Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 13:283–307, 2006
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ISSN: 1070-289X print / 1547-3384 online
DOI: 10.1080/10702890600698702

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ethnic Identities and Cultural Capital: An Ethnography of Chinese Opera in Singapore

Terence Chong
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore

This article weaves the trajectory of Chinese opera in Singapore with the country's political development. Starting in 1965, the year of Singapore's independence, it attempts to debunk the myth that national culture is resistant to global culture by describing the state's systematic erosion of local culture. From the late 1970s onward, with economic progress, state fears of "Westernisation" led to a centring of Chinese culture in national culture; this was followed by a mini-revival of Chinese opera that coincided with the emergence of Confucian ethics as national discourse and as a culturalist explanation for the "Asian miracle" of the 1980s. This article shows that globalisation's effect on local cultures is not a straightforward process. Instead, it is a complex relationship where the flourishing of a local culture depends on the changing recognition and valuation of cultural identities, ethnicity, and language as cultural capital. This in turn implicates the structural features of national policies and globalisation processes that determine the recognition and valuation of this cultural capital. The use of "cultural capital" as a conceptual tool to isolate the cultural and social components of Chinese opera demonstrates that a local culture flourishes or withers according to the effects of globalisation and national policies on such cultural and social factors.

Key Words: Singapore, globalisation, ethnic identity, ethnography, Chinese opera, cultural capital

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.

The above observation, made in 1842 at a Chinese New Year festival, by Charles Wilkes, Commander of the United States Exploring Expedition, is one of the earliest known documentations of Chinese opera in Singapore (*National Archives* 1988: 21–22). Equally vivid accounts include those by the Qing dynasty court official Li Zhong Jue in 1877 who described the social constellation of travelling opera troupes, festivals and temple rituals as clear evidence of a vibrant Chinese migrant community. By 1881 there were about two hundred forty opera performers in Singapore (*National Archives* 1988). The proliferation of Chinese opera activities in the British entrepôt was not only the practice of Chinese culture but also expression of Chinese identities in their many dialect forms. As an art form de-territorialised from mainland China and re-territorialised in the Southeast Asian island of Singapore by Chinese coolies, tradesmen, and merchants, Chinese opera was, and still is, an unmistakable signifier of ethnic Chinese identity.

Chinese opera in Singapore today is in a more dismal state. It is difficult to gauge the exact number of local Chinese opera troupes because 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 the change of management or to usher in good luck, thus making it harder to keep track. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Chinese opera today has been shunted to the margins of the local cultural and entertainment sphere. The drastic decline in Chinese opera activities and practitioners today has been attributed to a variety of reasons from the homogenising effects of global culture, to industrialisation and urbanisation, to changing tastes in leisure activities (Lai 1985; S. P. Chua 1995; Wong 1984, 1995). Although the local literature provides plausible causal explanations for the decline of Chinese opera, they generally ignore the dynamic relationship between ethnic identity and cultural power.

This article seeks to explore the complex relationship between ethnic identity and cultural power as mediated by global flows and pressures within a national sphere. Although conventional theorisations of this relationship tend to juxtapose globalisation and ethnic identities in constant tension to tell a straightforward story of cultural homogeneity or all-out resistance, this article examines the changing meanings and "cultural power" of "Chinese-ness" or Chinese identity in Singapore by examining the historical and political trajectory of Chinese opera in Singapore from 1965 to the present day. Although the literature on Chinese diasporas is broad and varied, there is a growing intellectual consensus that mainland China as the "imaginary

homeland" must recede as an ontological and epistemological shadow in the understanding of overseas Chinese, and that the nation-states and national communities where these diasporas reside are more pertinent and influential in identity construction (Anderson 1998; Wang 1992, 1999; Ang 2001). As Wang (1999: 1) writes, "I have long advocated that the Chinese overseas be studied in the context of their respective national environments, and taken out of a dominant China reference point." The question then follows, as Anderson (1998) asks, if epistemological ties between Chinese diasporas and the "China reference point" are severed, then what is it about Chinese diasporas, embedded in different national communities, that makes them Chinese? Wang's point also assumes that the Chinese identity can be explained exclusively within the national sphere, but this article will show that the Chinese identity in Singapore is fragmented with heterogeneous cultural interests, some of which seek to transcend the national sphere and tap into China as imaginary homeland to struggle for legitimacy.

Part historiography and part ethnography, this article uses Chinese opera as an analytical vehicle to show how dynamic domestic political factors play a larger role in influencing the relationship between ethnic identity and cultural power than global flows, and how affected Chinese identities, in turn, appeal to the global or the imaginary homeland to win legitimacy in the national sphere. In other words, this is a study of the way in which feelings and perceptions of the Singaporean Chinese ethnic identity are linked to the fluctuating cultural legitimacy and social value of Chinese opera, and how this relationship is mediated by Singapore's national policies and ideologies through the years from multiculturalism, the eradication of Chinese dialects, the government's fear of "deculturalisation," and the embrace of Confucian ethics as national ideology.

To flesh out the relationship between structure and agency and to animate the link between Chinese identity and the cultural capital of Chinese opera, I use the life histories gleaned from numerous semistructured interviews and participant observation to examine the experiences, sentiments, and attitudes of three Singaporean Chinese opera practitioners—Tan Hong, Lee Yong, and Sharon Lim (all pseudonyms)—to tease out changing notions of Chinese-ness, ethnic pride, and cultural legitimacy in Singapore through the years from 1965 to the present. The decision to use the narratives of these three individuals is premised on the work of Raymond Williams (1977) whose "structures of feeling" surrounding ethnicity and class bring into sharp focus the historicity and mental and emotional organization of the lived experience as explanation of social life. Or, as Williams (1977: 131)

describes, this term encompasses “a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives us the sense of a generation or of a period.” The discourses and experiences of these three individuals are used to reflect the impact of structural and ideological shifts on subjective identities. With these three narratives, I then look at experiences of cultural power, recognition, and prestige, and the struggle for these vis-à-vis Chinese opera, with the conceptual tools of Pierre Bourdieu.

Methodology and theoretical framework

Globalisation has had a profound impact on ethnographic work. Sociologists and anthropologists today have to conceptualise the conventional ethnographic site as a series of complex networks, scapes, or flows (Appadurai 1990; Castells 1996, 1998; Lash and Urry 1994). The theorisation of “place” as networks, scapes, or flows has blurred the traditional boundaries of ethnographic sites and has made the task of participant observation more complex. “Put another way,” Appadurai (1997: 52) writes, “the task of ethnography now becomes the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalised, deterritorialised world?” The response to this challenge is the growing literature on “global ethnographies.” This literature has attempted to (re)theorise ethnography with globalisation theories or, at least, problematise the practice of ethnography in the age of globalisation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Marcus 1995, 1998; Appadurai 1995; Eade 1997; Burawoy et al. 2000; Gille and Riain 2002; Tsing 2005).

The ethnographic data presented in this article are gleaned from one year of fieldwork within the broader Singapore theatre community in 2002. Semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with thirty-two Chinese opera practitioners and government representatives, whereas informants were chosen through selective sampling to achieve a broad gender and age representation. Other data collection techniques included archival and library research, as well as participant observation at Chinese opera rehearsals. The data analysis that followed demanded an ethnographic model and a theoretical framework that addressed the issues of global flows, culture, identity, and cultural power to arrange and make sense of the data. Revisiting the work of the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1990, 1993) recently, I found that his idea of “fields” possessed the theoretical flexibility to accommodate the deterritorialising effects of globalisation and the vanishing boundaries of ethnographic sites. A “field” (*champ*) is the social arena in which

struggles occur over the resources that are particular to this arena. Within the field are social positions and actors objectively defined by their relations to other positions and actors. More crucial for a global ethnography, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) refrain from drawing field boundaries—thus accounting for porous ethnographic sites—because this leads to a positivist instead of a relational worldview. Hence, field investigations must necessarily account for ambiguous boundaries and the exertion of external influences, a methodology Bourdieu (1993) conceived as "reflexive sociology." "To think in terms of the field is to *think relationally*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96), thus encouraging the global ethnographer "to seek out underlying and invisible relations that shape action" in the local (Swartz 1997: 119). This concept of the "field" as ethnographic site, in my research experience, allows the researcher to see the local, national, and global as sites within a broader network of social relations, in which different identities are located in different positions of power and struggling or collaborating for specific interests. As a working concept, it met my specific ethnographic and data needs better than a "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus 1995, 1998), which offers little guidance to the ethnographer in pursuing different sites (Gille 2001), or Tsing's (2005) study of "global frictions," which pays too much ethnographic attention to global and abstract interactions at the expense of frictions and struggles in the local.

Also vital to this article are the four Bourdieusian concepts of power, or capital, in any field. They are cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capital. Economic capital comes in the form of money or property. Social capital denotes the importance of social networks and acquaintances, whereas symbolic capital is self-interest presented (or disguised) as "disinterested" to gain honour, reputation, recognition or prestige from others. Cultural capital comes in three forms. In an *objectified* form, cultural capital refers to products such as books and art works. In its *embodied* form, it speaks of the cultivation, taste, artistic refinement and aesthetic distinction, training of the mind and body, whereas in its *institutionalised* form, cultural capital denotes the institutional practices and methods that perpetuate cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Generally, if "the motive of social life is the pursuit of distinction, profit, power, wealth, and so on," then "Bourdieu's account of capital is an account of the resources that people use in such pursuit" (Calhoun 1993: 70–71). Working from Marxist theory, Bourdieu sees "capital" as labour value because different types of labour take different amounts of time to accumulate and some are more scarce or abundant than others. Thus, cultural capital is not only a useful concept in illustrating the struggle of ethnic identities for

cultural power as a pathway to political legitimacy but also a means to articulate cultural legitimacy and the notions of prestige and honour that are so crucial to the construction of the Chinese identity.

Tan Hong, Lee Yong, and Sharon Lim: Selected narratives and histories

Tan Hong is 56 years old, middle class, multilingual (English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Malay), and highly educated. I was introduced to him by another respondent, an English-language theatre practitioner, and conducted two interviews with him within a year. Born in 1949 to a working-class family, Tan Hong received his early education in a Chinese school. His early childhood memories consist of watching street opera with his parents in open grounds of *kampongs* (villages) and reading both Chinese and English classics. Tan Hong was academically proficient and went to the then University of Singapore. He tried his hand at the *sheng* (male) role, specifically the *lao sheng* or *hsu sheng* (an aged man), before gradually moving toward directing. On graduating from university he worked in the civil service for five years before going to the United Kingdom to do his PhD in a social science discipline. He is currently active in amateur Chinese opera and academia. He is a regular face at Chinese opera events, and we bumped into each other frequently at various opera performances. Tan Hong's education in both Chinese and English allows him the privileged ability to inhabit the Mandarin-speaking and English-speaking worlds, within the local Chinese community with ease and may be said to occupy Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "third space," the condition of being in-between cultures, thus allowing the occupant to critique and negotiate embedded discourses with a dialectic enterprise not readily available to those who are firmly on either side of the cultural divide.

Lee Yong is 52 years old, working class, and speaks only Mandarin, Hokkien, and some Malay, and, by virtue of his inability to read or write in English, is situated on the economic periphery. I struck up a conversation with Lee Yong when I was conducting participant observation at a rehearsal. We spoke again after the rehearsal for about one and a half hours. Born in 1953 to a large working-class family of eight children, Lee Yong dropped out of school at an early age. He began by helping out at his parents' food stall before embarking on a series of odd jobs. Lee Yong's relationship with Chinese opera began when his friends introduced it to him in his late teens. His incomplete education prevents him from reading scripts or playing major roles, but his musical talent sees him playing either the *hu chin* (three-stringed lute), or the *yueh chin* (four-stringed banjo-like instrument). Besides

playing instruments Lee Yong also helps out manually with the props and is currently working at a local construction company.

Sharon Lim is 54 years old, middle class, and is fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese. Lim comes from a working-class background and was educated in a Chinese school where she inculcated a love for Chinese literature and culture. She belongs to an amateur opera troupe that meets regularly not only for rehearsals but also for social reasons. Lim has travelled several times to China to watch opera in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong. Lim specialises in female roles or *tan*, and plays a variety of characters from *tao ma tan* (warrior) to *lao tan* (aged woman). I was introduced to Lim by Tan Hong. Lim is active in amateur opera and works as a full-time Chinese teacher at a local primary school.

My choice of respondents was largely influenced by considerations of class, gender, and cultural-linguistic orientation. On one hand, these three considerations immediately hint at the heterogeneity of Chinese identity and its fragmented interests to suggest varied experiences of Chinese identity. Yet, on the other hand, they also demonstrate that practitioners of Chinese opera, regardless of economic and cultural-linguistic divisions, felt the common loss of cultural legitimacy and power, as well as feelings of "hurt," when the cultural and symbolic capital of Chinese opera was denied. And although I had interviewed several young Chinese opera practitioners, I chose these three, all of whom are in their fifties, because they could provide first-hand accounts of experiences, which stretch back to the period of independence.

Chinese opera from 1965 to 1975: Struggling for "heritage" and "authenticity" in the field

Singapore's unexpected separation from Malaysia in 1965 was a watershed for her three major ethnic groups—Chinese, Malay, and Indian—forcing issues of ethnicity, culture, and identity to the fore. The People's Action Party (PAP) government could neither formulate a national culture based on continuity and tradition because of the disjunctive narrative of its migrant-majority population, nor on the concept of pure folk (Hall 1992) because the elevation of Malay culture to national culture would have been unacceptable to the Chinese majority. Nonetheless, a cohesive national narrative, or a "story they tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz 1993: 448) was needed. As such, the PAP government formulated a national culture that impacted the Chinese identity in Singapore in three different ways.

First, Singapore's new national culture, premised on ethnic inclusion, effectively de-emphasised Chinese identity and culture in the national sphere. This was to avoid being perceived as a "third China" (in addition to China and Taiwan) by neighbouring Muslim-majority countries. The ideology of multiculturalism was installed while, as a symbolic gesture of balanced ethnic representation, English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil were all made official languages. Meanwhile, the elevation of Malay as national language was a symbolic gesture to ensure the surrounding Muslim-dominant countries that local Malays would not be marginalised in Chinese-dominant Singapore.

Second, the English language was emphasised to make the country's workforce attractive to global markets and capital. "The primacy of English was rationalised entirely on the basis for its utility for science, technology and commerce, i.e., it is essential to economic development" (B.H. Chua 1995: 65). The local education system's emphasis on the mastery of English as a key requirement for academic progress and, consequentially, economic success, turned the mastery of English into embodied cultural capital. The cultural capital of Singaporean students proficient in English, such as Tan Hong, was reflected by their subsequent access to white-collar jobs and professions. This began to fragment the Singapore Chinese identity along linguistic, and eventually cultural, lines. A post-independent English-proficient Chinese identity emerged, colloquially known as "English-educated Chinese," vastly different from its Chinese-proficient or "Chinese-educated" counterpart.

These structural changes affected the Singaporean Chinese identity in different ways. For Chinese like Tan Hong who were fluent in both Mandarin and English, these changes were not only bold and exciting but also made pragmatic sense. "Looking back," he tells me, "it felt as though the island was opening up to the world. And though the word didn't exist then, the [government's] emphasis on English accelerated our 'globalisation' process." There was little fear that his "Chineseness" was undermined or de-legitimised given that he possessed the required cultural capital to negotiate the two cultural worlds—a stark contrast to other Chinese who were more steeped in Chinese culture and language like Lee Yong and Sharon Lim. Both of them remember feeling apprehensive and slightly marginalised by the government's emphasis on English, with some like Lim withdrawing deeper into her cultural-linguistic world. She says, "There was an underlying resentment [towards the Singapore government] among the Chinese-educated. We understood the need for multiculturalism, we were not challenging that, but some of us wanted state funds and attention . . . for Chinese opera that [reflected] our majority status. We did not get it but we

continue doing what we did." Given the socioeconomic distinction between the English-proficient and Chinese-proficient, cultural activities such as Chinese opera invariably became markers of this socioeconomic distinction, with many feeling that the art form was a "low class" activity for the working class. Its link to the lower classes was compounded by the historical treatment of opera performers who "were looked on as wanderers and vagabonds, shiftless and dishonest, and, worst of all, utterly immoral" (Mackerras 1975: 78).

The third, and perhaps most significant obstacle to Chinese opera, was the government's discouragement of Chinese dialects in the public sphere. This not only undermined the symbolic and cultural capital of Chinese opera but also disciplined and organised ethnic categories according to state definitions of "race" (Purushotam 1998). Instead of categorising local ethnic Chinese according to dialect groups (or province), the Hokkien, Hainanese, Teochew, Cantonese, and Hakka communities were assimilated under the broad and inclusive "Chinese" category with Mandarin as lingua franca. The similarly heterogeneous Malay and Indian communities felt the same effects. Such measures echo Schudson's (1994: 30) observation that "In the modern age, the nation-state has increasingly played a central role in turning language to use for social integration." Consequentially, many believe that the literary nuances and linguistic finery of Cantonese, Teochew, and Hokkien opera were lost on younger Singaporeans who only spoke English and Mandarin. As Lee Yong recalls,

> I remember the time when Chinese opera was so popular with the people. Then slowly it became less popular. It wasn't overnight but gradually. One of the main problems was that younger people just couldn't understand Teochew or Hokkien opera anymore.

The national policies on multiculturalism, English language, and discouragement of Chinese dialects effectively reduced the symbolic and cultural capital of Chinese opera and, by extension, Chinese identity. This denial of symbolic and cultural capital to Chinese opera translated to a loss of power and a sense of marginalisation of the Chinese identity. Such disappointment reflected the general dissatisfaction of the Chinese conservatives who "felt that there was no recognition of their special status as the dominant majority and of their language and culture" (Vasil 2000: 100). Many local practitioners felt that the value of their cultural capital as "bearers" of "Chinese tradition" was no longer commensurate with the numerical superiority of their ethnic group.

The response to the loss of symbolic and cultural capital was to appeal to notions of "heritage" and "authenticity." Tan Hong, Lee

Yong, and Sharon Lim, alike, constantly revive the discourse of "heritage" when they remember the waning fortunes of Chinese opera during the late 1960s. Below is a sampling of the heritage discourse from my respondents:

> . . . by this time [1960s–1970s] Chinese opera was not so popular. People preferred to go to the cinema or watch television. There was very little interest in our own heritage (Tan Hong).
>
> We were doing [Chinese] opera out of passion, not for money. There was no money. We felt responsible also for keeping Chinese traditions and heritage alive. If [Chinese] opera died, then a huge part of our cultural heritage would have disappeared (Sharon Lim).
>
> We [Chinese opera practitioners] really felt it when fewer and fewer people could understand dialects. Most of them can only speak Mandarin now, and so they can't understand Teochew opera, or Cantonese opera. Its part of our heritage and its important that we hold on to it (Lee Yong).

The "loss of heritage" becomes a common trope when ethnic identities realise that the political legitimacy or cultural value of their beliefs, practices, or traditions is eroding. In framing "heritage" with a sense of loss, these ethnic identities strive to appeal to ethnic pride and integrity to struggle for symbolic capital, or recognition, within the field of power. The discourse of "heritage" is also used when an ethnic identity does not possess the necessary cultural capital (academic qualifications) to struggle successfully for economic capital. Such feelings are exacerbated, even for effectively bilingual and middle-class Chinese like Tan Hong, when contrasted with the economic success of English-proficient Singaporeans, most of whom draw their cultural capital and identity references from the West. This suggests two things: (1) that economic factors alone are not responsible for a fragmented Chinese identity in Singapore and (2) that the Chinese identity, whether in its "Chinese-educated" or "English-educated" form, draws cultural references from beyond the nation-state.

The appeal to heritage is also an implicit ontological statement, one that is accompanied by imaginations of history, a golden past, and high civilisation. When the ethnic Chinese practitioners I spoke to lamented the loss of heritage, they were effectively allowing themselves to be defined and identified as subjects of Chinese culture and literary history, thus relying on the very "China-centredness" that Wang (1992, 1999) wants to avoid. It becomes clear that when migrant ethnic identities are not able to struggle successfully for symbolic or cultural capital in the national sphere, instead of only seeking conventional civil or sociopolitical national institutions to advance their

interests, it is just as likely that they will transcend the national sphere and tap into the collective memories and histories of the imaginary homeland to arouse ethnic pride in the struggle for recognition and power within the national. By appealing to the imaginary homeland of China to address their lack of cultural power in a new national community, such identities are, in fact, returning to the "old local" to gain legitimacy in the "new local." As such, it is beginning to make less sense to speak of local, national, or global sites of interests when it comes to increasingly postmodern identities who can slip from site to site in search of cultural and political power and more relevant to think in terms of global fields of struggle.

The discourse of "heritage" was, in my research, often complemented by the discourse of "authenticity." Here, the notion of "authenticity" may be described as an individual's or group's politics of memory, history, and belonging, which may be used as a source of symbolic capital to struggle for resources or power. "Authenticity" arises as an issue when identities perceive their space and sociocultural rights to be undermined by the formation of other identities who begin to struggle more successfully for the rewards in the field. In this case, the emphasis of the English language and Mandarin as an overarching language for the heterogeneous Chinese community raised fears of homogenisation and cultural loss. Below is a sampling of the way in which my respondents use notions of "authenticity."

> Actually, we think that modern entertainment was responsible for killing off Chinese opera, but I don't think so. When younger people couldn't speak dialects . . . [that was what] killed off [Chinese] opera. They only understood Mandarin, and we lost dialect operas, and it became less authentic (Tan Hong).
>
> We had to fight for audience. We really had to compete for people who preferred to go to the cinemas or discos . . . we tried to experiment with western instruments and lightings . . . [incorporating] them into Chinese opera. It worked for a while because it was a novelty but after some time, audience [figures] went down again because it wasn't authentic (Sharon Lim).

Local culture is often closely tied to "authenticity" and the particularities of time and space (Featherstone 1990) and accompanied by "assumptions about boundedness, 'rootedness', insularity and 'purity' of (particularly) pre-modern cultures" (Tomlinson 1999: 129). This link between "authenticity," "boundedness," and "rootedness" is problematic for diasporas who, by definition, have moved across boundaries and severed their rootedness. And yet, as Ang (2001: 154–155) observes about identity, "The desire expressed in it has more to do

with a nostalgic harking back to an imagined golden past—embodied in a selective memory of 'tradition' and 'heritage'—than with the visionary articulation of a new future."

This has profound impact on "hyphenated" identities, that is, the way in which the identity politics of the local and the national are tentatively reconciled (Pan 1998; B. H. Chua 1998). For the "Chinese-Singaporean," this hyphenated identity was a state strategy to disempower notions of "race" and to promote "multiracialism" (B. H. Chua 1998). With this hyphenated identity, notions of ethnicity and race in Singapore are "essentialised as an unchanging feature of the population so as to ground various specific ways of disciplining the social body" while marginalised in the political sphere (B. H. Chua 1998: 34). In other words, in Singapore, it is conventionally thought that ethnic identities are only celebrated within the cultural sphere to symbolise ethnic harmony, whereas in the political sphere they have no political power or claims. However, the evidence presented thus far shows that the political sphere affects the cultural sphere, and that the struggle for symbolic and cultural capital, when denied in the political sphere, plays out in the cultural sphere. As such, many of the Chinese opera practitioners assert their cultural rights with discourses of "heritage" and "authenticity" to protest against state treatment of the Chinese identity and its interests, protests that are disguised as concerns over the health of Chinese opera to negotiate the state's firm stance against competing ethnic interests. The ideology of multiculturalism and the government's avowed refusal to succumb to ethnic interests makes it necessary for ethnic politics to be played out in a different way, away from the political sphere, as the struggle for the survival of an ethnic craft.

Meanwhile, rapid urbanisation was reshaping spaces and places in the local. The government's efforts to sanitise Chinatown in the 1970s led to the eradication of prostitution and the closure of roadside hawkers, both of which flourished alongside street opera. This urbanisation process also reconfigured local lifestyle patterns as rural areas and villages were cleared and replaced by high-rise flats. As a result, communities were broken up and disseminated to different parts of the island, thus physically dispersing ethnic identities, destroying a communal sociocultural 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 1 P.M. to 5 P.M. and 7 P.M. to 11 P.M., and only then at certain allocated sites. Although the government has designated about five hundred sites, three-quarters of

these are not regularly used because they are deemed either unsuitable for opera performance or too isolated from the public. According to *The Straits Times* (1 June 1978)

> Since 1975, the government has sharply curtailed the number of approved sites for wayangs [vernacular term for Chinese opera] 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 thin out.

This sociospatial transformation of place is crucial to identity (Morley and Robins 1995; Urry 1995). The performance of Chinese opera suffered when it made the transition from rural to urban space primarily because "social practices are spatially patterned, and that these patterns substantially affect these very social practices" (Urry 1995: 64). Tan Hong was overseas writing his PhD thesis, accumulating the requisite embodied cultural capital, and was not in the midst of these swirling urban changes. Both Lee Yong and Sharon Lim, however, felt the marginalisation of Chinese opera as an impingement on their ethnic identity. Sharon Lim recounts, "Chinese opera was considered very old fashion and boring—not cool. Chinese culture in general was not cool at that time." The visible economic and professional progress of English-educated students only served to cement the association of Chinese identity with notions of archaism and cultural inferiority, resulting in a traditional/modern, old-fashioned/cool, backward looking/forward looking binary that the Chinese-educated and English-educated identities inhabited, respectively. Lim's professional identity as a Chinese teacher during those times was received with either grudging acceptance or outright insignificance by parents who believed that the mastery of the English language held the key to economic success. Meanwhile, Lee Yong, unable to read or write in English, continued with odd jobs while devoting his spare time to Chinese opera.

Fears of "deculturalisation" and the centring of Chinese culture in national culture

Despite the marginalisation of Chinese opera through the late 1960s to mid-1970s, the majority of Chinese opera practitioners in Singapore, according to my respondents, continued to juggle work, family life, and opera practice. Although the attrition rate was high, there was a core

of practitioners, my three respondents included, who continued to work tirelessly in the periphery of cultural life in Singapore. When asked why they continued with a marginalised art form, Lee Yong responded simply that he "loved opera," Tan Hong said that he was "passionate about Chinese opera," with Sharon Lim joking that she was "married to Chinese opera." For Bourdieu, if agents in the field discern certain structures and criteria to be biased against them (thus seeing through misrecognition) and yet continue to submit themselves to such structures and criteria, they are in illusio. Illusio, the continued belief in the rewards and aims in a particular field, have kept Tan Hong, Lee Yong, and Sharon Lim from exiting the Chinese opera field completely. Declarations of loyalty and love for Chinese opera despite its marginal status are examples of illusio whereby certain ideals, even idealism, and intangible dividends of the social field prevent total disaffection and disconnection, and thus ensures continued participation (or what Dreyfus and Rabinow [1999: 90] call necessary "self-deception").

Nonetheless, between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, opera practitioners began to shed their illusio as Chinese opera began to grow in cultural capital. As Tan Hong remembers, "Suddenly [Chinese opera] became quite fashionable. There was a noticeable surge in attendance . . . I must say it was a huge change from the 1960s." This "sudden" change was the result of several structural shifts in national culture and policy from the late 1970s. Two key shifts were (1) the *Report on the Ministry of Education* (1978) and the *Report on Moral Education* (1979) and (2) the national Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched in 1979, both of which were prompted by some of the government elite's fear of "deculturalisation."

The country's high economic growth and English proficiency engendered worries that the ethnic Chinese population was becoming too "Westernised" (usually a euphemism for individualism, hedonism, and liberalism), arousing concerns over a community de-rooted from its "distinctive" cultural values and identity (Tham 1989; B. H. Chua 1995; Vasil 1995). These worries led to landmark national policies; 1978 saw the *Report on the Ministry of Education*, produced by the then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, in which he warned: "With large-scale movement to education in English, the risk of deculturalisation cannot be ignored" (quoted in Vasil 1995: 69). The spectre of "deculturalisation" led to the *Report on Moral Education*, submitted by the then Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong the very next year. These two reports led to the implementation of Religious Studies whereby major religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—were taught in secondary schools. The government's concern with "deculturalisation"

was, of course, ironic for it had been a chronic worry for Chinese conservatives and many opera practitioners.

Following closely behind the two reports was the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The primary reason for this campaign was the fear that Singaporeans, especially the Chinese, were becoming “westernised” and would eventually lose their distinctive Asian identity and heritage. The aim of the campaign was twofold: (1) to retain fluency in Mandarin and its cultural accoutrements and (2) to replace other provincial dialects amongst the Chinese community with an overarching language. Naturally, this engendered insecurities amongst the Malay and Indian communities, many fearing that this signalled the ascendance of Chinese culture to a dominant position in national culture. The two ministerial reports and the Speak Mandarin Campaign marked the first time that post-independent ruling class interests were publicly aligned with those of Chinese conservatives and opera practitioners. And although government leaders took pains to ensure ethnic minorities that they remained committed to a multicultural Singapore, this national emphasis on Mandarin in national discourse had the effect of validating Chinese conservatives and their interests. Chinese culture and its concomitant activities began to be legitimised and valued as cultural and symbolic capital.

The legitimisation of the Chinese identity in Singapore coincided with the schism in Chinese opera between amateur opera troupes and professional opera troupes. As Chinese cultural activities and literature moved toward the centre of national culture, there was a need to “refine” Chinese opera and to rescue it from the conventional image of street performance, the result of which was the reinvention of Chinese opera to meet the government’s desire for “high culture” (Lee 1998). Amateur troupes, as opposed to professional (or “street opera”) troupes, fitted the emerging national discourse on culture and the arts that recognised the ethnic-based art as “authentic” and symptomatic of a “high civilisation.” In contrast to “lowly” street opera, amateur troupes were seen as “artistic,” “urban,” “literate,” and were “considered exemplary reflections of, and models for, the young and “cultured” nation that the government aspires Singapore to become” (Lee 1998: 225). In effect, Chinese opera became, in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1992) term, an “invented tradition.”

Nonetheless, this legitimisation of the Chinese identity was a partial one. The reinvention of amateur Chinese opera as “high art” meant that only those with embodied cultural capital (i.e., cultural competence and literary fluency) enjoyed the new found symbolic capital. Individuals like Tan Hong and Sharon Lim, both well versed in Chinese classical literature, history, and art, began to enjoy the prestige

and recognition that came with the rejuvenation of Chinese opera. This, in turn, made them "proud to be Chinese" (Sharon Lim) and "suddenly humbled by the trajectory of Chinese history and culture" (Tan Hong). However, working-class individuals like Lee Yong, who dropped out of school at the age of 14, felt little or none of the prestige and recognition his counterparts in the field enjoyed. Lee Yong's economic identity was of greater significance than his ethnicity, and it played a greater role in determining his position in the field of struggle, denying him access to the rewards of Chinese opera. As he tells me without a trace of bitterness, "Others are more suited to [promote Chinese] opera but not me . . . because of my poor education. It's better to leave it to more educated people." For Tan Hong and Sharon Lim, their familiarity with Chinese literature was suddenly recognised as cultural capital, whereas for Lee Yong, it was status quo.

There was little doubt that Chinese opera in Singapore during this period was undergoing an economic and class adjustment. Amateur Chinese opera became a respectable middle-class activity, for according to Sharon Lim, "The old image of [opera] actors and actresses as low class or [who] have no education was outdated. Many of my colleagues were well-paid professionals like teachers, managers, accountants, that sort of jobs. We were very different from the street wayang." What this meant was that Chinese education and conservative Chinese cultural identities similarly underwent a middle-class revolution. As the country grew increasingly affluent, amateur practitioners, many of whom were white-collar workers, became socially mobile and commanded greater earning power, or economic capital. The Chinese-educated, Chinese-proficient identity was now a middle-class identity. Because the majority status of ethnic Chinese represented the broadest electoral base for the incumbent PAP, it may be argued that it was advantageous for the Singapore government, in addition to fears of "deculturalisation," to also legitimise the cultural capital of Chinese culture, and in essence Chinese identity, to secure political capital.

Confucian ethics: A global ethnic identity?

Perhaps the single most important factor affecting the Chinese identity and Chinese opera in the 1980s was the emergence of Confucian ethics in national discourse. The discourse began as a culturalist explanation for Asia's economic progress, popularly known as the "Asian miracle." The publication of influential books like *The Japanese Challenge: The Success and Failure of Economic Success* (1979) by Herman Kahn and Thomas Pepper argued that Southeast Asia's high

economic growth could be explained with its Confucian cultural tradition. Furthermore, Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (1979), a text closely read by government leaders, 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.

Confucian ethics confirmed the Singapore government's perceived link between economic competence and social discipline, thus prompting the official invitation of several Confucian scholars from America and Taiwan for a series of well-publicised and well-attended 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 the visiting 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" (italics added; quoted in Vasil 1995: 73; 2000: 105). Unlike conventional definitions of global culture, this "new" global culture was, according to the visiting scholars, both "universal" and ethnic based (Tu 1996). Furthermore, according to Tu (1984: 139), one of the visiting scholars, "Because Confucianism is not regarded as a religion, it can interact with the other four great traditions and make this a wonderful place [Singapore] to plant the seed of a future *global culture* emerging out of the great traditions of the past." Confucian ethics was a local culture going global.

Needless to say, Chinese opera in Singapore benefited from this "global culture." Amateur troupes began to enjoy increased state funding, for which professional troupes did not qualify. Performances in permanent theatres, the preferred venue of amateur troupes, also accentuated the schism in Chinese opera as "art" and as "street entertainment." Expensive opera tickets, glossy brochures and newspaper reviews cultivated Chinese opera's status as "art" while interest from the overseas Chinese literati, most notably from Taiwan, also helped inject intellectual discourse into the art form. On the other hand, as "street opera," professional troupes were often poor in quality and transient. 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. Audience turnout was usually healthy, and numerous newspaper reports show that local audiences flocked to productions of high quality, especially those of visiting troupes, with tickets selling out well in advance (*The*

Straits Times, 1 June 1978; 9 February 1986; 17 August 1986; 24 August 1986; 27 November 1986).

This purported "universalism" of Confucian ethics allowed for the formation of a Confucian identity in different national communities regardless of contemporary national politics or history. This "Confucian identity," like Chinese cosmopolitanism, is "one that embraces both a fundamental intellectual commitment to the Chinese culture and a multicultural receptivity, which effectively cuts across all conventional national boundaries" (Lee 1994: 229). The Confucian identity ceased to be an abstract ideology when it was anthropomorphised by Goh Chok Tong who publicly exalted Lee Kuan Yew as the "modern Confucius" (Kuo 1996). The Confucian identity thus became a collective signifier of modern Chinese identity for the heterogeneous Chinese community in Singapore, offering them a "strategy of distinction" that enabled them to struggle against the cultural capital of the English-educated middle-class Chinese. According to Tan Hong, "Everyone was talking about [Confucian ethics]. Everyone was talking about the "Asian Tigers" and there was an air of optimism because of the "Asian miracle." And it also made the Chinese think about their identity. It gave them more pride and faith in their culture." The economically privileged and professionally dominant English-educated middle-class Chinese, steeped in references to Western art, philosophy, and literature, had been successful in establishing culturally biased notions of aesthetics, taste, and high culture. This distinction was keenly felt by individuals like Sharon Lim who believed that their knowledge of Chinese culture and literature enjoyed none of the symbolic capital that Western-based culture and literature commanded. As Sharon Lim explains, "Chinese literature was considered un-cool before [the emergence of Confucian ethics], no one was interested in it. Then suddenly there was growing interest. Young professionals and executives were learning about their literary history." The "Asian Miracle" in the countries of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea, where English was not the predominant language, was the "evidence" that Chinese culture, far from backward or archaic, could be a driving force of industrialisation and modernity. Again, we see how the local transcends the national to tap into the global for legitimacy.

Nonetheless, by the early 1990s, Confucian ethics began to fade from national discourse. Its purported "universalism" was not borne out by the insecurity and suspicion it engendered among Singaporean Malays and Indians, many who were worried that their own ethnic cultures were increasingly threatened by what they perceived to be an ethnocentric national culture. It was inevitable that minority ethnic identities began to perceive themselves as increasingly marginalised

as Chinese identities struggled more successfully for the finite rewards in the field such as recognition, prestige, and finances. This perception of alienation amongst the ethnic minorities had to be addressed by the Singapore government lest it lost its legitimacy as protector of minority rights and, as a result, led to the abandonment of Confucianism as state project.

Amateur opera troupes, by now the major mode of Chinese opera in Singapore, faced internal difficulties too. Instead of higher quality performances to convert non-opera goers, competition for limited state grants began to undermine and erode the sociocultural bonds enjoyed between amateur troupes in the mid-1980s. With shrinking audiences, expertise, and state grants, 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.

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

Although the "Global City for the Arts" campaign, the national project to turn the city-state into a cultural hub, announced in 1992, saw a concerted effort in the promotion of culture and the arts as a vital industry, Chinese opera remains, according to Tan Hong, in a "dismal state." One contributing factor is the need for Chinese opera to contend with the state's perceived need to maintain equal distribution of grants among ethnic traditional theatres.

Formed in 1991, the National Arts Council (NAC) is aware of the current state of Chinese opera. NAC's grant scheme for local theatre consists primarily of the Project Grant, the Annual Grant, and the most prestigious and financially bountiful, 2-Year Major Grant. No Chinese opera troupe has ever received the 2-Year Major Grant, and only one opera troupe, the Chinese Theatre Circle, has been awarded the annual grant. However, the rest of the Chinese opera grant applicants have enjoyed numerous Project Grants. Today NAC funds about eighteen opera troupes on a project basis (Project Grant). And although this suggests state support for the art form, it is not unreserved. There are three reasons why NAC does not give local Chinese opera unqualified support.

First is NAC's insistence on a meritocratic and objective selection process of recipients for the Annual and 2-Year Major Grants. An NAC director (personal interview 2002) 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 [2-Year Major Grants recipients] have strong management, they have consistent performances, they are able to get the interest of young people, [and have] impressive 5-year plans.

However, meritocracy as a means of distributing higher theatre grants ignores Chinese opera's cultural capital as "cultural heritage" and "civilization." Says Sharon Lim, "Yes, they [NAC] always talk about meritocracy and objectivity whenever I have meetings [with them]. They say they understand my point of view . . . [NAC believes that] Chinese culture is part of the Chinese tradition and identity. But if you don't support it, then it will slowly fade away and die."

This frustration is shared by many of the amateur opera practitioners I have spoken to. Many endeavour to depict the NAC as overly bureaucratic and unsympathetic to their plight. On the contrary, it could be claimed that NAC does better to spread its limited funds to eighteen different opera troupes than to concentrate its limited resources on one or two elite troupes. Nonetheless, it is clear that the discourse of Chinese opera as "cultural heritage" to be protected and supported at all costs is still mobilised in the struggle for more bountiful state grants. This sets up an ideological confrontation between meritocracy and the need to preserve "heritage." The NAC director (personal interview 2002) 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 [opera troupes] 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! . . . 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.

"Meritocracy" and "objective criteria," nonetheless, also masks the different value of the cultural capital of Chinese opera troupes and established English-language companies. For example, the Annual and 2-Year Major Grants are largely inaccessible to Chinese opera because many troupes are deemed to lack strong management, consistent performances, young audiences, and impressive five-year plans. These traits, or cultural capital, are generally displayed by more

professionalised contemporary English-language theatre companies. Hence, notions of "meritocracy" and "objective criteria" seem to privilege, most obviously, the cultural capital of established English-language theatre companies and their practitioners.

Second, NAC does not support unreservedly Chinese opera because Singapore's multiethnic complexion makes it politically tenuous to privilege the cultural activities of one ethnic group over another group. In other words, if NAC supported Chinese opera on the basis that it is important to Chinese culture, then it would be obliged to do the same for Malay and Indian cultural activities. This would undoubtedly place more demands on the institution's budget. As such, although NAC does not deny the importance of Chinese opera to Chinese culture and identity, it depicts itself as "neutral" by adhering to the tenets of "meritocracy" and need for "objective criteria" such that it is not drawn into the political demands of equitable distribution.

Third, NAC wishes to avoid a "dependency" on financial handouts. This is in keeping with the government's ethos of eschewing any form of welfare, preferring instead to encourage the self-mobilisation, or "self-help," of needy constituencies. As an institution of the corporatist state, it is no surprise that NAC has adopted this ethos with regards to traditional ethnic theatre. Says a former NAC officer (personal interview 2002) in charge of theatre grants,

> 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.

NAC's "self-help" philosophy is, however, a vicious cycle. Expecting flagging traditional ethnic theatres to mobilise themselves ignores the fact that they are flagging precisely because they lack skilled manpower, infrastructure, and financial resources to mobilise themselves. Given this ongoing struggle between the proponents of Chinese opera and the NAC, it is thus misleading to ask whether or not globalisation, or global culture, would homogenise local cultures. Instead, the question should be, will ethnic cultures and notions of "heritage" continue to be useful in the political struggle for recognition and power? This article concludes that they are, and until they cease to be so, it is highly unlikely that cultural homogenisation will be globalisation's only outcome.

Conclusion

The notion that national identity is a macrocosm of ethnic identity, especially true for many postcolonial states, does not describe the experiences of Singapore. Her early national culture—the combination of multiculturalism, meritocracy and pragmatism—was an effort to formulate an ethnically "neutral" national identity. This systematically de-legitimised the cultural capital of Chinese opera through state policies such as the official discouragement of Chinese dialects, the promotion of English as lingua franca, and rapid urbanisation. In examining the impact of these structural shifts on the Chinese identity, this ethnographic study has shown that conventional concepts of the ethnographic site are no longer helpful in mapping out the patterns of influence, global flows, and cultural imaginations that affect ethnic identities. Identities, according to Hall (1991), are in a constant state of becoming, not being, and so too the Chinese identity in Singapore. Fragmented along economic, sociocultural, and linguistic lines, the Singaporean Chinese identity is heterogeneous in interests and engaged in different struggles. In resurrecting discourses of heritage and authenticity, certain segments of the Chinese community are shown to be able to transcend the local and the national and to tap into an imaginary China to define and validate themselves and their culture. This is in contrast to Wang's (1991, 1992) call to move away from a China-centred analysis of overseas Chinese.

Moving on, government fears of "deculturalisation" in the late 1970s signalled the centring of ethnic culture in national discourse and marked the period in which the cultural capital of Chinese culture and, by extension Chinese opera, was publicly lauded. This legitimisation was enhanced by the rise of Confucianism as "global culture" in the early to mid-1980s. Nonetheless, as the ethnographic evidence shows, Tan Hong, Sharon Lim, and Lee Yong experienced this "China/Chinese/Confucian" revival differently, with Lee Yong's working-class background and lack of cultural competence sealing off access to the rewards of the field such as the recognition and prestige bestowed on Chinese culture and literature.

For broader globalisation literature, this article offers several provisos. (1) The effect of globalisation, whether in its cultural or economic form, on local culture is not straightforward. Instead, the government often acts as a conductor of global pressures on local cultures, often under the rubric of "national culture" and through cultural policies. (2) Chinese opera has shown that when the cultural capital of a local culture is legitimised as symbolic capital, the local culture will flourish. (3) When its cultural capital is marginalised, the local culture will

flounder. (4) Local cultures are not abstract practices or traditions but are often indicative of a community's political interests, identity, and position of power. The cultural capital of Chinese opera and its changing fortunes, as those of any other ethnic culture, must be studied as the fluctuation of the ethnic interests, identity politics, and class histories of those who have a stake in this cultural capital.

Notes

Received 3 March 2005; accepted 27 October 2005.

The author thanks the three anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions and constructive critique.

Address correspondence to Terence Chong, Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614. E-mail: terencechong@iseas.edu.sg

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