Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 34 (3), pp 449–471 October 2003. Printed in the United Kingdom.
 DOI: S0022463403000420

Chinese Opera in Singapore: Negotiating Globalisation, Consumerism and National Culture

Terence Chong

While it is conventionally argued that global culture homogenises local cultures, very little attention is paid to the strategies that local cultures deploy to survive. This article looks at Chinese opera in Singapore and explores strategies such as apprenticeship schemes, coopting consumerist culture and amateur opera. It argues that the relationship between global and local cultures is one of continuous contestation and refutes the notion that national culture protects or elevates local cultures.

It has often been argued that the spread of a Western consumer monoculture destroys traditional societies and their cultures. The strength of this argument stems mainly from the dichotomy between 'local culture' and 'global culture'. Local culture is usually described as an entity closely tied to 'authenticity' and the particularities of time and space, and accompanied by 'assumptions about [the] boundedness, "rootedness", insularity and "purity" of (particularly) pre-modern cultures'.[1] Global culture, on the other hand, is usually defined as a 'melange' of disparate components – 'eclectic, universal, timeless and technical', such that it is 'memory-less', 'syncretic' and dependent on capitalist production of 'mass-mediated signs and symbols'.[2] In other words, 'local or national cultures have strong emotional connotations for large numbers of people, but global culture is bereft of such "ethnic-based" appeal'.[3]

This article argues that the diametric opposition between local and global culture is not as straightforward as it might seem. Entrenched in a highly globalised post-industrial site, Chinese opera in Singapore is an excellent case study to unpack the highly organic and adaptable nature of local or ethnic cultures. In examining the historical trajectory of Singapore opera, the article looks at its nineteenth-century deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The notion that traditional (or ethnic) cultures are eroded by capitalism and mass consumption is also addressed when we see how Chinese opera's 'golden era' between the 1930s and 1950s came about during its centralisation in amusement

Terence Chong is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, United Kingdom. His e-mail contact is terencechong@hotmail.com

1 John Tomlinson, *Globalisation and culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 129.

2 Nick Perry, *Hyper-reality and global culture* (London: Routledge, 1998). The 'eclectic, universal' characterisation is found in Anthony D. Smith, 'Towards a global culture?', in *Global culture: Nationalism, globalisation and modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), p. 177.

3 'General introduction', in *Globalisation: The reader*, ed. John Beynon and David Dunkerley (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 13; see also Helena Norberg-Hodge, 'Consumer monoculture: The destruction of tradition', in *Global Dialogue*, 1, 1 (1999): 70–7.

'Worlds' around the island. Moving on to the country's early industrialising phase, it is asserted that national and local cultures (and ethnic art) are not necessarily compatible. Although national and ethnic cultures are often seen as 'authentic' and global culture as 'artificial', Singapore's early form of national culture was in fact an obstacle to the growth of Chinese opera. The article also examines cultural politics between the National Arts Council and Chinese opera to suggest why the latter receives so little state support and concludes with a summary of the contemporary threats to opera and the counter-strategies it deploys.

The deterritorialisation of Chinese opera

Chinese opera is often popularly referred to by the Malay term *wayang*, meaning 'show' or 'theatrical performance'. It is difficult to gauge the exact number of Chinese opera troupes in Singapore today, since many disbanded troupes do not bother to de-register themselves with the relevant authorities. Furthermore, a certain troupe may undergo several name changes for a variety of reasons including a change of management or a desire to usher in good luck, thus making it harder to identify. There are, however, at least eighteen active opera troupes funded by the National Arts Council on a regular basis: two generic Chinese opera troupes; five troupes of Cantonese opera; three each for Beijing, Hainanese and Teochew; and two Hokkien troupes. The actual number of troupes in existence is higher since many do not seek state funding.[4] The relative inactivity of many local troupes also hides them from public awareness compared to the more prolific ones like the Chinese Theatre Circle, the Chinese Opera Institute and the Chinese Opera Society.

One of the key concepts in globalisation studies is 'deterritorialisation'. Different scholars have articulated this concept differently, sometimes as 'delocalisation' or 'displacement'. For our purpose, a helpful definition is 'the loss of the "natural" relation of culture to geographical and social territories'.[5] Chinese opera has a history of nearly a thousand years and manifests itself in approximately 300 forms around China, varying according to province and dialect. One of Singapore's earliest experiences of cultural globalisation came during the nineteenth century when Chinese immigrants flooded in from the southern coastal provinces of China looking for work. These sojourners, many harbouring intentions of returning to China, brought along their cultural rituals and ceremonial festivals to the Southeast Asian island, which was then awakening to the

4 Figures are taken from the National Arts Council Website www.nac.gov.sg. Except for the higher-profile opera troupes, many groups shy away from state support. This is largely because of communal pride, but also because of private funding from patron businessmen. Deep territorial divisions have resulted within the community. As Sim Wan Hui, National Arts Council officer, explains: 'You see, Chinese opera is such that they have a lot of "face" and it's still a very traditional thing where, if you perform for one troupe, you do not perform for another troupe . . . So on the one hand, some feel that we [NAC] should support more but some feel that it is charity and they should be more self-reliant' (interview, 2002).

5 Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture*, p. 107, citing the discussion in Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid cultures: Strategies for entering and leaving modernity*, tr. Christopher Chiappari and Silvia Lopez (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995). See also John B. Thompson, *The media and modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) (delocalisation) and Anthony Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) (displacement). General comments on deterritorialisation are in Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', in *Global culture: Nationalism, globalisation and modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), p. 301; Mike Featherstone, *Undoing culture* (London: Sage, 1995); and Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture.*

forces of mercantile capitalism under British colonialism. The operatic forms which found their way across the South China Sea – namely Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Beijing opera – reflect the dialect communities most strongly represented in Singapore. The influx of immigrants lifted Chinese opera from its original 'geographical and social territories' and transplanted it on foreign soil. Such a move involves more than just transplantation of culture, it unties the importance of 'place' from notions of the 'local'.

One of the earliest documented accounts of a Chinese opera performance in Singapore dates from a lunar New Year festival in 1842. Describing its theatricality, Charles Wilkes, Commander of the United States Exploring Expedition, wrote:

> The stage is raised about six feet above the street; the whole is richly decorated with silk hangings, and banners with many inscriptions, and illuminated with coloured lamps. The stage, which was by no means of large size, was occupied by a table and two chairs. The dialogue was in a kind of recitative, with an accompaniment performed by beating with two small sticks on the bottom of a copper kettle of the shape of a coffee-pot . . .The dresses of the actors were very rich, and the females represented by young men or boys. The male characters were for the most part masked, but not the female; the former generally had long black and white beards. . . . The two combatants draw their swords or handle their spears, and begin turning round poking at each other without closing, when suddenly one runs off; the other, after having evidently informed the audience that he is the victor, then makes his exit, accompanied with a most tremendous noise from both the music and the audience. After the performance had closed, it was with difficulty that I could determine whether it had been a comedy or tragedy; whichever it was, it was mingled with still vaulting somersaults, cart-wheel motions, and casting themselves about, indifferent as to what part they fell on, in modes which I may say I had never seen surpassed, either in muscular action or agility.[6]

Other early accounts include those by the Qing dynasty court official Li Zhongjue, writing in 1877; he described Cantonese opera, the most popular, and the occasional Hokkien and Teochew street operas, costing about 3 cents to watch. While most operas were performed by travelling troupes on make-shift stages as dictated by festivals and temple rituals, Li observed that 'permanent theatres were also already in existence'. By 1881 there were about 240 opera performers in Singapore.[7] This transplantation and flourishing of Chinese opera in a new location effectively deterritorialised the art form. Not unlike contemporary modes of deterritorialisation such as electronic images, satellite television or exported cultural products which enable the global consumption of cultural goods, symbols and meanings that in turn enable consumers to construct identity, Chinese opera flourished in nineteenth-century Singapore because as a practice and product for consumption it too contributed to the formation and perpetuation of ethnic

6 Singapore National Archives, *Wayang: A history of Chinese opera in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, 1988), pp. 21–2.

7 Li's account is quoted in Lai Wai Yin, 'Modernisation of a cultural tradition: A case study of Chinese opera in Singapore' (Honours Thesis, National University of Singapore, 1985), p. 13. See also Joanna Wong, 'Chinese opera in Singapore: An overview', in *Traditional theatre in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chua Soo Pong (Singapore: Unipress, 1995), p. 104. The figure of 240 performers is from National Archives, *Wayang*, p. 25.

Chinese identity. The primal link between Chinese opera and ethnic identity was demonstrated when the colonial authorities attempted to suppress the art form.

Though initially adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude, in 1850 the colonial government imposed restrictions on public performances and street processions as part of a broader attempt to maintain public order. In response, a petition signed by eighty-three Chinese businesses and well-known personalities in February that same year was submitted to the Marquis of Dalhousie, Governor-General of India. The petition specifically requested 'the liberty to observe the rites and customs appertaining to marriage and funerals' such as 'annual oblations to the manes to the deceased in the open air in front of each house, the oblation of the Fokien and Kwangtung temples and the "*Cho-hi*" or plays in the enclosures in front in honour of the "*sin*", deified mortals, on their respective birthdays'. The petition was ignored and the Police and Conservancy Acts were implemented in the Straits Settlement in November 1856 'without [their] objectives being explained clearly and adequately'.[8] This sparked off rumours within the Chinese community that opera and other street processions were on the verge of being outlawed, resulting in a strike by Chinese shops, markets and transport workers on 2 January 1857. Two months later in Penang (like Singapore, part of the Straits Settlements) a riot broke out when the police attempted to stop an opera performance, culminating in the deaths of several coolies. The colonial authorities did not relent and it became necessary to apply for a public licence from the police to stage Chinese opera, a practice continued today.

With deterritorialisation, 'places ceased to be clear supports of identity'.[9] Nonetheless, Chinese opera remained a cultural construct embedded with notions of ethnicity and cultural practices. In its different dialect forms, it was a cultural construct from and for the collective imaginary of different groups of immigrants sustained and perpetuated by the in-flow of materials (musical instruments, costume designs, make-up), personnel (travelling troupes, immigrants as audience) and discourses (the conveyance of myths, values and narratives of opera stories) from mainland China. The polyglot nature of Chinese immigrants, their various dialects and variety of provinces of origin ensured that different dialect operas remained relatively autonomous from each other.[10] The scarcity of scripts and musical scores meant that knowledge was largely orally transferred, thus fostering a sense of exclusivity amongst different dialect groups. This exclusivity, however, was suspended in the face of an external threat (in this case from the colonial authorities), and functioned as a 'collective identity'. As Dave Morley and Kevin Robins write, 'The cohesion of collective identity must be sustained *through time*, through a sense of a common past and heritage. It must also be maintained *across space*, through a complex mapping of territories and frontiers, principles of inclusion and exclusion that define "us" against "them".'[11]

8 June Lin, *A calendar of street wayang in Singapore 1987/88* (Singapore: National Archives, 1988).

9 Dave Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of identity: Global media, electronic landscapes and cultural boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 87.

10 The term 'Chinese' was too broad and vague for the culturally heterogeneous Chinese immigrants to identify with; Kwok Kian Woon, *Social transformation and the problem of social coherence: Chinese Singaporeans at century's end* (Singapore: Department of Sociology Working Paper, National University of Singapore, 1994). Instead, cultural identification premised upon dialect group served as an indication of one's provincial origins.

11 Morley and Robins, *Spaces of identity*, p. 72; emphasis in the original.

This collective identity was played out through immigrant retaliation and was no doubt based on their collective origins in – and ethnic ties to – China; this was the 'fostering of relations at a distance'. Chinatown, where Chinese opera converged in Singapore in the late nineteenth century was, in Anthony Giddens' term, a modern 'locale'. Such locales are 'phantasmagoric' because they are 'penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them'.[12]

As a transnational cultural construct, Chinese opera also functioned as a cogent social activity that aided in the organisation of social structure, societal relationships and a means of social intercourse within the community. This cultural construct was necessary for several psycho-social needs such as providing a signifier of ethnic identity, cultural familiarity and social or clan belonging amongst the immigrants. In other words, Chinese opera, upon undergoing 'deterritorialisation', eventually began to 'localise' itself in a new geographical and social territory. The section below looks at the various ways in which this localisation took place.

Localising local culture: socio-cultural practices surrounding Chinese opera

By the 1920s, Cantonese opera had emerged as the most popular amongst the dialect forms in Singapore, concentrating in Chinatown not least because of the strong presence of Cantonese immigrants and artisans there. The general popularity of Chinese opera hinged not only on its linguistic and physical accessibility but also on the socio-econ omic conditions of pre-war Singapore; in other words, it achieved a sense of 'local-ness' through various and specific socio-cultural practices and patterns of the Chinese immigrant community. There are three general cultural materialist explanations for how Chinese opera 'localised' itself.[13]

Firstly, Cantonese opera thrived alongside prostitution. Chinatown's Smith Street – now a sanitised and well-regulated *al fresco* dining venue and home to several theatre groups under the National Arts Council's arts housing scheme – was in 1901 a well-patronised 'red light district' with no less than twenty-five brothels. Along the narrow row of shophouses, whose façades are still visible today, brothels flourished side-by-side with other businesses, including opera troupes and teahouses. It was customary for prostitutes and their clients to frequent operas together, and opera actors regularly patronised the brothels as well.[14] Furthermore, the accessibility of Cantonese opera made it a communal activity closely related to other activities such as social eating, drinking and, in this case, sex. On a broader level, operatic performances became permanent additions

12 Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture*, p. 52; Giddens, *Consequences of modernity*.

13 My discussion here is informed by Marvin Harris, *Cultural materialism: The struggle for a science of culture* (New York: Random House, 1979). For Harris cultural materialism makes two key assumptions about human society: first, that society is made up of component parts that are functionally interrelated, and, second, that the material environment is the foundation of socio-cultural systems. All socio-cultural life must therefore be examined as being conditioned by its immediate material environment.

14 The red-light district blossomed in tandem with Cantonese opera because while the two professions carried different cultural capital, historically they were from the same socio-economic stratum. Actors and prostitutes in China were legislatively marginalised from the bureaucracy and the state examination system, which collectively constituted the only path to the highest social status a commoner could enjoy – that of scholar-official; Colin Mackerras, *The Chinese theatre in modern times: From 1840 to the present day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975). See also Lai, 'Modernisation of a cultural tradition'.

to city life when staged at fixed locations like theatre halls, so much so that the performance itself was complementary to the socio-cultural patterns of a particular ethnic socio-economic class. Travelling food-hawkers, prostitutes, coolies and small-time businessmen congregating in Chinatown for social and commercial intercourse could enjoy overlapping consumption practices. Indeed, many of the early theatres were called teahouses; the audience would only pay for a pot of tea upon entering.[15]

Secondly, because Chinese opera was and still is categorised according to dialect, it has had strong resonance for the various dialect communities. Clans, guild-houses and other communal associations were set up along dialect lines and became regular patrons and supporters of opera, with individual Chinese businessmen more instinctively predisposed to supporting opera troupes of their respective dialects. The steady decline in dialect usage from the late 1960s onwards, due largely to the government's promotion of Mandarin and the project of a broad and inclusive national culture in order to embrace the various ethnic minorities, weakened opera's links to the ethnic Chinese community (as will be discussed below).

Finally, Chinese opera was connected intimately to religion, which as a social tool performs three major societal functions. It offers social cohesion by uniting people through shared symbols, values and norms; it assists in social control by deploying religious rhetoric and imagery to promote conformity; and it provides meaning and purpose to life by appealing to the greater schema of a higher authority.[16] Buddhism and Taoism in Singapore have two of the largest followings amongst ethnic Chinese while Confucianism, a cultural philosophy, commands a broad resonance even among those who are not religious. Opera had two primary roles in didactic religious rituals: it offered a discursive platform for actors and actresses to (re)enact religious myths during temple celebrations for public consumption and was itself a ritual believed to ward off evil spirits and bad luck. Its religious relevance was further compounded by its ability to syncretise Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism into a singular spectacle for public consumption. As Lim Geok Eng observes:

> Filial piety and, by extension, ancestor worship, have always been principal tenets of Confucian practice. It is thus hardly surprising that the Taoist reason for staging Chinese operas for the ghosts came about because of a Buddhist legend, ancestor worship, and the Taoists' belief in the eighteen levels of Hell.[17]

Chinese opera also benefited from the way religious associations organise themselves during festivals such as the Hungry Ghost Festival.[18] The costs of these festivals, including the hiring of opera troupes, are borne by temple donations and the sale of candles, incense article and joss sticks, etc. Such proceeds are never sufficient, however,

15 'When Chinese opera was served in the ballroom', *The Straits Times* (henceforth *ST*), 27 July 1986.
16 Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life* (New York: Free Press, 1965).
17 Lim Geok Eng, 'Introduction', in Ines Vente, *Wayang: Chinese street opera in Singapore,* (Singapore: MPH, 1984), p. 8.
18 Falling between the months of August and September, the Hungry Ghost Festival is a time when the gates of Hell are believed to open temporarily so that the spirits of ancestors can return to earth to enjoy feasts and festivities. It is thus traditional to find the two benches closest to the stage empty because they are reserved for such visitors.

and are thus heavily supplemented by clan and religious associations, some of whose members form committees responsible for organising the celestial birthdays of different deities.[19]

It is clear, then, that Chinese opera was 'localised' or reterritorialised through several factors. By offering itself as a complementary activity to other social habits, opera made itself relevant to communal life. The relatively prosperous economic conditions of the pre-war tin and mining industries also enabled the bulk of its audience – Chinese coolies and businessmen – to help it survive financially. Meanwhile, Chinese opera's connections to dialect, clan and business associations, together with religion, allowed it to benefit from a cohesive and communal organisational force.

Apprenticeship and under-aged children: local culture's strategies for self-renewal

Many scholars write about the impending death of local cultures as though they were fragile entities ready to wilt at the first sign of pressure. This is largely because local–global culture debates have yet to pay enough attention to the strategies deployed by local cultures for self-renewal. Such strategies usually tap prevalent socio-economic conditions to enable a local culture to flourish, albeit sometimes temporarily. The more successful the strategy is in engendering an intimate relationship between socio-economic conditions and the visceral needs of a local culture, the stronger the fundamentals for the dawn of a 'golden period'. Naturally when these socio-economic conditions and political climate change, such strategies become obsolete but no less important as clues to the revival of local cultures. One important strategy for the self-renewal of Chinese opera was child apprenticeship.

During the early twentieth century Chinese opera remained a relatively stable form of employment. In a bid for financial aid, poverty-stricken families would offer their children to opera troupes for apprenticeship, usually lasting from eight to ten years. Troupes would pay families a sum of $200–500 which the children would have to work to pay off. As the President of the Chinese Opera Society, Sng Poh Yoke, observes,

> That [apprenticeship] was possible in the old days only because parents were very poor and that was the only way they could ensure their child of a living and of learning a skill. They had no money to send them to school, so what do you do? You send them to an opera school. So at least they learnt a skill.[20]

Child apprenticeships provided opera troupes with a steady supply of manpower and means for self-renewal. Although the social status of opera actors in China reached an all time low during the Opium War – mainly because they 'were looked on as wanderers and vagabonds, shiftless and dishonest, and, worst of all, utterly immoral', a perception which continued into the early twentieth century – opera troupes in Singapore did hold a certain degree of glamour for children, especially girls, some of whom would run off to join the troupes. The amount of attention and pampering given to some girls who were lucky enough to reach 'star' status made it difficult for them to accept or desire a life

19 Lim, 'Introduction'.
20 Interview (2002). All dollar figures in this article are in Straits dollars.

of domesticity.[21] Nonetheless, the majority of such apprenticeships entailed a life of hardship.

Child apprenticeships were also legitimised by the state. An Act of Parliament decreed that contracts between troupes and parents were legally valid, allowing the former to sue the latter for any breach. The state oversaw apprenticeship procedures by having an officer from the Licensing of Child Actors Section of the Labour Department interview both child and parents; these meetings were usually arranged by the troupe proprietor. The child was interviewed separately to ascertain his or her desire to join the troupe and verify that he or she was over twelve years of age. Even without the parents' presence, it was almost unheard of for a child to express unwillingness for a variety of reasons – fear of reprisals from parents (who were usually in debt), limited life choices or, quite possibly, the glamour that Chinese opera held for them. After a mandatory but brief medical examination, the officer then issued a licence to the child for stage performance. The apprentice was usually paid $10–15 per month in the first year with a $2 increment for the subsequent three years. From the fourth year, the increment was $4 and remained so until the contract ended.[22]

This early induction made it possible for children to specialise in specific roles and characters that required long-term training. The deeply idiosyncratic yet formal body movements and speech patterns of classical Beijing opera characters like *sheng* (male protagonist), *tan* (female protagonist) or *dahuanian* (villainous characters), together with the art of female impersonation, meant that specialisation was *de rigueur* in operatic training.[23] Child performers were most common in Teochew opera – to the extent that the tradition would have died without them. As the optimal age for training was roughly nine years old, labour laws prohibiting the employment of children under twelve (the Children and Young Persons Ordinance) were an initial hindrance to Teochew opera troupes, though some got around the laws by recruiting underage children but only putting them on stage when they reached twelve.[24] Such practices and strategies allowed opera skills and techniques to 'incubate' and mature as young apprentices developed over the years.

By providing opera troupes with a regular supply of manpower, this practice made it unnecessary for a troupe to compete with others for raw talent, and they did not threaten each other's survival. This 'in-house' training, together with the drawing of actors from respective dialect communities, helped Chinese opera troupes remain relatively autonomous and compartmentalised – traits which later weakened their cohesive visibility. Furthermore, troupes with child performers from China were hindered from performing in Singapore because of the local child labour laws, thus drastically reducing the competition for local troupes. In the meantime, while the under-class of society supplied manpower, financing came from the patronage of various clan or religious associations, businessmen and wealthy art lovers. This combination of factors meant that Chinese opera was able to coopt the underclass of society, which saw it as a route to a brighter

21 Ong Cheng Lian, 'The Teochew opera troupes: A study of the business and social organisation of opera players' (Honours thesis, Department of Social Studies, University of Malaya, 1958). The comment on perceptions of opera actors is from Mackerras, *Chinese theatre*, p. 78.
22 Ibid., p. 40.
23 Lim, 'Introduction'.
24 Ong, 'Teochew opera troupes'.

future, while soliciting funds from a bourgeois or merchant class – a two-fold relationship particular to a bygone socio-economic era that enabled Chinese opera to flourish.

Amusement 'worlds': reconciling Chinese opera's 'golden period' with early consumerist culture

Global culture is also conceived as a mass consumerist culture that shapes and conforms global desires, wants and needs. This 'commodification' of the consumer's experience is seen by many to pose a 'threat to the richness and diversity of cultural practices', especially in the Third World, resulting in the description of mass consumerism as a monolithic force with one-dimensional causal effects on traditional cultures.[25] This section looks at Chinese opera's first brush with mass consumerism in the 1930s and argues that far from eroding traditional culture, the early phase of modernisation and consumerist culture actually provided strategies and avenues for Chinese opera to flourish. Local opera observers have acknowledged the period from the 1930s to the early 1950s as the 'golden period' of Chinese opera in Singapore; ironically, this was also the time when Chinese opera was most comprehensively appropriated by the logic of capitalism.[26]

From the 1920s onward, amusement parks sprouted in all the major cities in Malaya including Penang, Ipoh, Melaka and Kuala Lumpur, with Singapore at the forefront. The most popular of these amusement parks in Singapore were Happy Valley (at Tanjong Pagar), Great World (Kim Seng Road), Gay World (Geylang), and New World (Jalan Besar); they have been characterised as 'a unique mixture of Eastern and Western entertainment with multi-ethnic participation'. As the *Singapore Free Press* described one such amusement park in 1937, 'electric words proclaim you are entering a "World" – a "Great" and "New" world – a world bound by high fencing, inside which can be found laughter and happiness, and the comedies – and tragedies – of life'.[27]

Amusement 'Worlds' catered to the masses by offering a *mélange* of spectacles which satisfied a wide spectrum of economic classes: wrestling and boxing matches, variety shows, gambling booths, shooting galleries, comic skits and even cabarets. Here the *towkay* (Chinese businessman) could entertain and dine in the 'million-dollar' private apartments of expensive restaurants while 'the humblest member of the working class may spend his very hard-earned fifty cents or more unostentatiously at the gaming booths, the open-air cinema or the laneside hawker'.[28] Chinese opera was also incorporated into the entertainment smorgasbord.

Instead of wilting in the face of competition from other forms of entertainment, Cantonese opera performances were put up at these 'Worlds' seven nights a week without fail.[29] Almost in defiance of the conventional 'global culture destroying local

25 Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture*; see also Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, spectacle, cultural politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985); Ulrich Beck, *What is globalisation?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); and Leslie Sklair, *The sociology of the global system* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

26 Chua Soo Pong, 'Reaching out for cultural roots: A Singapore example in reviving traditional theatre in Singapore', in Chua ed., *Traditional theatre*, p. 93; Wong, 'Chinese opera'; 'All aglow again to attract new fans', *ST*, 9 Feb. 1986.

27 Quoted in Jurgen Rudolph, 'Amusements in the three "Worlds"', in *Looking at culture*, ed. Sanjay Krishnan *et al.* (Singapore: Chung Printing, 1996), p. 21; the comment on 'a unique mixture' is from p. 21.

28 Ibid., p. 22.

29 Lai, 'Modernisation of a cultural tradition'.

culture' argument, mass consumerism and the Hong Kong movie industry actually contributed in three different ways to the revival of a Chinese opera scene that was flagging just before World War II. Firstly, because these 'Worlds' were predominantly capitalist-driven, their owners (the most powerful of whom were the Shaw Brothers) were highly selective of the opera troupes that performed in their theatres. Only highly skilled and artistically sound troupes were invited regularly to launch seasons. The ready pool of spectators, centralised sites and formal theatres in these 'Worlds' made it prestigious and financially beneficial for troupes to perform there. The question as to whether a traditional art form could hold its own against the growing popularity of movies can be partially answered by a brief comparison of ticket prices. By the 1940s, a Cantonese opera performance in one of the 'Worlds' cost about $0.75 (for the first 30 rows of seats), $0.55 (next 30–50 rows) or $0.25 (for the rest). These opera prices were on average 20 cents more than a movie ticket at the time. By the 1950s, opera prices increased to about $2, $1.50, and $1 while admission prices for movies were $1.50, $1 and 75 cents respectively. The higher admission prices of good opera troupes remained viable even though other troupes were performing around the island for free, also to large audiences.[30]

Secondly, the cult of the actor played a huge role in feeding interest. By then popular actors and actresses had emerged from the local circuit, each drawing their own loyal following. Famous artists, usually hand-picked by amusement park owners to boost receipts, performed only on weekends with the then hefty wage of between $240–$340 a month. As one of the more well-known actors, Tong Pak Meng, recalls:

> The success of an actor depended very much on his ability to draw a large crowd, in particular the so-called yegutuan … groups of wealthy housewives, dance hostesses or prostitutes. They came in groups of 20 to 30 and were nicknamed 'women squadron[s]'. It was a terrible thing to offend them. Once there was such a group who invited me for supper after a performance. They didn't ask my wife to go along. My wife was unhappy and stopped me from going with them. The following night they turned up as usual but once I appeared on stage they booed and walked off. After the show, they were outside the gate and loudly ridiculed me. On the other hand, if they liked you, after a performance they presented a gift – a gold chain, a jade pendant or a watch. Sometimes one group competed with another to see who could give the most expensive gifts.[31]

The third factor – and perhaps the most significant for the popularity of Chinese opera in these 'Worlds' – was, paradoxically, the emergence of opera movies.[32] Cantonese opera stars from Canton and Hong Kong would cross over regularly from the theatre to the film genre. The Shaw Brothers, who contracted these stars to act in its movies, made this crossover possible. It may not be far-fetched to suggest that some of the glamour of the movies was reflected onto the theatre in view of the fact that actors and actresses who had appeared in movies or television garnered a larger than usual audience whenever

30 Chua, 'Reaching out'. Information on prices is taken from Richard Lim, 'Wayang heroes are losing out to Superman', in *Straits Times Annual* (Singapore: Straits Times, 1982) and Lai, 'Modernisation of a cultural tradition'.

31 National Archives, *Wayang*, p. 52.

32 See also Chua Soo Pong, 'Teochew opera in Singapore: Continuity and change', unpublished manuscript kindly provided by the author.

they next appeared on stage. An audience of housewives and such would scour the weekly programmes of the 'Worlds' and flock to theatres whenever their favourite stars appeared on stage. Many of these movies were highly accessible by the 1950s and 1960s because they were televised, entering the private realms of the audience to reassert the art form's link to ethnicity and dialect identification in a highly intimate way. As these stars were mostly from China or Hong Kong, their 'foreign-ness' also lent a touch of mystique and glamour, which naturally translated into higher theatre ticket sales whenever they performed 'live' in Singapore. Instead of diverting attention from opera, television in this case actually boosted its popularity; the cooption of a popular entertainment genre by a local cultural form thus became a useful strategy in heightening the latter's appeal.

Given the evidence above, it is necessary to understand how the early phases of modernisation and consumerism affect traditional cultures. Different traditional art forms are plugged into modernity and capitalism separately and in varying degrees. This necessarily dictates the speeds, modes and strategies of how traditional cultures are transformed and how their practitioners negotiate and reposition themselves with the disparate products of modernity such as amusement parks, television, cinema and so forth. Such negotiation and repositioning set up multiple competitions between the vernacular and the modern, with many traditional cultures fighting different battles because of their different contexts, practices and audiences.

The myth of national cultural resistance to global culture

National culture is often seen as a broad configuration of specific ethnic or local cultures. This configuration characterises it as 'particular, timebound and expressive'.[33] Its association with ethnic or local cultures perpetuates it as 'authentic', in opposition to the 'artificiality' of global culture. The 'authenticity' of national culture comes from its emphasis on 'origins, continuity, tradition', and the way national identity is 'often symbolically grounded on the idea of a pure, original people or "folk"'.[34] The strong links between national culture and ethnicities and the 'pure' are also, in part, perpetuated by the postcolonial state's efforts to elevate ethnic cultures to 'national culture' status. This authenticity–artificiality dualism between national and global cultures consequently assumes that the former is antithetical to, or even needs to be protected from, the latter – which is not always necessarily so.

The case of Singapore shows that governing elites have aligned local national culture more closely to global than to ethnic culture, for two reasons. Early inter-ethnic conflict and violence made it unfeasible to elevate a particular ethnic culture over others to national culture status, and access to global markets was deemed vital for national survival. Furthermore, national culture as a tool of modern nation-states facilitates the erasure of memory, invention of tradition and reorganising of history in order to construct a national identity; the narratives of this national culture and identity serve as a 'story they tell themselves about themselves'.[35] As we will see, Singapore's brand of national culture, concerned with intra-ethnic harmony, English-language proficiency

33 Smith, 'Towards a global culture?'.
34 Stuart Hall, 'The question of cultural identity', in *Modernity and its futures*, ed. Stuart Hall *et al.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 295.
35 Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 448.

and disciplining ethnic categories instead of supporting or protecting ethnic culture, became an added obstacle which Chinese opera had to negotiate.

Singapore's unexpected separation from Malaysia in 1965 was a watershed for its three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays and Indians), forcing issues of ethnicity, culture and identity to the fore. It became necessary for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to quickly forge a national culture based on the ideologies of meritocracy and ethnic equity. To avoid inter-ethnic conflict, the first building block of this new national culture was the deemphasising of Chinese-ness in national discourse.[36] If Singapore were perceived as a 'third China' (in addition to the PRC and Taiwan), this would strain not only the domestic relationship between the Chinese majority and non-Chinese minorities but also the country's ties with the neighbouring Muslim-majority countries. To negotiate around this problem, English, Malay, Tamil and Mandarin were all made official languages as gesture of equal representation. Emphasis was placed on the English language as a *lingua franca*, not only to blunt Chinese ethnocentrism but also, more practically, to make the country's workforce more viable to global markets and business. The second building block was the symbolic elevation of Malay as national language. This move recognised the ethnic Malays' indigenous status, thus assuring the surrounding Muslim countries that Singapore Malays would not be marginalised. Chinese conservatives initially received the national emphasis on the English language as *lingua franca* and as a symbol of modernisation with unease. However, the tangible economic progression the island enjoyed over the years gradually weakened their resolve.

The rise of communist activities in the 1950s also contributed partly to the demise of Chinese opera. Pro-communist parties and left-wing workers' unions had organised mass dances and dramas to recruit disenfranchised Chinese students and workers with great success. Chua Soo Pong, academic and artistic director of the Chinese Opera Institute, writes:

> A large number of students from Chinese schools were involved in politicised performing art activities, staging of Chinese folk dance, folk songs, newly composed songs and choreographed dance dramas depicting contemporary stories. These youngsters unwittingly became alienated from the Chinese opera, which was then a common form of entertainment.[37]

Perhaps national culture's most significant obstacle to Chinese opera, however, was the systematic promotion of Mandarin at the expense of other dialects. Practically speaking, the state believed the use of the other dialects hindered the use of English, a vital tool because of its status as global language of business and education. At the same time, the need to forge an inclusive national culture led to the demonising of non- Mandarin dialects because of the communal divides they engendered within the ethnic Chinese majority. Official discouragement of these dialects was also part of the larger project to 'discipline' and organise ethnic categories. Instead of categorising the ethnic Chinese according to their dialect groups and the language of their true 'mother tongue', they

36 Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's management of ethnicity* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995).
37 Chua, 'Reaching out', p. 94.

were assimilated under a broader and inclusive 'Chinese' category.[38] 'Mother tongue', rather than being understood as the language spoken with one's parents or in the domestic sphere, was now defined by the state in terms of an ethnic category. Diverse dialect groups such as Hokkien, Hainanese, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka were all collectively assigned 'Mandarin' as their new 'mother tongue'. (The heterogeneous Malay and Indian communities felt similar effects when it came to classifying them according to 'mother tongue'.) The fact that Mandarin was not the mother tongue of most of the older generation of ethnic Chinese – who instead spoke Cantonese, Teochew or Hokkien – alienated younger generations from their parents' dialects. The act of language conformation aided in the cultural integration of disparate communities. 'In the modern age', as Michael Schudson writes, 'the nation-state has increasingly played a central role in turning language to use for social integration.'[39]

As a result of these policies, many of the literary nuances and linguistic finery of Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien opera were lost on younger Singaporeans who only spoke English and Mandarin. Nonetheless, it is uncertain whether Chinese opera would have continued to flourish even without the decline of non-Mandarin dialects. Its sociocultural relevance to pre-war Chinese immigrants and its popularity in the amusement 'Worlds' strongly suggest that its decline would not have been as dramatic if dialects – the primary mode of appreciating Chinese opera – had not been systematically discouraged by the state. What is certain, however, is that this systematic discouragement and the newfound proficiency in the English language, a salient component of the new national culture, opened up the population to other forms of Western entertainment. Linguistic closure to dialect opera, English language proficiency and exposure to the rapid proliferation of Western popular culture all contributed to the transformation of cultural aspirations and ideals of the younger generation, offering Western movie and music idols who celebrated freedom and individualism as cultural references worlds apart from the classical and staid heroes of Chinese opera.

The consumption of Western icons in turn influenced identity construction. Such consumption became increasingly accessible as cinemas grew in popularity and as televisions found their way into more and more homes. Idols and icons of Western pop culture gained contemporary relevance for a younger audience by capturing their collective *angst* and hopes, while the literary classical heroes of Chinese opera became at best anachronistic and irrelevant or, worse, the antithesis of the foreign heroes, provoking disdain. The sharp decline in audience figures led to the disbanding of many professional troupes as the structural changes brought about by the government began to affect the patterns of entertainment consumption. Gwee Bock Huat, former chairman of the Singapore Theatrical (Wayang) Association, observed that

> It's not so much the government wanting to phase out dialects which will kill us. The flavour would change if we become a Mandarin-speaking Beijing-style troupe. But it's the

38 See Nirmala Purushotam, 'Disciplining difference: "Race" in Singapore', in *Southeast Asian identities: Culture and the politics of representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 51–94.

39 Michael Schudson, 'Culture and the integration of national societies', in *The sociology of culture: Emerging theoretical perspectives*, ed. Diana Crane (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 21–44.

young people, who no longer care or understand this traditional form of entertainment, who will eventually kill off the *wayang*.[40]

'No longer caring or understanding' was an attitude prevalent not only on an individual level, but on a national scale as well. The national discourse of economic survival and progress during the country's early industrialising years imbricated the new national culture with a functionalist and materialist philosophy. Vocations such as engineering and accounting, which contributed directly to economic wellbeing, were culturally constructed as socially prestigious and desirable, while the arts in general were devalued, leaving a lasting perception that artists and theatre performers were economically ineffectual and socially unimportant.

To be sure, other national structural and socio-cultural changes also contributed to Chinese opera's decline. The government's efforts to sanitise Chinatown in the 1970s led to the eradication of prostitution and the closure of roadside hawker stands. The Urban Redevelopment Authority's (URA) master concept plan of 1991 to redevelop certain city areas traditionally associated with different ethnic groups (i.e. Chinatown with the Chinese, Kampong Glam with the Malays, and Serangoon Road with the Indians) has also unwittingly resulted in the decline of street life. URA's conservation efforts '[have] been consciously inscribed with an "ethnic" narrative' but have paradoxically left 'most vernacular houses. . . effectively "deresidentialised"' because 'their subsequent usage is carefully managed, giving preference to commercial or other designated purposes that are in line with the planned narrative of the area'.[41] Such moves have deprived Chinese opera of its traditional surrounding activities, undoing the reterritorialising processes of early opera.

Meanwhile, clan association memberships fell as dialect usage declined, thus removing a vital organisational force behind Chinese opera. Rapid urbanisation also effectively reconfigured lifestyle patterns as rural areas and villages were cleared and replaced by high-rise flats. As a result, communities were broken up and dispersed to different parts of the island, destroying a communal socio-cultural fabric that has never been replicated since. With people living in tighter proximity, common spaces became more regulated to keep traffic congestion, noise population and public complaints at bay. Chinese opera troupes need licences to perform in residential estates, with performances only allowed between 1:00–5:00 in the afternoon and 7:00–11:00 in the evening, and then only at certain designated sites. Although the government has allocated about 500 such sites, half to three-quarters of them have not been regularly used because they were deemed either unsuitable for opera performance or too isolated from the public.[42]

40 Quoted in Lim, 'Wayang heroes', p. 79.

41 Kwok Kian Woon and Low Kee Hong, 'Cultural policy and the city-state: Singapore and the "New Asian Renaissance"', in *Global culture: Media, arts, policy and Globalisation*, ed. Diana Crane *et al.*(London: Routledge, 2002), p. 155.

42 As *The Straits Times* confirms, '(s)ince 1975, the government has sharply curtailed the number of approved sites for wayangs and imposed stringent noise-control regulations following public complaints from the public. The wayang's traditional role as entertainment for "villagers" or neighbours in the celebration of happy and auspicious occasions has certainly been eroded in the process of urban renewal. With resettlement, the crowds have thinned out' ('The wayang: People still like to watch', *ST*, 1 June 1978).

A new Confucian 'global culture': Chinese opera's mini-revival in the 1980s

If the early stages of the new national culture thwarted Chinese opera's growth, then a drastic alteration to the national culture from the late 1970s led to its 'mini-revival'. The country's high economic growth and English proficiency led some PAP leaders to believe that the ethnic Chinese population was becoming too 'Westernised' (which usually meant individualism, hedonism and liberalism), arousing fears of a community de-rooted from its 'distinctive' cultural values, heritage and traditions. (Interestingly, only the Chinese community was thought to have suffered from this cultural enervation while the Malay and Indian communities remained relatively secure with their cultural traditions and values.) In 1978 then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee produced the watershed *Report on the Ministry of Education*, in which he warned that 'with large-scale movement to education in English, the risk of deculturalisation cannot be ignored'.[43] The spectre of 'deculturalisation' led to the *Report on moral education*, submitted by Minister of Culture Ong Teng Cheong (future President of Singapore) the very next year.

The government's fears of 'deculturalisation' and the loss of 'Asian values' coincided with the emergence of Confucian ethics as a culturalist explanation for the economic progress (popularly known as the 'Asian miracle') of Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. Euphemistically known as the 'Asian tigers', these 'neo-Confucian cultures were singled out as "heroes of development"'. Such exhortations usually involved comparison with the 'less desirable value traits of American society'.[44] The economic potential of China confirmed the importance of Confucianism, prompting the Singapore government to invite several Confucian scholars from America and Taiwan for a series of well-publicised lectures. The media attention lavished on these lectures engendered a domestic wave of Chinese cultural consciousness that swept the public's imagination for most of the 1980s and led many to feel that Confucianism had become a national ideology in multicultural Singapore. One of these foreign scholars confidently assured the local ethnic minorities that Confucianism was 'a universal system of ethics and a universal way of life and that Singapore by adopting it might well become the seed of a future *global culture* looked to by other parts of the world'. Unlike conventional definitions of global culture, this 'new' global culture was both 'universal' and 'timeless' or 'memory-less', as well as culturally grounded and ethnic-based.[45] It was a 'local culture' gone 'global'.

This prediction of a new Confucian-based 'global culture' owed its boldness to the economic supremacy of Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Its emergence as a world economic power began to draw academic and political attention to Asia, and in 1979 the publication of three influential books consolidated the place of 'Asian values' and 'Confucian ethics' in the literature of international economic and industrial development. In *The Japanese challenge: The success and failure of economic success*, Herman Kahn and Thomas

43 Quoted in Vasil, *Asianising Singapore*, p. 69.

44 Michael Hill, *'Asian values' as reverse Orientalism: The case of Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Sociology Working Paper, National University of Singapore, 2000), p. 10.

45 The quotation (by Tu Wei-Ming) is from Vasil, *Asianising Singapore*, p. 73; emphasis added. See also *Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity*, ed. Tu Weiming (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Pepper argued that Southeast Asia's high economic growth could be explained by its Confucian cultural tradition, while in *World economic development 1979 and beyond*, Kahn went further to state that neo-Confucian values were better suited to industrialisation than Western ones. Finally, Ezra Vogel's *Japan as number one: Lessons for America* argued that contemporary 'Asian values' closely resembled American core values of the past, the implication of which was that Asia now held the secrets of economic success.[46]

It was thus the combination of tangible economic success, influential and well-timed literature and global academic, political and media attention – mixed with pure exuberance – that encouraged the prophecy of a new and distinctively 'Asian global culture'. Indeed, this new vision inspired the rhetoric of an 'Asian renaissance' of which Singapore state elites (the majority of whom were ethnic Chinese) saw the country to be a part. This particular perspective had a profound effect on the national sphere. As Chinese playwright and academic Quah Sy Ren opines in hindsight:

> If we go back and take a look at the 80s, there was an important phenomenon and that was Chinese-language activities. They were very vibrant. Not only Chinese theatre but the entire education and cultural scene was vibrant with all sorts of activities. . . That's why I perceive the 1980s as the climax of Chinese cultural development (in terms of) literary, theatre activities. . .[47]

Chinese opera in Singapore benefited from this vision of a 'global culture'. In 1978, the Ministry of Culture and Singapore Tourist Promotion Board initiated an annual Chinese opera programme in Chinatown's Hong Lim Park, with the objectives of preserving traditional culture and enticing tourists. With free performances and small government grants, the Hong Lim Park operas were a success in terms of both audience figures and attracting high-quality overseas troupes. These operas marked the first time the government made a concerted effort to support Chinese opera. In 1986 the programme was revamped into the Traditional Theatre Festival, this time including classical Indian dances and Malay *Bangsawan*, a genre which developed in colonial Malaya in the late nineteenth century. Historically, audience turnout has usually been healthy whenever Chinese opera was centralised – first at the 'Worlds' and later at Kreta Ayer Theatre, Hong Lim Park and then the Traditional Theatre Festival. Numerous news reports show that local audiences flocked to productions of high quality, especially those by visiting troupes, with tickets selling out well in advance.[48] Nonetheless, this 'mini-revival' eventually petered out, for three reasons.

Firstly, the education bilingual policies and the systematic discouragement of dialects of the 1960s and 1970s were already yielding fruit. By the 1980s, younger generations of ethnic Chinese spoke mainly English and Mandarin and were alienated from other

46 Hill, '*Asian values*'. See Herman Kahn and Thomas Pepper, *The Japanese challenge: The success and failure of economic success* (New York: Crowell, 1979); Herman Kahn, *World economic development, 1979 and beyond* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979); and Ezra Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

47 Interview (2002).

48 'The wayang: People still like to watch', *ST*, 1 June 1978; 'All aglow again to attract new fans', *ST*, 9 Feb. 1986; 'The end of wayang, the birth of an art', *ST*, 17 Aug. 1986; 'Witty ways warmed Chinese opera audience', *ST*, 24 Aug. 1986; 'Experts play the fool', *ST*, 24 Aug. 1986; 'Troupe breathes life into classic', *ST*, 27 Nov. 1986.

dialects. This development effectively deprived Chinese opera of younger audiences and the potential for self-renewal. The audience demographic continued to be dominated by older generations and old 'die-hards', thus reinforcing opera's image as stodgy and unfashionable. Secondly, the relatively poor quality of local productions kept discerning audiences away. Overseas professional troupes would often reveal the stark difference in standards, resulting in healthy turnouts for their performances but dismal ones for local amateur troupes.

Finally, permanent theatres and street performances slowly differentiated Chinese opera as 'art' from opera as 'street entertainment'. Permanent theatres, expensive tickets, glossy brochures and reviews cultivated Chinese opera's status as 'art' while interest from the overseas Chinese literati, most notably from Taiwan, also helped inject intellectual *gravitas*. Invariably, it was the foreign professional troupes rather than their local counterparts that commanded this 'art' status because of their higher standards. On the other hand, Chinese opera as street performance was often poor in quality and transient. The system of performance permits and land regulations made it difficult for street operas to stage regular productions in residential areas, thus removing opera from the life-world of ethnic Chinese. Unlike their immigrant ancestors, younger Singaporeans saw Chinese opera as neither a necessary feature of their daily life nor an important element in their identity construction. Furthermore, 'the inability of the street opera groups to attract new audiences was due to the lack of funds, poor management skills, limited resources for training, and the inability to attract new talents and lack of marketing strategies'.[49]

It is an oversimplification, then, to say that different forms of entertainment such as cinemas and television are destroying traditional cultures. To lay the blame solely on modernisation and Western popular culture only highlights traditional culture's natural competitors and does not shed light on the structural and inherent reasons for Chinese opera's inability to compete with or prevail against external forces. Moreover, even the neo-Confucian 'global culture' began to lose its lustre in the 1990s. In an effort to temper a more inclusive national ideology, partly due to the unhappiness of ethnic minorities over ethnocentrism, the more 'neutral' term 'shared values' was coined in 1988. Various religious and ethnic leaders were consulted to ensure these values were acceptable to all. Moreover, 'global city' visions articulated by the state in the 1990s, such as 'Global City for the Arts' in 1995 (spearheaded by Singapore Tourism Board) and the *Renaissance City Report* of 2000, were less culturally or ethnically centred and more cosmopolitan in nature. But perhaps most damaging to this neo-Confucian 'global culture' was the Asian Crisis of 1997, when instances of corruption and nepotism in the economic and political sphere of several Asian countries were revealed.

Hanging on with amateur troupes

Even with the decline of amusement 'Worlds', the dismantling of professional troupes and an unfriendly national culture, Chinese opera did not die off because it deployed other strategies to keep alive. One of them was the emergence of amateur or part-time troupes. Professional troupes were associated with 'street opera' and served a functional purpose at events such as temple celebrations, yet they were of low economic status. Amateur troupes, although in existence for a long time, began to be associated

49 Chua, 'Teochew opera'.

with 'high art' or 'high culture' from the late 1970s onwards, partly because of the government's efforts to 'Asianise' the populace. 'The rise of amateur groups', as Chua Soo Pong notes, 'gave Chinese opera a boost as the street opera groups continued to decline.' Amateur troupes played a vital role in keeping the art form alive between the 1960s to 1980s when the processes of modernisation and urbanisation were at their most unrelenting, and to a large extent continue to characterise the local opera scene today.[50] Amateur opera has a long local history. One of the first troupes, Kok Fong Wan Keng Dramatic Association, started out as a social club in 1910. In keeping with the genre, many of these amateur troupes were unprofessional and could not boast of high artistic or technical quality. The attitudes of performers, most of whom were unmotivated, were poor to the extent that some would resort to spouting colourful expletives on stage whenever they forgot their lines.

It is not exactly clear why amateur groups emerged to fill the vacuum left by professional troupes. Again, one can only speculate. The simplest explanation is that with the decline in audience figures, professional opera actors and actresses had to look for alternative employment, but remained active in the opera scene. With day jobs, amateurs no longer relied on the art form for a livelihood and were thus less fastidious with technical and artistic standards. Another is that the decline of professionalism made it less intimidating for enthusiasts and interested onlookers to join these troupes. Highly exclusive and communally tight, previous professional troupes were very selective in taking on actors, thus discouraging individuals without classical training from participating. Amateurism, together with the pallid state of opera in general, prevented insiders from being choosy, and also allowed individuals to play roles which had never before been open to them.

Despite their many shortcomings, amateur groups served to keep the opera tradition visible, albeit barely, during the country's industrialising phase, while at the same time testing the patience of whatever opera enthusiasts were left. A local opera director told the author that it was common for troupes to hire competent foreign actors and actresses to play the leads for major productions while the rest of the cast was composed of local amateurs who, more often than not, pulled down the overall quality of the show. This practice of getting more competent foreign performers for leads while leaving the support roles to the mercies of lesser local talents continues today, putting off local audiences who have become more discerning, and explains why local productions continue to flounder whilst visiting troupes play to sell-out venues.

By most accounts, the amateur scene underwent a paradigm shift in the mid to late 1970s.[51] Competition among troupes began to increase, gradually leading to sharpened performances. Innovative experiments with presentation, content and style followed. This paradigm shift was made possible when the state, worried about increasing 'Westernisation', began to emphasise culture (as the high point of Asian civilisation) in national discourse. In this sense, '(a)mateur opera groups constitute the institutional culture of the state'. Lee Tong Soon argues that amateur opera groups, as opposed to street opera troupes, fitted the emerging national discourse on culture and the arts that

50 Chua, 'Reaching out'; Joanna Wong, 'Revival of Chinese opera in Singapore', *Performing Arts*, 1, 2 (1984): 25–7; quotation from Chua, 'Teochew opera'.
51 Chua, 'Reaching out'; Wong, 'Chinese opera'; Lai, 'Modernisation of a cultural tradition'.

recognised traditional arts as 'authentic'. In contrast to 'lowly' street opera, amateur groups were seen as 'artistic', 'urban' and 'literate', and were 'considered exemplary reflections of, and models for, the young and "cultured" nation that the government aspires Singapore to become'.[52] This set the stage for local amateur opera troupes – an 'invented tradition' according to Lee – to flourish during the 1980s, when a Confucian 'global culture' took centre stage in the national imagination.

The dawn of the 1990s witnessed a decline in the popularity of Chinese opera. Instead of higher quality performances to convert non-opera-goers, competition seems to have been dividing the community. With keen competition for limited state funds, audiences and actors as well as crew in an already shrinking community, it is not uncommon to see tension and wariness develop between troupes, leading to increased suspicion and the general lack of desire to work together as opera practitioners. The situation is made worse by the fact that, given the small community, strong personalities from various troupes emerge to clash with each other.[53]

The politics of supporting Chinese opera: the National Arts Council's dilemma

Formed in 1991 to promote and support local arts, the National Arts Council (NAC) is aware of the current state of Chinese opera. The NAC's grant scheme for local theatre consists primarily of (1) the Project Grant; (2) the Annual Grant; and (3) the most prestigious and financially bountiful Two-Year Major Grant. The Annual and Two-Year Major Grants were introduced in 2000 with the *Renaissance City Report* published by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MITA). Both grants were designed with the expressed purpose of nurturing local 'flagship' arts companies to break into the international scene. No Chinese opera troupe has ever received the Two-Year Major Grant; only one group, the Chinese Theatre Circle, has been awarded the Annual grant while the rest of the applicants in this genre have only qualified for Project Grants.

There are three reasons why NAC does not unreservedly support and promote Chinese opera. First is its insistence on a meritocratic and objective selection process of recipients for the Annual and Two-Year Major Grants. Leem Kim Swee, the NAC Audience Development Director, explains:

> Sometimes it all really depends on the groups themselves. The grants have a panel and it throws open the application for the groups to come in with their proposals, their future plans, with their training plans as well. Whether they are able to show an impact, to influence, all these components, I think, comes in [for consideration] . . . We make it very objective . . . These groups [Two-Year Major Grants recipients] have strong management, they have consistent performances, they are able to get the interest of young people, [and have] impressive five-year plans.[54]

52 Lee Tong Soon, 'Performing Chinese street opera and constructing national culture in Singapore' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1998), p. 225; the 'institutional culture' quotation is from p. 220.
53 One well-known opera practitioner, asked her opinion of a local opera troupe leader, replied that he was not so much 'disliked' by other troupes as 'hated and despised by them'. 'There's no other word to describe him except "evil"', she continued, 'because of the way he tries to kill off other troupes so his can be number one in Singapore'.
54 Interview (2002).

The second reason is the political sensitivity over state funding of traditional art form because of their close links to ethnicity. Leen continues:

> So *unless* you want to give special consideration [to Chinese opera troupes] from a political viewpoint, from a community development viewpoint, whatever, you'll lose out if there is no special consideration . . . So unless NAC does away with artistic criteria and puts in special considerations for special reasons – [we] can't help it! And we *are* [providing traditional theatre special considerations] *all the time*, but on a smaller grants level. When it comes to major grants, I think it has to be very objective. Competition is very keen and our arts community is also not very big. Who are strong, who are not, [is] very obvious.[55]

Apart from the 'Confucian hiccup' in the 1980s, the government remains sensitive in balancing the competing interests of ethnic communities. Active support for Chinese opera would obligate NAC to exert the same efforts for Malay and Indian traditional theatre, regardless of their artistic standards, thus turning it into a heritage centre. This is not the purpose of the NAC, which cannot fund traditional theatre for the sake of ethnic culture. To circumvent this dilemma, 'objective' criteria are deployed in the awarding of grants. Such criteria, however, may be shown to favour a certain socio-economic class of arts practitioners. For example, the Annual and Two-Year Major Grants are largely inaccessible to Chinese opera because many troupes are deemed by NAC to lack 'strong management', 'consistent performances', 'young audiences' and 'impressive five-year plans' – traits generally displayed by more established contemporary English-language theatre companies. Such companies are headed by English-educated and English-speaking artistic directors, many of them with some form of overseas (read Western) training and access to Western theatrical theories.[56] They work and produce in the English language, which cuts across all ethnic categories to ensure a broader audience and talent pool, while their companies enjoy greater media coverage from the most widely read national broadsheet, *The Straits Times*, an English daily.

The business and professional use of the English language also influences to a large degree the economic and social status of its speakers, thus suggesting that English-language theatre audiences enjoy higher disposable income and education, vital to organisational, managerial and administrative skills – all of which are manifest in English-language theatre. Hence, what count as 'objective' criteria seem to be standards tending to favour contemporary English-language theatre companies and their practitioners. There is clearly a stratification of theatre companies based on language and genre. As Sim Wan Hui, NAC administrator in charge of local traditional theatre, notes:

> The Two-Year Major and Annual Grants – they are committed to promoting groups which are [at] international level. In fact the Annual Grant [recipient] is the aspiring Two-Year Grant [recipient]. They [Annual Grant recipients] have the potential to move up but not yet . . . and that happens a lot with Chinese opera groups, folk art groups. Although their overheads are generally high, they don't quite hit the artistic standard that is required to be in Annual [Grants].[57]

55 Ibid., emphasis in the original.
56 In a Singaporean context, the terms 'English-educated' and 'English-speaking' designate someone for whom English was the main medium of education and remains the preferred language of communication.
57 Interview (2002).

A third reason is that NAC wishes to avoid a 'dependency' on financial handouts. This is in keeping with the PAP government's political ethos of stoically eschewing any form of welfare, preferring to encourage the self-mobilisation or 'self-help' of needy constituencies. As a government institution, it is no surprise that NAC has adopted this philosophy with regards to traditional ethnic theatre. Says Sim:

> On the flip side, if we raise the funding, it may encourage a form of dependency, I feel – especially from young artists. From experience we find that with emerging artists, the first thing they do is come to NAC and ask, 'what can you do for *me*?'. That is different from, say, 10 years ago when because there was no NAC, they try and strike out on their own. But the fact remains, we can't fund for the sake of heritage. We're not a heritage centre. We're an arts council committed to excellence.[58]

Such decisions raise broader questions over the inherent right of traditional and local cultures to national support, the state's responsibility to them, and the national importance of such cultures in the face of increasing cultural globalisation, all of which are beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, NAC's 'self-help' philosophy is a vicious cycle. Expecting flagging traditional ethnic theatre groups to mobilise themselves ignores the fact that they are flagging precisely because they lack the skilled manpower, infrastructure and financial resources to do so. How the state intervenes and the rationale for this intervention will have ramifications on the morality of local conservation, the socio-political value attached to traditional culture and, ultimately, its future.

Conclusion: threats and counter-strategies

As we have seen, Chinese opera refuses to die. It was deterritorialised in the nineteenth century with the influx of Chinese immigrants to Singapore and was reterritorialised as it became a staple and important feature in the life-worlds of these immigrants. Meanwhile, apprenticeship contracts show the importance of mutual benefit between traditional culture and economic class. Moving on, Chinese opera's 'golden period' between the 1930s and early 1950s problematises the one-dimensional argument that modernisation and consumerism flourish at the expense of traditional culture. Instead, opera centralisation and the cooption of the film genre demonstrate that the modes of consumerist culture may be similarly deployed by traditional cultures for positive effect. Perhaps more detrimental to the health of Chinese opera was the country's need for an inclusive and shared national culture which led to the systemic eschewing of dialects other than Mandarin. By the late 1970s, amateur troupes were able to spark what some have called a 'mini-revival'. Previously hampered by a self-consciously inclusive national culture, later shifts in public cultural discourse – the most important of which was Confucianism in the 1980s – created a more culturally conducive climate for Chinese opera to flourish again.

This is not to say that the future of Chinese opera in Singapore is free from threat. Popular cultural consumption and the limited dialect vocabularies of contemporary Singaporeans still stand as two of the biggest obstacles confronting Chinese opera today. To make matters worse, even its religious relevance is now under question. The presence of operas at Hungry Ghost Festivals has shrunk drastically over the years, with many

58 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463403000420 Published online by Cambridge University Press

planning committees gradually giving in to popular culture. In place of Chinese operas, it is more common to find *getai* (literally, 'singing stage') entertainment. Like a variety show, *getai* may showcase semi-professional singers belting out popular Mandarin songs followed by amateur actors performing comedy routines. This new format accompanies the traditional banquet and the auction of assorted items blessed by temples. Such a format mirrors highly popular Mandarin variety programmes on local TV whereby an eclectic concoction of acts is put up in quick succession. Hence, Lim Geok Eng's assertion that 'it is in its role as a form of homage to the gods and to "hungry ghosts" that street opera is likely to survive' belies the ever-changing expression of religion in modern society.[59] If Chinese opera's relevance to ethnic religion stems from its role as entertainment for the hungry ghosts, then it is a role slowly losing its significance because *getai* is thought by the locals to entertain the ghosts as well. The popularity of *getai* suggests that Chinese opera's 'religious relevance' is in fact insufficient to protect it so long as popular consumerist culture is similarly able to fulfil this purpose.

Another threat to opera is its irrelevance to the contemporary lifestyles of ethnic Chinese. Unlike other traditional ethnic art forms, which remain integral to the construction of ethnic Malay or Indian identity, opera has lost its importance in Chinese identity construction. Sim, who has dealt with traditional Indian and Malay theatres, observes:

> Unlike Chinese opera, Indian classical dance is like ballet, so the rich Indian parents would send their daughters [for it]. You *have* to know classical dance, right? They will even book Drama Centre for a coming-out dance. So you have a lot of people who are very good dancers because they have been training since they were very small ... Indian classical dance, and the instrumental ensemble, which I feel are still quite vibrant because when you attend an Indian wedding – they're there. So there is *still* some hope because there is still some viability. Now the Chinese opera ... there is no strong viability for them as a professional group.[60]

Furthermore, with the decline of street opera, Chinese opera is vanishing from the everyday practices of the ethnic Chinese population. As opera moves from the streets to the theatre, there is a growing danger that it will be institutionalised as 'high art' and purged of its 'street' essence. It thereby immediately becomes a privileged form removed from the daily socio-cultural practices of its ethnic community, accessible only to the wealthy or educated. This 'museumification' of a local culture may further undo its relevance to its community.

Some opera practitioners, however, argue that Chinese opera needs to modernise in order to reach a younger audience. Since as early as 1975, scripts have undergone a process of simplification. Stage props and lighting are also shedding their abstract style in exchange for realism and sophistication. Costumes are becoming lighter and more stylish. This revamp, however, is resisted by some opera conservatives who are worried that the essence of literary classics would be lost with the introduction of unconventional instruments and choreography, prompting countless internal dilemmas over finding the right balance between attracting the young and retaining flavour. Another strategy to

59 Lim, 'Introduction', p. 15.
60 Interview (2002); emphasis in the original.

woo the younger audience is the bridging of the language divide, and English subtitles are an increasingly common sight at the operas held in theatres.

Apart from making the art form more linguistically accessible for the young English-speaking crowd, Chinese opera has also undergone cultural syncretism. In 1986 the Chinese Theatre Circle presented the classical folk tale *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* in Peranakan Malay. Peranakan culture, itself a hybrid of Chinese and Malay cultures, is particular to the Southeast Asian region, and has a strong presence in Singapore and certain parts of Malaysia. This strategy is a conscious quotation of cultural specificity by an art form in order to legitimise its regional specificity.

Another strategy is national relevance. In March 2000 the Chinese Opera Institute presented *Heroes: The story of Lim Bo Seng*. The protagonist was a Chinese resistance fighter in World War II who was eventually captured by the Japanese and killed under torture. The production was restaged by popular demand in November that same year and even travelled to Hubei, China where it received critical acclaim. One cannot be sure how successful this strategy will be as it is a relatively new phenomenon. It does, however, take for granted that national heroes have an emotional foothold in the hearts of younger audiences. Given the country's short history and limited number of national heroes and myths, this strategy may only be deployed sporadically.

It is difficult to say whether Chinese opera will ever relive the glory of its heyday; concomitant with modernity is rapid change. What this article has tried to argue is that the diametric opposition between local or ethnic cultures and global culture so prevalent in popular consciousness should be revised. This is because local cultures do deploy various strategies to survive and flourish – sometimes, as we have seen, by adopting the processes of mass consumerism and capitalism. Whether or not certain political forces, cultural revivification or socio-economic structures will emerge to replicate the conditions for another 'golden period' remains to be seen.