the laws regarding xiyuans. Starting from 1917, the control over xiyuans will be even more stringent. All those xiyuans who do not satisfy the requirements will have to develop new blueprints. Those who did not comply risked not having their licences renewed.[26]

Additionally, fire-fighters were required to be on the standby whenever shows were taking place in the *xiyuan* as there was no electricity supply and most

xiyuans used oil lamps and coal gas for lighting, thus making them prone to fire. Accordingly the financial report of the municipal council, particularly under the category of "Fire Brigades on Standby at *Xiyuans*", saw an annual income increase from 2,025 dollars in 1915 to 5,146 dollars in 1924. This shows that the authorities not only firmly enforcement the new rulings but made the wayang operators pay for the safety.[27]

By the late 19th century, congestion in the city area caused a movement to the suburbs resulting in villages of varying size. Not surprisingly wayang found its way there; this shifting of sites was not without its ramifications. Recorded are a series of letters to the Editor of the Singapore Free Press echoing similar sentiments:

DEAR SIR—Is it asking too much to inform me of the reason why a certain class of Chinese clubs is permitted to desecrate Sunday within sound of the European Sunday observing community? It appears to me that the Ordinance in force for the due observance of that day is somewhat inconsistent in its application inasmuch as every Sunday is specially devoted by a certain class of Chinese to indulgence in gambling, etc, etc, besides other doings of a nature I fear not quite in accordance with our ideas of what should be, and "Wayangs" with full orchestral accompaniments. The gambling, etc, etc, and the other "doings" can be safely left to the care of our guardians of 'morality' but the "Wayangs" I think, should be observed in the Sunday Observance Ordinance. Why should the noise arising from these "wayangs" be allowed to disturb the peace due to Sunday? In the neighbourhood of Scott's Road, there existed a Chinese club on the conduct of which I would prefer not to pass an opinion. It is better perhaps, but the noise emanating therefrom was mild in comparison to that which disturbed the neighbourhood on Sundays 19th and 16th instant. On the evening of the latter, two Wayangs, no less, both in the same compound situated near the fork formed by Campong Jawa Road and Bukit Timah Roads, close to the end of Scott's Road, were in full blast. Campong Jawa was literally blocked to vehicular traffic by the usual type of Chinese costers' portable kitchens and al-fresco restaurants. The refreshment department in connection with the "Wayangs" no one would reasonably object to if the odours arising therefrom are ignored and the road kept clear but the awful noise created by the accomplished artistes comprising the orchestra should not be allowed: what between the deafening crash of the cymbals, the loud monotonous beat of the drums, accompanied by the occasional blast from an instrument the sound of which is not unlike that of an Alpine horn with all the musical tones shut down by the manipulation of an inebriated amateur, it seemed as if Pandemonium was let loose….All day long, night also until gunfire on Monday morning, the performance continued without a break. I dare swear if others than Chinese attempted to make night hideous in the manner obtaining last Sunday night and

Monday morning, the result would be different to a mild remonstrance only, from a suffering member of the community. Where are the Police? Why should descendants of a race whose natural instincts in matters musical are at total variance with that of the European be allowed to violate the day of rest and rational enjoyment as observed by the principal civilising nations of the world? The remedy is quite simple. Let the Chinese community enjoy their pleasures by all means but their "music" (save the mark) be restricted to week days only and not later than 11pm. Surely that could be done. It is so in effect elsewhere and no hardship entailed either. Thanking you in anticipation for inserting the foregoing in your valuable paper.

A SUFFERER[28]

We believe there is no provision in any Ordinance dealing specifically with noise nuisances but on the authority of Yahayah Merican v. Khoo Hock Leong, reported in Kyshe's Reports, the Court will at the suit of a private neighbour restrain by perpetual injunction the performance of a wayang or Chinese theatre in a house adjoining his if it causes a nuisance.

Section 268 of the Penal Code says:--A person is guilty of a public nuisance who does any act…which causes any common injury, danger or annoyance to the public or the people in general who dwell or occupy property in the vicinity…or annoyance to persons who may have occasion to use any public right. If the inhabitants of a district are persistently annoyed a petition of house-holders to the Chief Police Officer should set the law in motion. ED. S.F.P

SIR:--Several of your correspondences have been complaining lately of Wayangs and other musical(?) entertainments and of their inability to abate the nuisance. I would suggest a trial of my method, and that is to get up and visit them armed with a small Malacca cane and stop them by sheer force of being a "Britisher". I found it successful the other day, when a Wayang was playing near my house. I gave them until past eleven p.m., and then my better half and myself being seedy and unable to get a wink of sleep, I got angry and dressed and visited the show as one of the public, armed as aforesaid, and shortly after arriving there I said "berhinti ini bising" and it "berhintied", after some persuasion and trouble, including the refusal of two offers of handfuls of silver and a pressing invitation to enter and have a drink. Subsequently, I had the Towkay prosecuted and eventually he was fined. The new Ordinance is lamentably failing in a most vital respect, and that is where the Chinese M.L.C (Municipal Legislative Council?) scored, for it does not apply to private wayangs but only to those 'open to the public or some section of the public' but perhaps a lawyer might be able to find a chance of a loop-hole through which to drive the proverbial coach and four in the work "section", for if you and I, Mr. Editor, can visit a wayang without let or hindrance, surely we are a "section"

of the public though possibly an unimportant section, as least as far as concerns your obedient servant.

"INSOMNAMBULIST"[29]

"And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall lift up their tents like the Arabs
And as silently steal away."

MR. EDITOR—Let the music be Chinese tom-tom music and I guarantee the cares of the day will not budge an inch. A Chinaman's house in the upper part of Killeney Road considerately treated the midnight air last night to a vigorous and lengthened recital on the tom-tom, much to the delectation (?) of the European would be sleepers in the neighbourhood. The quarter is a European one and I think this fact should weigh with the organisers of the entertainment before they attempt a repetition of it. It should certainly attract the attention of the Police authorities.

SUFFERER[30]

SIR—Permit me to avail myself of the opportunity offered by the letter signed by A Sufferer to corroborate fully all he says regarding the nuisance of which he complains. I regret to say that I am a fellow sufferer to such an extent that I have already threatened Mr. Lee Cheng Yan who is responsible for the annoyance with legal proceedings. One would think that a person who mixes with Europeans and knows their customs and habits so well, would be well aware what an annoyance such nightly performances must be. When Supt. Bell was residing in the neighbourhood he managed to bring some persuasion to bear, which mitigated it a little, but it has now got worse than ever. It is hoped that Mr. Lee Cheng Yan will have sufficient consideration for his neighbours to put an end to the nuisance without obliging them to take steps to compel him.

I am Sir,

Yours truly
E. Nathan[31]

SIR:--The inhabitants of houses in River Valley Road, Killeney Road, Institution Hill and that neighbourhood generally, have had a magnificent opportunity presented them, during the last few days, of studying the technical intricacies and intense beauties of Celestial music even when living in recognised European localities. The writer is informed that the occasion giving rise to this unusual order of things is the occurrence of Chinese nuptial jubilations. The celebrations appear to be on a large scale, as is testified by the number of guests continually arriving at the house where the happy pair are staying. The

civilised West prefers to spend its honeymoons in quietude and comparative solitude but the enlightened Celestial evidently likes to make as much show and noise as possible during such happy periods. After melancholy and irritating banging of gongs, interspersed with the accompaniment of drums, and lasting for some five days, the neighbourhood above mentioned was on Sunday (the quiet Sabbath of happier England) treated from 5.30pm to midnight, to the incessant charivari of a high Celestial order, varied occasionally by shrill Chinese songs. The latter appeared to be mainly comic, to judge by the shouts of boisterous laughter that greeted the various verses, especially towards midnight. ***It is true that the monotony of the Chinese music, which to the uncultivated mind resembles the noise usually met with a working smithy, was interspersed with music given by a band of musicians playing European instruments. The two orchestras evidently vied with each other as to which could make the most bunyi-bunyi.*** *They followed each other in incessant rotation. The writer has just been awakened this (Monday) morning by more Celestial music from this same house at the hour of 5 am, and the intolerable row has already lasted nearly an hour. He trusts his "boy" is right when he states that to-day sees the close of this unexpectedly rich musical treat given gratis to the community at large. The un-musical and those whose ears do not appreciate the beauties of Celestial music, especially when such appreciation entails the total banishment of sleep during ordinary sleeping hours, will doubtless desire, with the writer, if they live in the neighbourhood in question that the enlightened Chinese would spend their honeymoon in European fashion, or in neighbourhood un-infested by the orang-puteh, or say at Selitar, by the sea, or any such places, so long as these be out of sight, out of hearing and out of mind.*
ONE WHO HAS SUFFERED[32]

Wayang troupes during this period had mostly male actors. However, in the early part of the 20th century, what was known as "women troupes" also surfaced. A minority of the actors are believed to have come to Singapore as "contracted workers". They might have come from Hong Kong, Shantou or Hainan. As they had not paid off their transport fees, they had to sign contracts and "work" for their employers for one to two years.[33]

In 1910, F. V. Hochberg, witnessed some wayang while touring the villages in his brief stay in Singapore:
After lunch, we toured the suburbs by car. We went in the direction of Katong. The roads were filled with coconut trees…. We alighted at a Chinese village where a performance of Chinese Wayang was going on. The actors were busy putting on their make up in the backstage, painting their faces with various striking colours including black, white, red and green. Their faces looked like

masks…. Then, they changed into their costumes: some wore their robes sewn with golden threads, some put on wings and dragontails of arresting colours, some put on the guise of the clown …[34]

The early 20th century was a major event in the course of development for wayang here. This was the formation of **Ba He Hui Guan** by the artistes on 26 November 1906. **Ba He** was previously known as **Li Yuan Tang**, believed to have been already established around 1857. "**Ba He**" "Union of Eight" referred to the union of eight branches. The eight branches were Zhao He Tang (*sheng*), Qing He Tang (*hua lian*), Fu He Tang (*dan*), Xin He Tang (*chou*), Yong He Tang (*wu*), De He Tang (*da wu*), Shun He Tang (*jie xi*), and Pu He Tang (music and set).[35] Over the next 20 years, amateur troupes also came into being. The main ones were Yu Yu Ru Yue She (1912), Hai Tian You Yi Hui 1913, Tan Hua Jing Ying Ci Shan Ju She (circa 1920) and Liu Yi Ru Yue She (1929). These amateur performers joined the groups mainly due to their interest for Chinese Wayang. They often gave public performances to raise funds for charities.[36]

In the pre-World War I period, *xiyuans* were also often used for fundraising or publicity purposes other than wayang performances as evident in Song Ong Siang's documentation of two such events.[37], Li Chun Yuan organized a fundraising performance in 1909 for victims of the big flood in Guangdong. In the same year the *xiyuan* was used for publicity to aid the anti-opium campaign. Performers were either Cantonese or Hokkien and tickets were sold between two and fifteen dollars. During the performances, paper fans and snacks were sold at highly inflated prices. Performers received many flowers and gifts, only to put them up for auction at high prices in order to generate more funds for the campaign. Song also mentioned that during the 1911 revolution in China, the *xiyuans* on Wayang Street often organized fundraising campaigns to help the revolutionaries.[38]

Other than at the *xiyuans* and along the streets, wayang troupes often staged performances on the stages (*xitai*) found in temples too. In the early days, the bigger Chinese temples often had a permanent stage built in each of them. For example, the Thian Hock Temple had a stage built in front of it (the year it was erected should have been around the 1880s because the front of the temple had yet to undergo land reclamation before then and in 1893, McCullum's map already reflected the existence of the stage). This stage was later demolished as a result of the construction of the Hokkien Clan Association. Judging from a blueprint of proposed improvements to the walls in 1907, the stage itself was probably quite grand at the time. Another stage (*xitai*) which was similar was built next to the Wu Cao Tua Peh Kong. This was demolished years ago together with the Cao Clan Association. Compared to the *xiguan* (this should be an alternative term for *xiyuan*), such *xitais* were naturally much more simplistic

in terms of design. They were normally four to five feet aboveground. The stage was in the shape of a square. There were no seats and no makeup rooms. As there was very little space on the stage, the actors usually did their makeup below the stage before climbing up the ladder at the backstage to wait for their turn to appear onstage. At times when there were no performances, these *xitais* were used as classrooms for either private or public schools.

Between 1930 and 1940, we are informed of stiff competition Chinese Wayang faced from other forms of entertainment and the uncertainties of the political situation, all the troupes had to innovate in order to survive. Located at the intersection of Tanjong Pagar Road and Cantonment Road and built in the late 1920s, Lao Shi Jie, also known as Huan Le Yuan, was owned by someone named Lin De Jin. He invited actors of Peking opera, Zhang He Lou and Meng Xiao Pei among others, to perform. Although there were only civil plays (they were lacking in manpower), the performances were nevertheless very popular among the audiences.[39] The success of this ushered in the emergence of a new form of performing venue. In 1931, Da Shi Jie You Yi Chang/ Big World was established at the intersection of Kim Seng Road and Jalan Bukit Ho Swee. Soon after this, New World was started at the intersection of Serangoon Road and Rangoon Road. Gay World was also established at Geylang Road. These "worlds" were huge; they not only had *xitais*, they also had stores, restaurants and various entertainment facilities like billiard rooms and game stalls. Customers could walk into the "worlds" and watch performances, shop and dine. Furthermore, the price of admission was far cheaper than that of the traditional *xiyuan*. Thus, the traditional *xiyuan* came to be under threat. According to accounts by Zeng Tie Ying, troupes in the 1930s preferred to perform in the "worlds" because in a typical *xiyuan*, the troupe owner had to make a down payment for rental to the *xiyuan* owner. If the ticket sales were not good, they would have to make a loss. However, the owner of the amusement park would normally give money to the troupe as a form of remuneration because he wanted to attract more customers. The amount of the remuneration depended on how well the amusement park flourished. For Big World, due to the lack of proximity to the city area, there could be an extra payment of 70 to 100 dollars. The remuneration also depended on how famous the troupe was and how attractive the kind of play to be presented would be for the audience. At that time, Cantonese operas were more popular, so the Cantonese troupes received a higher remuneration than those troupes performing in other dialects. From the point of view of the owners of the amusement parks, such extra payments used to attract troupes were necessary; there was a time when the shop owners in a particular "world" refused to pay rent because there were no Cantonese operas featured there. The "worlds" mentioned above changed the troupes they hired frequently.

Street Plays:

After the 1930s, street plays became popular in Singapore. Judging from the number of permits issued by the colonial government for the purpose of staging street plays for thanksgiving (to the gods), and the total income it collected from this having increased from 4,749 dollars in 1915 to 56,889 dollars in 1934, it can be surmised that the street plays were indeed getting popularized (refer to Table 2). However, it is believed that the engagements for street plays were largely accepted by troupes who did not manage to get opportunities to perform in the amusement parks. Cantonese wayang thespian Liao Xing Hua said in an interview: *At that time, Cantonese operas were very popular. We often had to perform all seven days in the week! The Chinese Wayang performances at that time were mainly long plays and each one could last for three to four days. If we had had to terminate the story halfway through due to street play engagements, the audience would have been displeased. Besides, the remuneration for street plays wasn't much. Unless we had no venues to perform at, we would not accept engagements for street plays.*[40]

On the other hand, the rise of street plays also created some problems for security. The annual reports of the police force had mentioned repeatedly that secret societies had caused armed fights through the control of troupes who were allegedly mainly the Teochew clan troupes; which explains why there were fewer Teochew plays in the Entertainment **Worlds**. As secret societies often created trouble during street plays, the colonial government had to blame the atrocities on street plays out of desperation, and so in 1934, banned street plays.[41]

Moreover, during the mid to late 1930s, the Japanese invasion and massacre of Chinese in China incurred the wrath of many overseas Chinese beginning a mass boycott of Japanese products and various fundraising campaigns. The Chinese in Singapore and Malaya organized various fundraising campaigns under the leadership of Tan Kah Kee. The response from the overseas Chinese community was overwhelming. Wayang troupes participated actively in the effort by holding fundraising performances and spreading anti-Japanese propaganda. After the Double Seventh incident in 1937, a group of merchants who were also wayang enthusiasts (Lim Bo Seng was among them) formed amateur Peking opera groups holding fundraising performances at Big World, New World, Gay World and Empress *Xiyuan*.[42] Other amateur groups established during this period included Tao Rong Ru Yue She and Xing Hua Ru Yue She.

From mid February 1942, the Japanese troops occupied Singapore and renamed it Syonan-To. In the first few months, the Japanese went on a search for anti-Japanese members and all cultural events came to a halt. Subsequently, in its bid to establish the "East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", the Japanese attempted to get

rid of all Western influences and Western movies were the first to be banned. However, the Japanese did not intervene in the area of wayang and on 29 April 1942, when the local Chinese were celebrating the Tian Chang Festival many troupes were "invited" to perform in various locations day and night In reality, despite the tyranny of the Japanese troops, the major "worlds" resumed their operations after the workings of society became more normalized. Thus, troupes began to perform in amusement parks once again. In addition, radio stations also invited them for recordings in the hope of making their programmes more interesting.[43] The Japanese military also often ordered the troupes to perform at factories and dockyards for the sake of entertaining the workers there who were really victims of forced labour.[44] In a later period, the troupes even gave fundraising performances under the arrangements made by the Overseas Chinese Association. These were to aid the overseas Chinese and the Eurasians who were on their way to create new settlements in Johore.[45]

In the early stage of the post-Japanese Occupation, wayang experienced a resurgence of popularity. Some *xiyuans* in the amusement parks (e.g. Chongqing Xiyuan and Shanghai Xiyuan in Big World) had mainly Peking operas. The Pu Chang Chun Xiyuan in New World had mainly Cantonese operas.[46] However, as films were seen as greater potential for profit-making, Shaw Brothers gradually turned their attention away from wayang towards films. Gradually, the *xiyuans* in amusement parks were converted to cinemas and nightclubs while the *xitai* ("a stage for plays") became a *getai* ("a stage for songs"). Wayang troupes at that time mainly faced problems because of a lack of actors and performing venues. Many actors who had come to Singapore also returned to China or Hong Kong at this time, causing wayang to dwindle further. The owner of Guang Hua Troupe, Liao Xing Hua, who was himself a *wu sheng*, said that there were around 150–200 members in the troupe before the war, but after the war, this number had dwindled to 70–80. He explained that the lack of requisite skilled expertise made it impossible for some major plays to be staged as these required more than a hundred performers.[47]

Other local troupes like Lao Sai Tao Yuan Teochew Troupe also faced the same problem of shortage of actors. Although this troupe tried scouting for actors locally, it was not successful. Later, they requested to import 15 actors, musicians and mentors from Shantou through the Immigration Office but it was not successful either. This might have had something to do with the civil war happening in China at that time.[48] At the same time, the Ministry of Labour started to pay attention to the issue of child labour. The modified labour law set a minimum age for an individual to start work. Under a labour act passed in May 1949, children and youths under the age of 17 were not allowed to work as actors unless they held the permit from the Ministry of Labour. This permit was meant to be given only to healthy and physically fit children. Thereafter, some

professional troupes found it even harder to source for child actors. According to the annual report from the Ministry of Labour in 1951, there was a total of 496 requests for permits for child actors. Among these, 291 were approved, 130 were pending approval and another 66 were rejected. Most of these child actors were employees of troupes. 7 of them were with Teochew troupes, 5 with Hokkien troupes, 6 with Cantonese troupes, 3 with Shanghai troupes, 2 with Foochow troupes and another 14 with Teochew music troupes. The rest were with either Malay or Indian troupes. At that time, almost all the Hokkien troupes were performing at the amusement parks while the Teochew troupes went to various places to perform (local and abroad). The Ministry of Labour took into considerations that it was difficult for the working conditions of the children to be monitored while the troupes were on overseas trips. Thus, it arranged for General Hospital and Singapore Anti-Tuberculosis Association to conduct regular checkups for the child actors. From the 1950s onwards, child actors gradually decreased in numbers. According to statistics, there were 300 permits issued to child actors in 1954. Two years later, the number dropped to 195. In 1969, there were only 70 such permits issued.[49] In the 1950s, there were already signs that Chinese Wayang was on the dwindle. Some lesser known troupes were even on the brink of bankruptcy. When Liu Yuan Wu tried to apply for a permit to bring in a Teochew opera troupe of 80 people from Bangkok for a six-month performance, the application was rejected immediately by the Ministry of Labour. The reason given was that the local wayang industry would suffer even more in the face of foreign competition. The Ministry of Labour advocated helping the local troupes so that they could continue to survive.[50]

The social disturbances of the 1950s and 1960s affected the wayang industry in Singapore. Some troupes had to make overseas trips in order to survive. According to Liao Xing Hua the main sources of income at that time for the troupes were overseas performing trips to Malaysia and Thailand. One reason for the decrease in the number of troupes here was the urbanization of Singapore. In the 50s, the populations in the villages were still very dense and the villagers would always eagerly await the Chinese Wayang performances during the Seventh Month of the Lunar Calendar (Zhong Yuan Festival) and at the thanksgiving events. When there was a wayang performance, there would also be an open air bazaar where food, furniture, books, magazines, cloth etc would be sold. Thus when there was a thanksgiving street play, it was always very lively. In the 50s where villagers were generally not affluent and the entertainment industry was not developed, such street plays became the main source of entertainment for the villagers.

With the quickened pace of urbanization, many villages, originally the hubs of wayang performances, were converted into new towns (HDB estates) and factory belts. As a result of complaints by HDB dwellers over the level of noise

made by wayangs, the police force limited the number of places where troupes could erect temporary stages for performances from the 1970s onwards. This restriction caused the number of performances to decrease each year. Thus, some troupes had to disband due to their inability to survive. Others either reduced the number of performances or concentrated on touring Malaysia and Thailand. Some troupes also had to resort to cutting down the number of actors. For example, Heavenly Eagle/Tian Ying and Glory/Guang Hui gave the major roles to Hong Kong actors and the secondary roles were given to part time actors.[51] As the expenses of a Chinese wayang performance were quite high, the ticket prices were high too. This made it difficult for them to compete with the cinemas. According to Zeng Tie Ying, the ticket prices for Chinese Wayang ranged from 1 to 5 dollars. But the movie tickets at the time cost between 75 cents to $1.50 by comparison. Liao Xing Hua also pointed out that Shaw Brothers employed cost-cutting measures too. It employed troupes to perform in amusement parks and tour Malaysia on a contractual basis. Towards the end of the 1950s, when Shaw Brothers realised that wayang was not longer profitable, they stopped employing actors altogether. Thus, some risk-taking individuals formed their own troupes and rented the xiyuans in the amusement parks from Shaw Brothers to stage professional wayang performances. However, they only performed for 4 to 5 days in a week. In the 1960s, this was further reduced to 2 to 3 times a week. Often audience numbers often fell short of expectations by as much as half.

Movies clearly had a debilitating impact on wayang. Attempts were made, however, to make movies based on wayang in the 50s and the 60s sparked off yet another round of interest in it. However, this revival of interest was insufficient to prevent a diminished wayang market made worse by worsening performance standards. Nevertheless, amateur troupes began to thrive in the 1960s. The establishment of the people's theatre in Chinatown spurred on the renaissance. This theatre has undergone several renovations and today, it has air-conditioning facilities, a seating capacity of over a thousand, modern sound and lighting systems. It also has a central location, thus it has become the main performing venue for local amateur Cantonese opera groups and foreign professional Cantonese opera groups. The Victoria Theatre and the National Theatre were also once 2 ideal venues for these groups to perform at. In the 1960s, there were amateur groups such as Qiong Lian You Ju She, Yi Guang Ju Tuan, Serangoon Qiong Ya Xiang Cun Lian He Hui Xi Ju Zu, Chinatown Cantonese Ge Ju Tuan and Dun Huang Ju Fang. Of these, Dun Huang Ju Fang established in 1981 had the highest achievements and it was also the most active. The leading thespian was Madam Hu Gui Xin. The new generation of amateur wayang actors all had the courage to innovate. They understood that if they wanted to attract the audience and maintain the interest the younger generation had for Chinese Wayang, then the traditional art had to improve in

order to keep up with the expectations of the new era. Thus, during a performance, they would screen bilingual subtitles so that the audience would understand what is being said or song even if they do not understand dialects. The more important thing was that, the younger actors now had a more systematic form of training. Thus, their rate of improvement accelerated and the standard of their performances was also raised gradually. Public organizations played an important part in encouraging the interest in Chinese Wayang. Since May 1968, RTS introduced a weekly programme on wayang appreciation, inviting locally known groups. The Ministry of Culture helped organize drama festivals and since August 1978, wayang was one of the categories featured. To help alleviate the financial burden of amateur groups, the Ministry of National Development came up with a plan to aid local theatre so that there could be financial support for local plays and Chinese Wayang.

On the other hand, foreign troupes continued to receive great support from the audience. For example, when Xin Tian Cai Teochew Troupe and Hong Kong Zhong Yuan He Teochew Troupe came to the south in 1969 and 1970 respectively, they had very good ticket sales at New World and Gay World. The Hong Kong Zou Feng Ming Cantonese Troupe (1975) and the China Guangdong Cantonese Troupe 1980 also received great support. These foreign troupes brought with them a revamped form of Chinese Wayang performance. Their elegant lines, new props and new settings influenced the development of Chinese Wayang in Singapore greatly. They also gave part of their earnings to the National Theatre and individual schools, thus establishing the link between Wayang and arts education in Singapore. Perhaps one of the most notable features of the support for wayang has been the National Theatre Trust which continued since its inception to find sufficient support for wayang even till the late 1980s.[52]

A number of groups are seen in the public sphere to promote the performance and appreciation of Chinese opera in Singapore today:

Siong Leng Musical Association

This organization led by the late Teng Mah Seng**,** promotes **Nanyin**, wayang from the Hokkien tradition. Joseph Peters[53] informs us the music of **Nanyin** is based on the just intonation modal pentatonic system. It has a basic repertoire consisting of three categories of music:

1. chih – (47 works which can be either sung, played with musical instruments)
2. P'u – (has 12 and is only for instruments)
3. Ch'u – (is exclusively for voice and an extensive repertoire)

According to Chia Wei Khuan[54], Nanyin, which literally means "The Music of the South", can be traced back to as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD

220). It was originally a form of music for the palace. There were two historic episodes resulting in differently evolving forms for Nanyin:[55] The Jong Jin revolution during the Jing Dynasty where court musicians were forced to migrate to the southern part of China, particularly in Sichuan and another in the coastal province of Fujian. It was in the historical city of Quanzhou and Xiamen that Nanyin continued to flourish and evolved into the form we know today.[56] The second was a cultural negotiation with influences from the Tang Dynasty. [57] It was probably during the nineteenth century that Nanyin was spread to Southeast Asia and in Singapore was established 1819, Nanyin found its way here in the similar manner and was popular with the Hokkien community. Siong Leng Musical Association is one of the most active musical groups of the Hokkien community that has preserved and promoted this ancient art form in Singapore for many years.

The information on Nanyin is scarce. Howeve, from two articles that published in the *Nanyang Shang Bao*[58] and *Lianhe Zaobao*, [59] it is believed that the performance of Nanyin generally adhered to the tradition repertoire brought in from China. The main musical instruments used are, namely, the erxian (a two-string fiddle), the dongxiao (a vertical-held six-hole bamboo flute), the pipa (a pear-shaped four-string lute) and the sanxian (a long-necked three-string instrument). A singer usually takes the place at the centre of the ensemble, holding a clapper in hands to mark the first beat of every measure. A full array of percussion instruments consist of hand-bells, gongs, cymbals, woodblocks, as well as a set of short hand-held bamboo pieces known as sibao which are made to vibrate against each other in fast tempo.

From an article in the programme book of *International Nanyin Concert and Symposium*,[60] the Siong Leng Musical Association began as the Heng Yun Ge Nanyin Association (Horizon Cloud Pavilion), was formed in 1901 and was the most active Nanyin group in the Malaya Peninsula. With the 1937 **Lou Gou Bridge** incident in China, which led to the outbreak of war against the Japanese, Heng Yun Ge Nanyin Association took it upon itself to gather support for the Chinese through its fund-raising concerts. Unfortunately the colonial government began to clamp down on its activities for fear of incurring the wrath of the Japanese. The action caused an internal dissent and the Association was disbanded. A few dedicated members, however, continued the fund-raising effort under the name of Yun Lu (Cottage of Cloud) Nanyin Association. Again, these efforts provoked violence protect from the Japanese and the operating license of Yun Lu was withdrawn. Following a period of quiet inactivity, some members reorganized themselves and re-established what we now of, as the Siong Leng Musical Association in 1941.

Till the early 1970s, Nanyin music was performed, following traditional practice. One of the most significant contributions of the Association was to provide music accompaniment to dance **Journey to the Lakes** shortly after World War II, a performance which was made into documentary. Malcolm MacDonald, Governor-general of Southeast Asia who saw it in London was so impressed that at a welcome function for his visit to Singapore, he specifically requested for this music to be performed. In 1947, the Association was invited to perform in Johor Bahru for an official gathering, with as many as one thousand guests from many foreign countries. The enthronement ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II in Singapore on 2nd June 1953 was marked by a performance by the Siong Leng Musical Association.

Ramifications of the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 were deeply felt with Nanyin music, specifically with issues and practices of cultural exchange. Singapore's post-independent period of modernisation and industrialisation saw a decline in the appreciation on Nanyin with factors cited such as limited repertoire, the proliferation and promotion of Mandarin, but perhaps more so, a decided preference for music of Western art-music and popular culture.[61] Teng Mah Seng, who assumed leadership in Siong Leng as chairman, initiated the organization of an inaugural Southeast Asia Nanyin Conference in 1977, making it a platform for exchange and sharing of both musical and academic ideas. At the inaugural Southeast Asia Nanyin Conference, Ong Pang Boon, the then Minister of Labour and Guest of Honour, pointed out in his speech articulated a need to nurture a new generation of successors through systematic teaching and learning to prevent Nanyin from fading into extinction.[62] At the opening of the new Association premises at Bukit Pasoh Road, the same Minister expressed concerns that if Nanyin could not keep up to the latest trend and development of the modern the society, the heritage might lose its appeal and be abandoned.[63]

There were at least two outcomes of these events. Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan decided to take turns hosting these conferences, which not only gave impetus to Nanyin but also stimulated a revival of in the land of its origin, Quanzhou. Subsequently, numerous conferences were held in the cities of Quanzhou and Xiamen. The initiative was a little later to coincide with economic reform in China, which enabled frequent music exchanges between Siong Leng and China, specifically teachers such as Zhou Sheng-Xiang and Chen Jia-Bao, who were engaged to teach at the Association. A Nanyin network was firmly established through visits to Nanyin groups in the Philippines, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Secondly, Teng Mah Seng was also responsible for several hundred new-style Nanyin lyrics based a wide range of contemporary subjects, with Zhuo Sheng-

Xiang composing the melodies. The project is highly significant because it was a bold attempt to fuse modern idioms into the traditional art form. The result was *The Complete Book of Great Nanyin Melodies* in three volumes. Following that, the Association also launched a compilation of his works entitled *New Nanyin Songs: A Selection of Composition of Teng Mah Seng*.

Nanyin received recognition on an international Occidental stage at the Llangollen Musical Eisteddfod in Wales, 1983 when Teng's wife, Madam Ong Guat Huah was awarded Third Prize in the Folk Song Solo singing **Reminiscence**, by Teng Mah Seng and Zhou Sheng Xiang. Additionally, the Association's ensemble won fourth prize with a performance of **Trotting Horses**.

With management succession systems put in place, the death of Teng Mah Seng on 5th December 1992 due to cancer, enabled successors, trained by him, to able to continue the tasks and responsibilities of the Association to a new level. A Teng Mah Seng Cultural Arts Foundation was founded in March 1993 with the Association, under the leadership of Ong Pheck Geok, Teng Hong Hai, and Music Director Wu Qiren, the promotion of Nanyin was intensified through involvement in the traditional and Liyuan opera, experimental approaches to to Nanyin, organizing Nanyin symposium and publishing Nanyin music and education resources. With assistance from the National Arts Council, Siong Leng has participated in the Singapore Arts Festival, Opera Festival and the Composer's Forum on Traditional Music. Apart from staging many short operas and opera excerpts, it has produced full-length operas that incorporated unconventional content, music, style and presentation. These operas include *Sakyamuni* (1993), *Mu Lian* (1995), *The Life of the Buddha* (1996), *The Tragedy of a Crane-Besotted Emperor* (1997), *The Eminent Vinaya Master Venerable Hong Yi* (1999) and *Motherly Tears* (2002, 2003).

Chinese Opera Institute

The Chinese Opera Institute was established in August 1995 as a non-profit organisation with the support of the National Arts Council. It is a training and research centre responsible for the promotion of all facets of Chinese opera, both practical and theoretical through lectures, demonstrations, performances, publications, and training programmes. The institute aims to strengthen and enlarge the audience for traditional Chinese opera by popularising it in schools and community centres by assisting their productions of Chinese opera. The COI aims not only to innovate in order to create interest but also to preserve tradition. According to Dr Chua, many young people prefer Huang Mei (Mandarin opera) in the beginning because they can speak Mandarin.

The Chinese Opera Society
The COSS was established in August 1992. Its three strategies are
1. The use of English in their publications and subtitles during performances,
2. Conducting talks and demonstrations for students and the public and
3. Experimenting with new ways to present Chinese operas.

The Chinese Opera Society has brought to Singaporeans various opera troupes from China. These included Chuan Opera, Peking Opera, Hebei Opera and Sichuan Opera. Well-known Cantonese opera troupes have also been invited to perform here.

Chinese Theatre Circle Ltd.
Established in 1981, the Chinese Theatre Circle (CTC) has been promoting the art of Chinese Opera, dance and music locally & overseas and in June 1999, registered as a charity under the Charities Act, 1994. In 1984, CTC paved the way with its **Bringing Chinese Opera to the People** project, organising a series of Cantonese Opera performances at Community Centres. It also conducted talks and demonstrations on Chinese Opera in USA colleges and universities in 1992. Its signature opera **A Costly Impulse** was recorded live in Beijing in 1993. In March 1995, it became the first non-profit professional performing Chinese Opera company in Singapore and was subsequently awarded the "Excellence for Singapore Award" in 1997 for its efforts in promoting Chinese Opera in Asia and in the world. CTC made its debut in the Arts Education Programme in 1995 under the auspices of National Arts Council and has since visited more than 100 schools and junior colleges, presenting talks, demonstrations and performances of Chinese Opera to more than 200,000 students. In June 1998, CTC started the first Chinese Opera Teahouse in Singapore to create greater opportunities for the appreciation of Chinese Opera. In October 1999 it presented Madam White Snake and helped to raise more than $300,000.00 for the Dover Park Hospice. From 2000, Madam White Snake has been presented in English, Mandarin. CTC went further with a presentation of **Chinese Opera in Malay** in August 2001. CTC to date, has staged more than 2,000 performance in Singapore and at least twenty countries in different continents.

There are many other clan-based societies and temple-affiliations which are also engaged in similar activities specific to their genre of wayang. According to Juntaronont and Mak 1994, there are about 170 Chinese temples in Singapore. A professional troupe usually performs at an average of ten different temples each month and returns to a temple previously performed in during the same month for a different religious occasion. The audience at a Chinese street opera

performance consists mainly of middle-aged and elderly people and at certain sites, as well as foreign tourists. Two groups of audience are identified—those who want to watch and attend to it and those who prefer to stay at a distance and attend for social reasons, chat or smoke (or both).[64] Lee Tong Sen informs us that four Chaozhou opera troupes and at least 8 Fujian opera troupes perform street opera regularly. Groups get their opportunities to perform during the Hungry Ghost Festival and the annual opera gala at the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong temple. There are usually about 30 members, manager, stagehand, musicians and performers. Their average age is about 50, most members are between 50-65. They are sometimes known as the dapigu (hit-on-the-bottom) the professionals for whom apprenticeship was served with the cane. Dapigu also distinguishes the professional from the amateur. Their wage is $30-$40 for three nights of three hours. Opera performers have a low esteem of their profession, at least not in contemporary urban Singapore. The regular Chinese opera is viewed as outmoded as a form of entertainment and relegated to the practice of customary religious practices. Nevertheless, professional opera troupes continue to be patronised and supported by a regular community and constitute an integral socila process among the Chinese communities today. There are three genres of Chaozhao opera troupes:

1. qingchang, --pure singing
2. zouchang—walk-singing
3. regular street opera.[65]

Street Wayang

What has to be established in future scholarship is to understand wayang in its two pronged manifestation, staged-wayang/opera and street-wayang/opera. One of the most comprehensive studies of and fieldwork on street opera in Singapore has been carried out by Lee Tong Soon, who notes that during the 1960s, there was a general decrease in the number of professional opera troupes, accompanied by a concommitant rise in popularity of amateur groups.[66]

Lee attributes the decline largely due to:

1. A general disinterest in Chinese opera among the younger generation;
2. A decrease in the number of older-generation opera enthusiasts
3. An influx of technological developments such as television and film
4. A fall in the performance standards of professional troupes.[67]

The overall discussion of street wayang from the 1960s onwards has been its fate in a post-independence predicament in Singapore where government placed emphasis on political consolidation, economic expansion and the general process of nation-building. In the following decade, Chua Beng Huat described Singapore as *a new social order characterised by instrumental rationality and a*

population with a strong achievement motivation.[68] Emphasis on moulding a disciplined work-force and rewarding educational success came with the aim of achieving industrial success. As such the argument is built around the need for the arts and culture *to abide by the dictates of the logic of economy*. [69] The demands made of 'culture' based on industrial success and economic development, in Lee's terms, transcended the symbolic aspects of cultural construction, such as the practice of ethnic arts and traditions. As far as individual group identity was promoted through the cultural practices of the respective communities, they were according to Chua Beng Huat *restricted to largely privatised celebration of festivals, dances and ornamental adornments*.[70]

We are informed of the aims of the government of Singapore during the late 1970s and early 1980s in constructing an overarching national identity based on the ideology of multiculturalism.[71] The ideal of a national culture in Singapore was envisaged as one that transcends the respective ethnic cultures that constitute the population. Koh Tai Ann drew on a statement from the Prime Minister's Office in 1986:
The government's policy was not to "assimilate", but to "integrate" our different communities, in other words, to build up common attributes such as one common working language, same loyalties, similar values and attitudes, so as to make the different communities a more cohesive nation.[72]

There were four distinct educational systems in colonial Singapore and slightly beyond independence, each using the official languages (English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil) as the major medium of instruction. English was instituted as the sole medium of instruction in 1987 to ensure national cohesiveness through the use of "one common working language". At the same time, a second language that is the ethnic tongue, was retained and made compulsory for students for the purposes of retaining ethnic identity through language. For Lee, the annual **Speak Mandarin** initiated in 1978, as far as the Chinese-dialect speaking community in Singapore was concerned, was part of the government's effort to produce a common language among the various Chinese communities whose identities were more dialect-based.[73] More importantly, there was a gradual emphasis on ethnic traditions, in terms of language, religion, customs and other expressive forms:
There is encouragement not only of traditional religion but also of the so-called traditional arts to remind the different communities of their cultural roots; to express individually the identity of each community and collectively to express Singapore's multicultural identity; and as a means to create culture in itself.[74]

During the 1980s, there was a decided shift in encouraging ethnic identity through advocacy in traditional arts and art-forms and customs balancing the needs for continuous industrial growth and success in economic development.

Lee believes that since the late 1970s, there was growing concern about the gradual demise of ethnic cultures in Singapore because of the influx of Western style that came together with industrialisation. The inculcation of so-called Asian values and ethnic roots, therefore, came to be regarded as essential defense against the encroachment of western social values. Education policies in the 1980s reflected the emphasis on moral education and religious knowledge; made compulsory in the school curriculum in 1984. Major festivals of the well-known ethnic groups in Singapore were organized and supported by government agencies in the domains of traditional art, rituals, costumes and food.[75] For Lee, traditional art forms, especially Asian ones, constituted an important resource in the process of constructing national identity and culture in Singapore.[76]

Given the fragility of wayang in these circumstances, Chua Soo Pong informs us *while the professional troupes were fading, many amateur groups sprang to fill up the vacuum and they inculcated discipline and morality in the practice of Chinese opera.*[77] Joanna Wong of the Chinese Theatre Circle (CTC) explains that amateurs played a very important role in keeping themselves alive…*through the efforts of a groups of enthusiasts (amateurs) whose objective was to raise the standard of amateur performance and to attain higher artistic achievement, amateur performances improved in quality.*[78] Joanna Wong was for a considerable period part of the National Theatre Trust and wayang had continued to be promoted alongside Chinese tradtional instrumental music as well as the Chinese Orchestra. The Annual reports indicated strength in these areas as well as the reports of sustained interest and support of wayang when organized through the National Theatre Trust.[79]

According to Lim Geok Eng, amateur groups proclaimed as the real salvation of wayang. [80] Such amateur groups have received adulation for reviving Chinese opera in Singapore through their experiments in and improvement of artistic skills, bringing about *a higher standard of performance which often transcended those by professionals.*[81] Lee points out that this however raises the question of conditions governing the rise of amateurs with respect to the decline of professionals within a similar social context. To assume that amateur groups *predominate*, in Lee's words, over the professionals, first acknowledge parity of standards of excellence across both groups but do not sufficiently account for the ways in which this has been arrived at in the history of opera troupes in both domains.[82] Not too long before this, Lee (1998: 51) recalls that during the Japanese Occupation *many troupes were disbanded but those that remained were allowed to perform in order to appease the people and to project a peaceful image. Indeed there was a saying that, in the eyes of the Japanese, professional opera performers are never in the wrong.* [83]

Chinese Opera, in Lee's argument, falls into the category of culturally symbolic expressions of communal identity associated with the more popular practice of the traditional arts in the Singaporean context. From one point of view, Chinese opera, among other traditional practices become worthy of preservation as an 'authentic' local tradition. However, these traditional forms, seen as fundamental to constructing a new social order, are framed within the discourse of cultural policy such that it is the amateur groups of street wayang performers rather than professional troupes that have received public attention in the process of reviving cultural culture and the arts in Singapore. This is the basis of Lee's concern in contemporary Singapore where amateur opera groups constitute the institutional culture of the state, their activities recognized and promoted as an urban, modern and artistic configuration of a traditional expressive form central to national discourses on culture and the arts. Not surprisingly, members of these groups possess qualities identified in a capitalist economy; tertiary education qualifications, economically well-off, holding permanent jobs – all of which enable the luxury of advocating the practice of Chinese Opera. Amateurs claim that main purpose is to promote Chinese opera as an art form and engage in intellectual discourses of Chinese Opera performance, such as analysis of musical modes, vocal styles and performance techniques, among other aspects. Lee paraphrases Daniel Neuman's observations in his study of Gharanas in North India, *the amateur Chinese Opera troupes in Singapore have, in totality of their characteristics, practices and ideologies, a reality that seems a microcosm of what the Singapore Government wants the country to be…educated, culturally vibrant, artistically well-versed.* [84]

This is in stark contrast to professional opera troupes who belong to what one might call folk or unofficial culture, and their practices are considered customary and marginal to the dominant culture defined by the state. They are relegated to the realm of religious practices and their performances are perceived as inconsequential to the development of Chinese opera in Singapore in particular and culture and the arts in general. More importantly in the history of Chinese opera, the amateur groups have come to define the performance of Chinese street opera, formerly associated solely with professional troupes. He goes on further to add that *Chinese Opera in Singapore is being dominated by the amateur opera groups, partially or wholly supported by the government.*[85]

Lee argues that exalting amateur groups in Chinese Opera in contemporary Singapore creates an artificial history, creating a situation that 'real' professional troupes are now relegated to performing exclusively in religious contexts. Using James Clifford's phrase, he argues that the art-culture system created in the process of nation-building in Singapore, that has elaborated arbitrary systems of values and meaning in which various social practices are

defined. In this way, only 'suitable' practices are acknowledged and emphasized while other are effectively obliterated.[86] With specific reference to Chinese street-opera, Lee argues that the art-culture system in Singapore has generated a particular system of performance aesthetics which presumed a parity between the professional and amateur, indirectly favouring the latter, only because the amateur seems to fulfill the aesthetic criteria articulated by the system but also because it constitutes a symbol or perhaps a model, towards which Singapore aspires. At the same time, the conspicuous presence of amateur groups in government sponsored events and writings about Chinese opera in Singapore, perpetuates the norm that favours, and indeed, encourages, the acquisition of a transcendent or aesthetic sensibility towards the arts. Whether or not economic conditions are involved, the emphasis is to participate in the field of arts for leisure, knowledge, self-development, and more importantly, for the promotion of art and culture. Definitions of professional need a little more explanation. Lee argues although the CTC is an organisation with salaried staff (unlike professional wayang troupes who perform street opera daily), it is seen as performing Chinese opera for the main purpose of cultural avocation and are positioned in contrast to members of wayang troupes who are not involved in the state's discourse on culture, at least not explicitly, but perform only to earn a living. This art-culture system generated in the process of nation-building in Singapore, privileges the possession of an aesthetic 'distance' in artistic pursuit and simultaneously encourages such acquisition. [87]

Much of the discourse provided by Lee Tong Soon are built on an understanding of street opera/wayang and a view that 'amateur' performing groups are somehow seen as a privileged group, certainly over those 'professionals' whose opportunities do not extend beyond the temple grounds. That is not to suggest Lee does not appreciate the amateur presence. While accepting not to disagreeing over the commendable standards of performance of amateur groups, the imputed judgment of parity, inequitable funding and support of both groups only serve to mark a divide between the two instead of reaping a dividend from their joint presence.

Further scholarship will have to critically examine, the nature, role and identity of professionals and amateurs as well as the nature, role and identity of street and staged wayang. An interesting corollary of this process will also have to consider tactics and strategies of mark wayang troupes, cultural associations in the convergences and collisions of tradition and modernity. Finally, there needs to be a critical examination of the ways in which the performances by these ensembles, as creative and re-creative endeavours, identify and indemnify them; both within the discourse of tradition and modernity as well as the formation of a Singaporean identity, constructed or evolved out of necessity, within local and international settings.

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