

## **Reciprocal Dedication: Understanding the Ritual Significance of Teochew Opera Offerings in Malaysian Chinese Traditions**

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**Abstract:** Teochew opera, a traditional Chinese performing art from Guangdong's Chaozhou region, has a long history in Malaysia, transcending its role as mere entertainment and becoming deeply embedded in religious and cultural practices. However, in recent decades, it has faced challenges such as declining audience interest, competition from modern entertainment forms, and the fading of traditional values among younger generations. These issues raise concerns about the future of Teochew opera and its role in Malaysian Chinese society. This study uses qualitative methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival research to explore how Teochew opera continues to survive and maintain relevance in Malaysia despite these obstacles. Specifically, it examines the opera's transformation into a religious offering during rituals. The research also explores the motivations behind the sponsorship of these performances, including acts of filial piety, social status elevation, and the desire for divine blessings. Findings reveal that Teochew opera has evolved into a ritualistic gift to deities, ancestors, and spirits, reflecting a reciprocal relationship where humans offer performances in exchange for divine favour. This has helped sustain its cultural and spiritual significance in the Malaysian Chinese community, enabling its endurance despite modern pressures.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Chinese; Teochew opera; Ritual significance; Ritual offering; Effectiveness of rituals.

## 1. Introduction

Teochew opera originating from the Chaozhou region of Guangdong, China, is a traditional Chinese art form celebrated for its distinctive Teochew dialect singing, emotive melodies and rich storytelling. It combines music, drama, and dance to portray themes of loyalty, justice, and filial piety (Wu & Lin, 2015). Over time, Teochew opera spread to Chinese diasporic communities, particularly in Southeast Asia, due to migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In countries such as Malaysia, Teochew opera became a cultural practice, frequently performed during temple festivals and ceremonies, where it served as both entertainment and a means of preserving cultural identity and spiritual devotion (Lee, 2018).

Teochew opera is intimately linked to religious and ritual contexts in Malaysia, especially during temple festivals and rituals dedicated to deities and ancestors, a custom preserved by Chinese immigrants. Historically, Chinese operatic performances have been entwined with spiritual practices, as these operas were often staged as offerings to gods, ancestors and spirits. Within this context, opera transcends mere entertainment, becoming a ritualistic act imbued with spiritual significance. Performances aim to appease the gods and ancestors, securing their blessings, protection, and favour for the community (Guo, 2005).

Despite the maintenance of Teochew opera in rituals among the Malaysian Chinese communities, its function remains an underexplored research area. This knowledge gap can have significant implications, as it may hinder the appreciation and recognition of Teochew opera as a vital component of Malaysian cultural heritage. Without a clear understanding of the ritual significance of these performances, there is a risk that future generations may undervalue or neglect these traditions, leading to their erosion over time. Moreover, failing to acknowledge these performances' multifaceted roles—such as community bonding, spiritual devotion, and cultural continuity—can lead to a superficial engagement with the art form. These problems may affect the vitality of Teochew opera and diminish the rich tapestry of Malaysian Chinese identity, which resulted in impacting the preservation of a key cultural practice within a broader societal context.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What motivates the continued integration of Teochew opera in rituals? What roles does Teochew opera play in fostering a reciprocal relationship with the divine? What do participants gain from presenting Teochew opera during the ritual? This research aims to delve into the ritual significance of Teochew opera within the context of Malaysian Chinese religious traditions, focusing on its role as a form of reciprocal dedication between individuals and deities. It highlights how this traditional art form facilitates spiritual communication, bridging the material world and the divine.

## 2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, using ethnographic fieldwork methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival research, to obtain data and thoroughly examine the significance of Teochew opera within Malaysian Chinese religious traditions.

The first step in data collection involves carefully selecting field sites where Teochew opera performances continue to play a vital role in religious festivals. Penang was chosen as the site for the fieldwork due to its vibrant Chinese community and frequent religious festivals that include Teochew opera performances (DeBernardi, 2009; Seong, 2015). To fully understand the cultural and spiritual significance of Teochew opera, this study involves participant observation at several religious festivals, notably the Hungry Ghost Festival. This festival, characterised by ritual performances intended to appease deities or restless spirits, serves as a key venue where Teochew opera acts as a medium for religious offerings (Tan, 2020).

The researcher attended as an active observer, immersing themselves in the environment to document the performances, interactions among performers, religious practitioners, and the audience, as well as the overall atmosphere. Participant observation offers valuable insights into how Teochew opera performances function as spiritual communication. For instance, during rituals, performers often make symbolic gestures and recite lines believed to invoke deities' presence. Observing these intricate interactions helps the researcher discern layers of meaning within the performance, which may not be evident to external viewers. Moreover, it allows for identifying rituals accompanying the opera, such as offerings made to the deities before or during performances, further enhancing its role in religious devotion.

The study also relies on semi-structured interviews with three key groups: opera performers, temple authorities, and community members. The sample size consisted of 15 individuals, and each group consisted of 5 individuals. Interview performers to uncover their personal experiences and perceptions regarding the ritualistic aspects of their art. Many performers, such as Ling Goh, come from families with a long history of opera performance, and their understanding of the religious significance of their work can offer valuable insights into how Teochew opera has been preserved and adapted over generations. Previous studies have shown that performers often view their participation in these religious festivals as more than just an artistic endeavour but a sacred duty (Kang, 2005). Interviews with temple authorities and religious leaders focus on the institutional perspective. These individuals are often responsible for organising festivals and coordinating performances, and their insights shed light on the decision-making processes behind selecting Teochew opera as a ritual practice. Temple authorities can also offer a broader understanding of the opera's symbolic importance, particularly in how it relates to the worship of specific deities. Finally, community members who attend these performances as part of their religious observance also be interviewed. They often believe that these performances serve as a

form of communication with the divine, and their experiences are key to understanding how Teochew opera strengthens communal religious identity.

In addition to fieldwork, archival research is pivotal in contextualising the historical development of Teochew opera in Malaysia. The researcher reviewed historical documents, temple records, and oral histories to trace how Chinese cultural practices in Malaysia, especially Teochew opera, were transplanted from China to Malaysia. This approach is essential for understanding how these practices have evolved. For example, archival research helps establish whether the ritual use of Teochew opera has changed in response to external factors such as colonialism, modernisation, or migration patterns. The review of temple records, in particular, can provide data on how frequently Teochew opera performances have historically been used in religious rituals, allowing for comparisons between past and present practices.

Data analysis for this study employed a triangulated approach to ensure comprehensive insights into the ritual significance of Teochew opera. Participant observation provided a foundational understanding of the rituals, capturing details of the occasion, structure and content of performances. This observational data was systematically coded to identify themes and patterns. Semi-structured interviews with performers and community members were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, highlighting individuals' perceptions of Teochew opera in rituals. This qualitative analysis allowed for the extraction of nuanced interpretations that complemented observational findings. Additionally, archival research contributed to the historical context, enriching the analysis with traditional beliefs and practices documented in existing literature. This tripartite data combination analysis reveals their deeper functions within the rituals of Teochew opera in Malaysian Chinese traditions.

In the ritual, Teochew opera is presented to the deities by the Malaysian Chinese as a meticulously prepared gift. Thus, this study utilised Mauss's (2002) gift exchange theory to elucidate Teochew opera's presence in Malaysian sacred rituals. The theory of gift exchange extended its significance beyond the realm of social and economic transactions to encompass offerings in religious rituals. Mauss (2002) delved into the complex interplay of gifts, not merely as economic or utilitarian exchanges but as a fundamental component of social bonds and obligations. This theory revealed how giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts are imbued with symbolic meanings and serve as a cornerstone in maintaining and reinforcing social relationships, hierarchies, and communal solidarity, as shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**

*Mauss's theory on gift exchange.*

| Concept                                      | Description   |
|--|---|
| The foundations of reciprocity               | At the core of Mauss's theory lay the principle of reciprocity, which is integral to the practice of gift exchange. This principle is not limited to human societies but encompasses human interactions and the divine or supernatural realms. According to Mauss's framework, offerings made to gods or spiritual beings in religious rituals are considered a gift exchange. These offerings can include food, objects or performances.   |
| Obligations of the gift                      | Mauss delineated three intrinsic obligations in gift exchange: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. Within religious rituals, the faithful are compelled to present offerings; the deities are believed to accept these offerings. Deities are expected to reciprocate with blessings, protection, or by fulfilling prayers. This cycle strengthens the connection between worshippers and the divine, reflecting the social ties fostered and reinforced by gift exchange in human society. |
| Symbolic value and social cohesion           | Mauss underscored the symbolic significance of gifts, which surpass their material value. Within religious contexts, offerings are imbued with profound symbolic meaning, symbolising devotion, submission, and acknowledgement of the divine's supremacy. Such rituals consolidate the community of believers, enhancing a collective sense of identity and belonging through the shared practice of giving.   |
| Reinforcement of social order and hierarchy  | Just as gift exchange in societal contexts reflects and reinforces social hierarchies and statuses, religious offerings frequently serve analogous roles within religious communities. The grandeur or modesty of an offering may mirror the devotee's social standing or piety as an indicator of religious and social status within the community.  |
| The concept of "Hau" and religious offerings | Mauss introduced the concept of "hau", the spirit of the gift that compels reciprocation. The "hau" represents gifts' intangible, spiritual connection, linking people in a continuous cycle of exchange and mutual obligation. This concept can be extended to religious offerings, where the "spirit" of the offering compels a response from the divine. It embodies the expectation that giving will engage the supernatural forces in a reciprocal relationship.                         |

*Source:* Adapted from Mauss, 2002.

### 3. Teochew Opera in Rituals

Ritual is a general term for an activity with religious or traditional symbolism. Rituals have a certain period on a specific occasion, are associated with individual or group judgement, and may be conducted and organised by individuals, groups or organisations (Bell, 1997; Graf, 2016). In Malaysia's cultural landscape, Teochew opera created a significant ritual context through performative elements such as actions, postures, dances, music, chants and staged scenes, alongside the strategic arrangement of objects and settings. This environment immersed participants in and derived spiritual solace and fulfilment from the conveyed meanings. Each performance, scene and object served as a conduit for expressing meaning within a ritual, transforming the ritual into a realm rich with symbolism where sensory elements are employed to communicate more profound significance (Langer, 2009).

#### 3.1 Occasions of Performances

In contemporary Malaysian sacred rituals, Teochew opera is performed exclusively on occasions dedicated to transcendental beings. Teochew opera enhances its attraction to the audience with the support of religion and integrates into people's daily lives by relying on religious activities. On certain occasions, the Chinese community transports their deity statues to the opposite side of the stage, arranges elaborate offerings and burns incense. Simultaneously, the ritual's patron hires a professional Teochew opera troupe to execute a meticulously chosen repertoire in full costume on stage. Such Teochew opera performances transcend everyday entertainment, representing exceptional events that break from normative daily routines and are recognised as ritualistic acts with specific purposes.

This study found that Teochew opera performances in Malaysia are intricately intertwined with the Chinese belief system. Wolf (1999) posited that the Chinese belief system comprises three entities: gods, ghosts, and ancestors. Based on the researcher's fieldwork in Penang, the occasion of the performance coincides with the beliefs' activities, as shown in **Table 2**.

**Table 2**

*Dates of Teochew opera performances in Malaysia.*

| Ritual Types           | Dedication Objective                          | Dates (Lunar calendar)   |
|------------------------|---|--|
| God's Birthdays        | Kwun Yum (观音诞)                                | The 19 <sup>th</sup> day of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> month  |
|                        |   | The 19 <sup>th</sup> day of the 6 <sup>th</sup> month  |
|                        |   | The 19 <sup>th</sup> day of the 9 <sup>th</sup> month  |
|                        | Jade Emperor (天公诞)                            | The 9 <sup>th</sup> day of the 1 <sup>st</sup> month   |
|                        | Tua Pek Kong (大伯公诞)                           | The 15 <sup>th</sup> day of the 1 <sup>st</sup> month and the 2 <sup>nd</sup> day of 2 <sup>st</sup> month |
|                        | Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝诞)                      | The 3 <sup>rd</sup> day of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> month   |
|                        | Ma Zu (妈祖诞)                                   | The 23 <sup>rd</sup> day of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> month  |
|                        | City God (城隍诞)                                | The 28 <sup>th</sup> day of 5 <sup>th</sup> month  |
|                        | Guan Yu (关帝诞)                                 | The 24 <sup>th</sup> day of the 6 <sup>th</sup> month  |
|                        | Nine Emperor Gods (九皇爷诞)                      | The 1 <sup>st</sup> and 9 <sup>th</sup> days of the 9 <sup>th</sup> month                                  |
|                        | Huanguang Dadi (华光大帝诞)                        | The 28 <sup>th</sup> day of 9 <sup>th</sup> month  |
|                        | Taiyi Zhenren (太乙救苦天尊圣诞)                      | The 11 <sup>th</sup> day of 11 <sup>th</sup> month   |
|                        | Amitabha (阿弥陀佛诞)                              | The 17 <sup>th</sup> day of 11 <sup>th</sup> month   |
| Na Tok Kong (拿督公)      | The dates are not fixed                       |  |
| Ancestor's Birthdays   | A deceased ancestor in a clan or family       | The dates are not fixed  |
| Hungry Ghost Festivals | Da Shi Ye (大士爷) and the lonely souls (ghosts) | From 1 <sup>st</sup> to 30 <sup>th</sup> days of the 7 <sup>th</sup> month                                 |

Among the various traditional festivals celebrated by the Chinese community in Malaysia, those with religious significance are particularly appealing, with Teochew opera primarily centring on acts of worship. The god's birthday is a comprehensive cultural phenomenon associated with religious beliefs and folklore. During the specific period of the deity's birthday, the public sacrifices to the gods with secular and utilitarian aspirations and prays to the gods for certain benefits in the present world. As a result, various celebrations of varying scales are held in the communities where the Chinese reside. In the Malaysian Chinese conception, the blessings from

deities are essential for realising the ideal situation in life. In order to obtain the blessings of the deities, apart from providing sumptuous offerings and devotional worship, it is also necessary to dedicate intangible offerings—opera performances—for the enjoyment and pleasure of the deities.

The remarkable contributions of Malaysian Chinese ancestors serve as the cornerstone of their family's prosperity. Therefore, staging a Teochew opera performance, a favoured tradition among ancestors, during ceremonies commemorating their birthdays is an excellent means of honouring them. This act serves as a gesture of gratitude for their past contributions and expresses hope for their continued protection of the family.

In Malaysia, besides being performed on the birthdays of deities and ancestors, Teochew opera is also present in festivals associated with ghosts, represented by the Hungry Ghost Festival. The performance of Teochew opera at the Hungry Ghost Festival stems from this ritual act of combining song and dance with transcendence (Issei, 2008). In the Chinese conception, the gates of hell will open in the seventh month of the lunar calendar every year, and these lonely souls that have not been worshipped will escape from hell and disrupt the harmony and stability of the present world. To pacify these aggrieved spirits, the Chinese community collectively presents offerings, including food, paper currency, and liquor, to appease them (Lim, 2021). Additionally, musical performances, such as Teochew opera, are staged to entertain these spirits. This practice aims to alleviate the spirits' grievances towards the living, mitigating their potential harm to the Chinese community.

The Malaysian Chinese believe that numerous unrested spirits wander the human world, not all of which receive offerings. Those spirits that miss out on these rituals retain their grievances, posing a threat to the harmony of the Chinese community. To more effectively appease these spirits, Teochew opera performances during the Hungry Ghost Festival were also primarily presented as offerings to Da Shi Ye (大士爺), the deity in charge of spirits, as shown in **Figure 1**. These performances are pleas to the deity to aid in managing these restless souls.

**Figure 1**

*Da Shi Ye statue worshipped by the Chinese in Malaysia.*



*Source:* Photographed by the author, August 19, 2023, in Penang.

The Hungry Ghost Festival rituals are held from the seventh to the eighth month of the lunar calendar and typically last for one month. However, they are held continuously at different locations. The rituals are held separately in each Chinese neighbourhood for as short as three days or as long as half a month. For example, in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Hungry Ghosts Festival activities are held from the first to the seventeenth day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, in which Teochew opera performances start on the third day and continue for fifteen days, with a total of four Teochew opera troupes performing as shown in **Table 3**, which is sufficient to demonstrate the significance that Malaysian Chinese attach to Hungry Ghosts Festival.

**Table 3**

*Teochew opera performances in Penang Hungry Ghost Festival 2023 at Pek Kong Cheng.*

| Date   | Time                     | Troupe                          | Site   |
|--|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Third to fifth day of the seventh lunar month<br>(2023, Aug 18–20)               | 8:00 pm<br>–<br>11:30 pm | Sai Boon Fong<br>(赛宝丰)          | Pek Kong Cheng,<br>Jalan Pasar, Bukit<br>Mertajam, Pulau<br>Pinang |
| Sixth to tenth day of the seventh lunar month<br>(2023, Aug 21–25)               | daily                    | Tiong Chia Soon Heang<br>(中正顺香) |  |
| Eleventh to thirteenth day of the seventh lunar month<br>(2023, Aug 26–28)       |                          | Lao Buan Nee Heng<br>(老万年兴)     |  |
| Fourteenth to fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month<br>(2023, Aug 29–30)      |                          | Tiong Chia Soon Heang<br>(中正顺香) |  |
| Sixteenth to seventeenth days of the seventh lunar month<br>(2023, Aug 31–Sep 1) |                          | New Chung Ching Soon<br>(新中正顺)  |  |

Notably, the Teochew opera troupes that participated in the performances during the rituals were all from Thailand and not local Malaysian Teochew opera troupes. According to the informant:

The reason for hiring a Thai troupe is two-fold. On the one hand, because it is easy to hire Thai troupes, and they are cheaper. According to the current price, if you hire a Malaysian troupe for a day, it will cost you about RM3000, but a Thai troupe will only cost you 2500 or even less. On the other hand, because there are only two local troupes left, the Lao Yu Tang and the Xin Yu Lou, and their schedules are full, even if you want to hire them, it's not too easy (Chong, personal communication, August 16, 2023).

For the Malaysian Chinese community, engaging a Thai opera troupe offers convenience. It is attributed to two main factors: firstly, the geographical proximity of Pattani-based Thai troupes facilitates more accessible travel arrangements. Secondly, the tradition of hiring Thai troupes is deeply entrenched within the Malaysian Chinese culture, further simplified by the fact that Malaysian entertainment agencies manage

many Teochew opera troupes in Thailand. Consequently, organisers only need to liaise with an agent who will coordinate the troupe's participation based on the organiser's needs, streamlining the hiring process significantly.

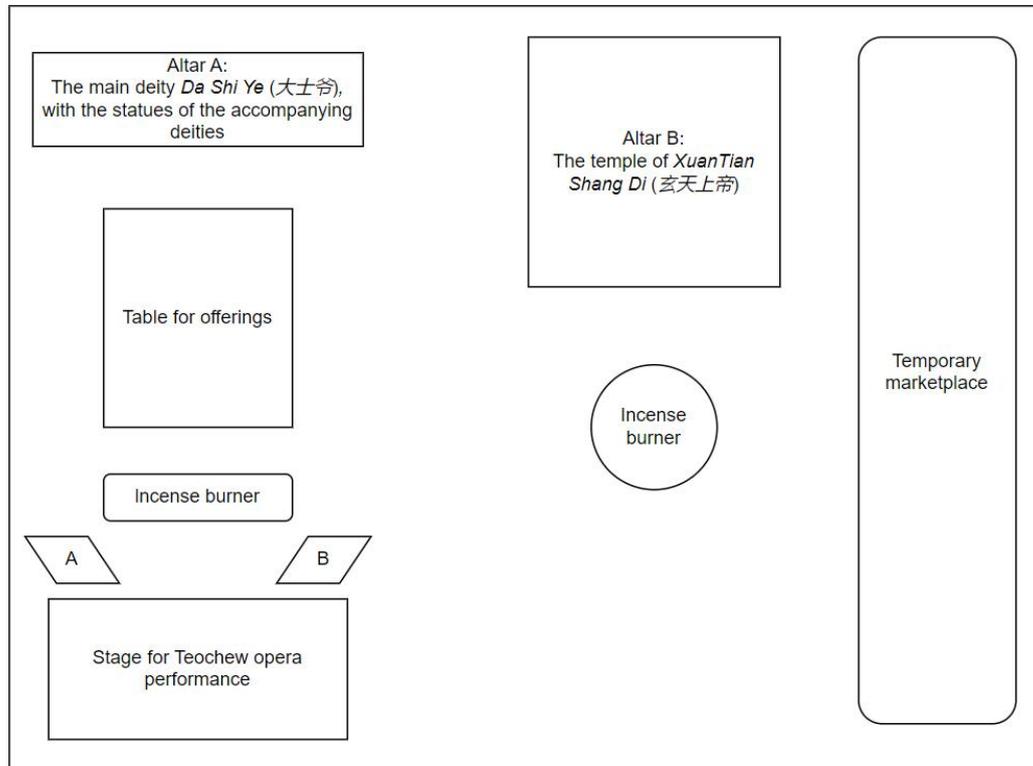
There is a deeper reason for hiring Thai Teochew opera troupes, which extends beyond mere cut-down expenses and convenience. These performances are primarily dedicated to the gods rather than to human spectators in ritual. For the Malaysian Chinese, the focal point is not the quality of the performance but the execution of the ritualised process. Provided the performers can enact the ritualised actions and deliver sincere performances to the gods on behalf of their employers, the nationality of the troupe is inconsequential to both employers and the audience.

### **3.2 Structure of Performance Venue**

The Malaysian Chinese construct spaces for performing rituals, with the venue structure and the ensemble arrangement playing critical roles. Since the inception of Chinese immigration to Malaysia, conducting Teochew opera performances in front of temples to honour transcendent beings has been a steadfast tradition, persisting to the present day (Kang, 2005). In these rituals, Malaysian Chinese established a temporary sacred space in front of the temple, erecting a shrine and a theatrical stage, complemented by an offering table and incense burner on the shrine's opposite side, as shown in **Figure 2**. The stage for Teochew opera also called the theatre shed, was positioned to face the shrine, which housed the deity's statue to ensure an optimal view of the deity. The stage is temporary, explicitly erected for performances and dismantled post-festival.

**Figure 2**

*The layout of the ritual field.*



*Note.* A and B beside the stage are spaces for the accompanying musical instruments: A for the orchestra whilst B for the percussion.

*Source:* Drawn by the author, August 18, 2023, in Penang Pek Kong Cheng.

However, the offstage seating arrangements for the audience were distinctive. The research has revealed that Teochew opera performances commemorating deities' birthdays, such as those of Xuantian Shangdi and Mazu, seldom offer seating arrangements. Audiences typically enjoy the performances from a standing position offstage. However, the situation is slightly different during the Hungry Ghost Festival rituals, as exemplified by the New Chung Ching Soon Teochew opera troupe's performance at the Armenian Park in Penang, where rows of red chairs were arranged offstage. Each bench in front of the chairs held food with small-sized incense burners, as shown in **Figure 3**. A few audience members were offstage enjoying the Teochew opera, but in any circumstances, no one was sitting in a chair.

**Figure 3**

*Seats for the spirits in the Teochew opera performance at the Hungry Ghost Festival.*



*Source:* Photographed by the author, August 19, 2023, in Penang.

The troupe's performer Chan (Female, 1979, actress in Tiong Chia Soon Heang) said:

Seats are only set up for the Hungry Ghosts Festival, not for the audience, but for the “good brothers” [好兄弟, spirits]. The purpose is to invite them to wander around to watch the opera by setting up seats so that, on the one hand, it can reduce their grievances against people; on the other hand, by gathering them here through Teochew opera performances, it will also reduce the hazards and damages produced by their wandering around the human world (personal communication, August 24, 2023).

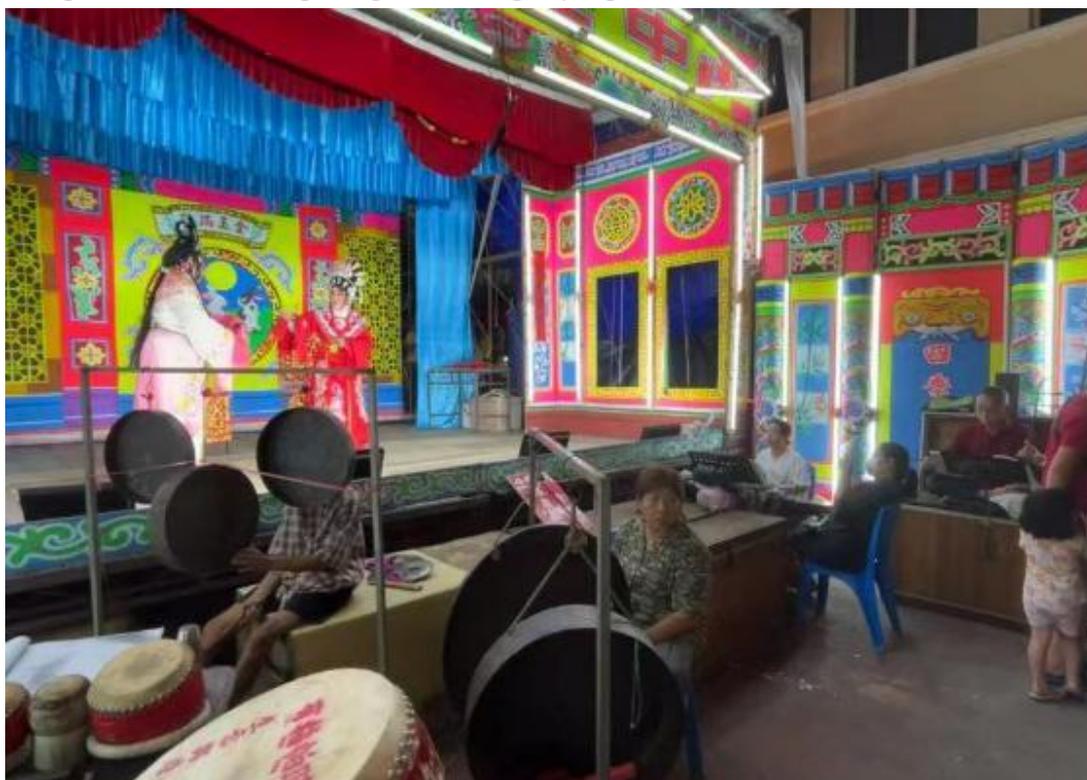
Occupying a chair in front of the stage during the Hungry Ghost Festival is considered taboo, as it symbolises taking place meant for wandering spirits, potentially exacerbating their resentments. This act might lead to possession by malevolent spirits and ensuing misfortune. Fieldwork conducted at various events has shown that despite the absence of explicit signage prohibiting seating, attendees universally refrain from sitting, indicating a collective recognition of this prohibition.

The ensemble is also part of the ritual space. Ordinarily, the accompaniment ensemble is located upstage; sometimes, due to the limited space on stage, the

ensemble moves offstage and is exposed to the audience, as shown in **Figure 4**. The ensemble is divided into Wen Pan (文畔, Dragon's Side) and Wu Pan (武畔, Tiger's Side). The music in the ritual is used to support the narrative. Hence, the ensemble is not complicated and consists of some traditional Chinese instruments. Wen Pan is the orchestra, responsible for the melodic part; Wu Pan is the percussion, responsible for controlling the rhythm of the performance. The stage is fronted in the direction of the audience and the statue of the god.

**Figure 4**

*Tiong Chia Soon Heang troupe's accompanying ensemble.*



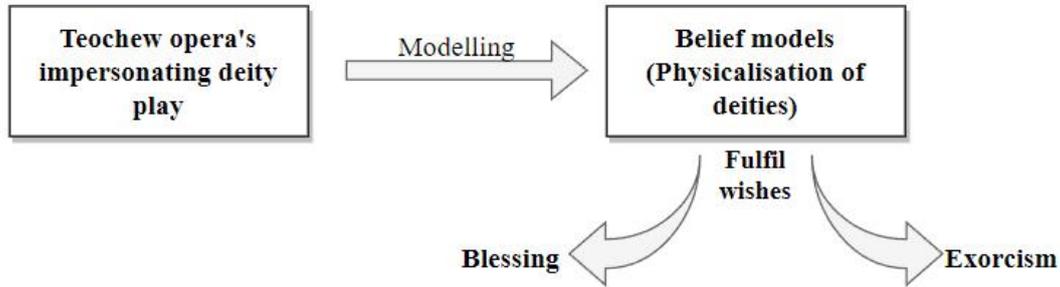
*Source:* Photographed by the author, August 19, 2023, in Penang.

### 3.3 Ritual Performance Content

Teochew opera within ritual contexts manifests in two types: impersonating deity plays (扮仙戏) and serial plays. The impersonating deity plays, also called routine performances, are distinguished by their ritualised actions, wherein performers embody deities. Geertz (2017) conceptualised rituals as cultural performances, positing that they serve as a means for participants to visualise and actualise religious beliefs, thereby modelling these beliefs in their formative stages, as shown in **Figure 5**. Teochew operas enact these beliefs during rituals by assuming the roles of deities.

**Figure 5**

*The purpose of the Teochew opera impersonating deity.*



*Source:* Drawn by the author.

Participant observation and interviews have revealed that each impersonating deity plays in Teochew opera is independent and classified into large-scale and small-scale performances based on the number of performers and the duration. This categorisation is widely recognised among Malaysian Teochew opera practitioners (Goh, personal communication, July 28, 2023; Chan; personal communication, August 24, 2023). Furthermore, the repertoire of deity impersonation plays across all Teochew opera troupes is standardised (as shown in **Table 4**), with only minor variations in specific performance movements and costume details. Each impersonating deity plays represents the different secular aspirations of Malaysian Chinese (as shown in **Table 5**), and they hope that through the performance, the transcendent being will be aware of their wishes and make them come true.

**Table 4**

*Types and characteristics of impersonating deity plays.*

| Impersonating Deity Play |  |  |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Type                     | Large-scale (大扮仙)  | Small-scale (小扮仙)  |
| Duration                 | Approximately 40–50 minutes each   | Not exceeding 10 minutes each  |
| Number of performers     | More than 10 people  | Except for the Eight Immortals Celebrate a Longevity Birthday, they are all 1 to 2 people  |
| Repertoire               | Six Kingdoms Granted the Prime Minister (六国封相)<br>Carp Jumping Dragon Gate (鲤鱼跳龙门)   | Eight Immortals Celebrate a Longevity Birthday (八仙庆寿)<br>Dance for Promotion (跳加冠)<br>Goddess Sends Her Son (仙姬送子)<br>Purification Stage (净棚)<br>Capital Meeting (京城会) |
| Content                  | Plots are independent, unrelated to each other or the content of the serialised opera  |  |
| Music and performance    | There are rarely singing parts (beside Capital Meeting) in the performance, and the melody only appears in the interludes. The performance is accomplished with the rhythm of gongs and drums and the actors' recitations, similar to "ritual theatre" with instrumental accompaniments. |  |
| Purpose                  | Fulfil the ritual function of praying for blessings or exorcising evil spirits   |  |

**Table 5**

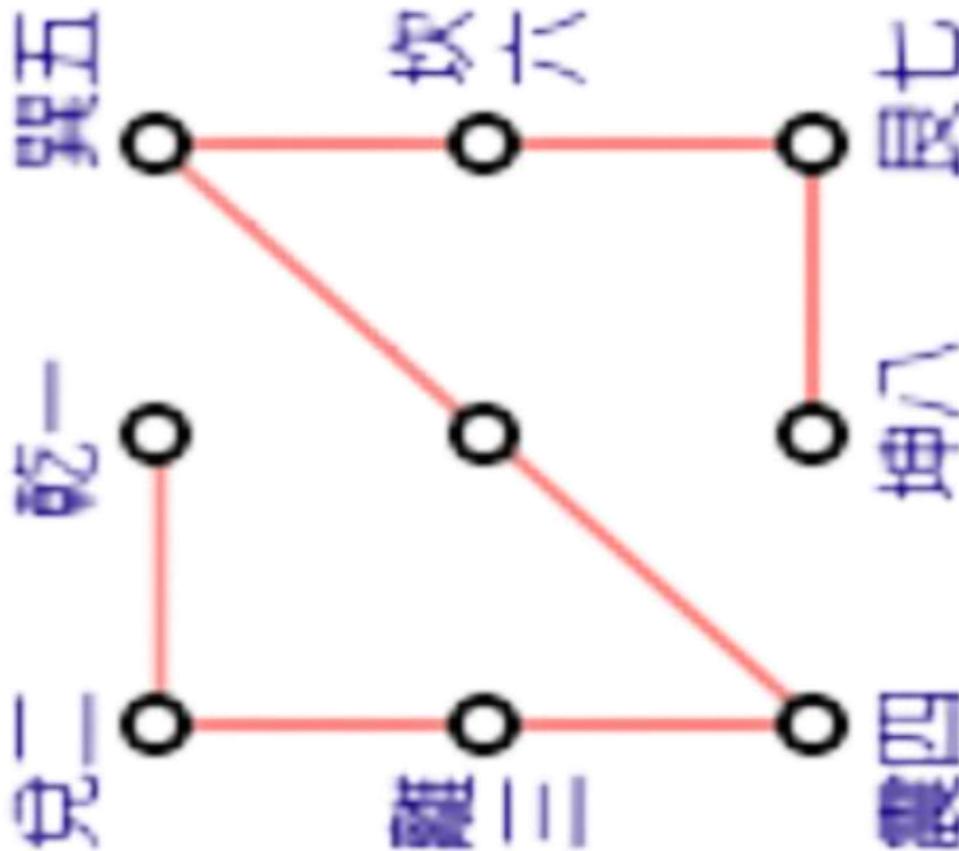
*The symbolism of impersonating deity plays.*

| Play   | Symbolism   |
|--|---|
| Six Kingdoms Granted the Prime Minister        | Social status promotion; Wealth and prosperity    |
| Carp Jumping Dragon Gate                       | Community harmony; Academic or career advancement |
| Eight Immortals Celebrate a Longevity Birthday | Longevity   |
| Dance for Promotion                            | Political advancement                             |
| Goddess Sends Her Son                          | Family prosperity with offspring                  |
| Purification Stage                             | Exorcism  |
| Capital Meeting                                | Family and romantic happiness                     |

In addition to featuring performers dressed as immortals, Teochew opera incorporates elements from Chinese religious rituals, including specific movements, gestures, and music, whose intent is to enhance the effectiveness of the ritual. For example, during the *Purification Stage* (淨棚) performance, the actor, who is dressed in a yellow dragon robe, girded with a jade belt and wearing an emperor's hat, circles around the stage in a trajectory similar to the steps used to invoke the deities in Taoist rituals as shown in **Figure 6**. When the actor walks around as shown in **Figure 7**, he constantly waves his sleeve outwards, which symbolises the exorcism of evil spirits.

**Figure 6**

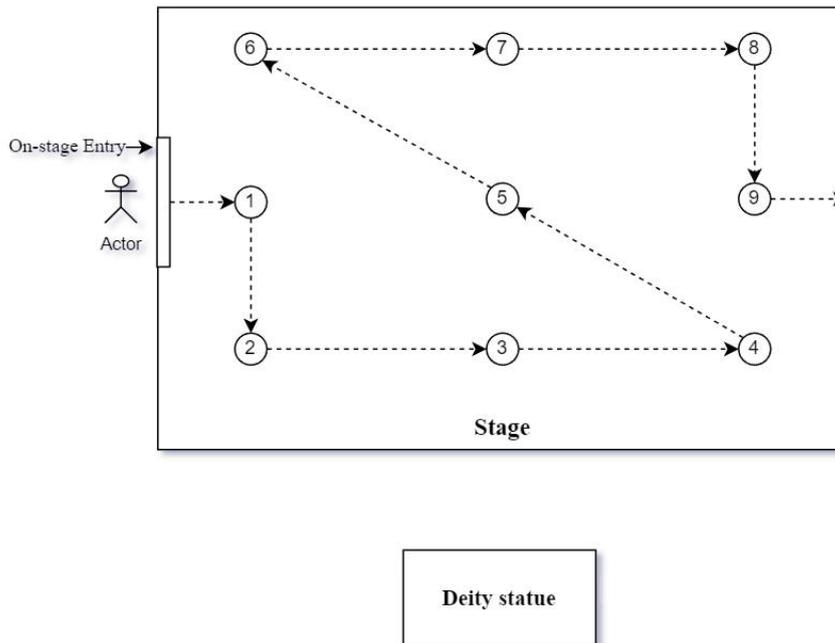
*The steps (trajectories) used in Taoism to invoke the deities.*



*Source:* Adapted from Wu, 2017.

**Figure 7**

*Actor trajectories during Purification Stage performances.*



*Note.* The figure shows the trajectory during the performance of Lao Buan Nee Heng troupe Teochew Opera troupe, consistent with the steps used in Taoism to invoke the deities.

*Source:* Drawn by the author.

This study infers that the Purification Stage in Teochew opera imitates the Taoist Jing Tan (净坛, purification ritual). Turner (2017) pointed out that the threshold period of the ritual process removes inequalities of social status and allows for forming a special relationship between people, a form of “communitas”. In Taoist rituals, this communitas can be seen as equal communication between humans and the deities. The Taoist temple is the specific space where this communication takes place, and it has a sacred character, which must be kept pure for the deities to visit the temple. Jing Tan is a crucial section of the ritual, in which the Taoist priest invites the deities to descend to the altar by sprinkling holy water, cleansing the dust, and offering three incense sticks to achieve the purpose of eliminating calamities and bringing blessings to the devotees, as well as transforming them into immortal beings. During the Jing Tan, Taoist priests recited incantations to exorcise evil spirits. The incantations recited are scriptures with a melody and are accompanied by musical instruments. The Purification Stage of Teochew opera is an imitation of this ritual.

The performance of the *Purification Stage* is highly religious, which inherits the structural pattern and religious function of Taoist Jing Tan rituals and many of the behavioural rituals of Taoism, and vividly demonstrates the rituals of religious

folklore from the perspective of the opera. The stage of the opera, like the altar of Taoism, is a mysterious space where the opera is performed in a ritual-like manner, which brings the performers and the audience into a non-realistic realm, allowing them to devote themselves to it at a specific time and space, and to gain a sense of life. This sacred stage likewise requires effective measures to maintain its purity.

Besides, the serial plays narrate a cohesive story or interconnected narratives, where each episode is integrally linked to the others, akin to the television series, which used to please and entertain transcendent beings. Fieldwork revealed that each serial play lasted approximately 45 minutes, with performers choosing multiple episodes for presentation based on the allocated performance duration for the ritual. Typically, Malaysian Chinese rituals span two or three days; if a Teochew opera is slated for presentation, a three-hour performance slot is allocated daily. Impersonating deity plays are exclusively staged on the ritual's inaugural day, followed by serial plays for subsequent performances. Troupes adapted their selection from an established repertoire based on the casting, each having a set of serial plays tailored to their cast's capabilities. However, interviews with actors across various troupes uniformly indicated proficiency in performing *Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell*, a play inspired by the Buddhist text *Bon Koran*. This play, particularly resonant during the Hungry Ghost Festival, is chosen for its thematic emphasis on religious belief and filial duty.

#### 4. Reciprocal Devotion in Teochew Opera Performances

The devotion of Malaysian Chinese to Teochew opera during rituals is apparent. However, it remains to be examined whether it serves solely as spiritual sustenance or if it can be reciprocated meaningfully.

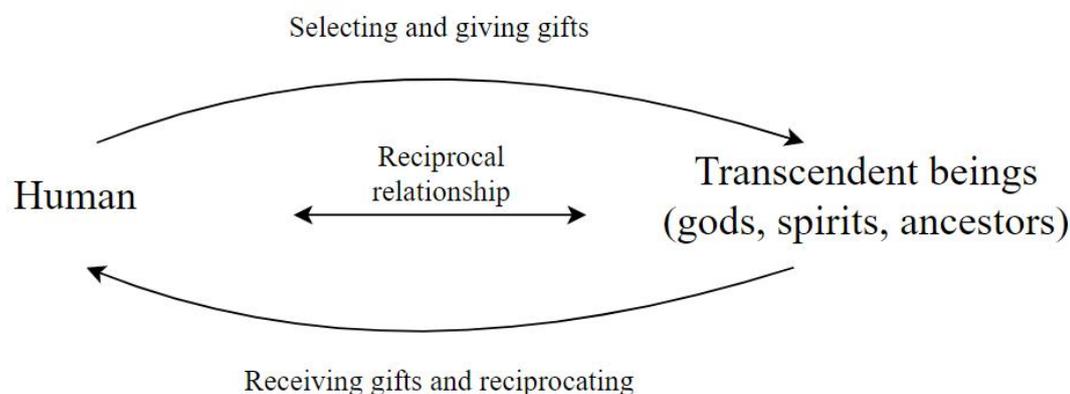
##### 4.1 Reciprocity Between Human and Transcendent beings

The study finds that the Teochew opera performances dedicated by the Malaysian Chinese to transcendental beings are based on a principle of reciprocity. Mauss (2002) stated that “In Scandinavian civilisation, and in a good number of others, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (p. 3). In human society, gifts serve as the ties that unite individuals. Likewise, gifts to the gods are components of a reciprocal relationship between humans and the divine. Such offerings are intended to cultivate a rapport, with humans giving to secure favour, protection or blessings (Mauss, 2002).

According to Mauss’s theory, gift exchange entails an inherent obligation: giving, receiving and reciprocating. In the context of Malaysian Chinese sacred rituals, this manifests as offerings made to the deity (giving), which the deity is expected to acknowledge (receiving), followed by an anticipated divine reciprocation in the form of blessings, good fortune or intervention, as shown in **Figure 8**.

**Figure 8**

*Gift exchanges between human and transcendent beings.*



*Source:* Drawn by the author.

When it comes to giving, selecting the form of the gift is paramount. The selection of Teochew opera as a performance gift is deliberate. Unlike tangible offerings such as food and alcohol of which the quantities remain unchanged before and after the ritual, making it challenging for participants to discern the acceptance by transcendent beings. When the offerings remain undiminished following the ritual, questions arise in participants’ minds regarding whether the deities deny the undesired offerings or if the deities are absent; all of these render the ritual ineffective.

In comparison, this issue does not arise when the gift manifests in performance. In the Malaysian Chinese concept, Teochew opera performances represent intangible gifts which can be appreciated and experienced by gods. Consequently, during rituals, individuals present Teochew opera performances to the transcendent beings, aiming to exchange this gift to realise their desires and achieve divine blessings. Such meticulously prepared performances are believed to diminish the alienation between humans and gods, thereby fostering more effective communication.

In the receiving phase, the content of the gift must be something that pleases the deity. The value of a gift transcends its material worth, residing instead in its symbolic significance and the social connections it embodies. This holds especially true for religious offerings, where a gift's value to the deities is rooted in its embodiment of devotion, reverence and the aspiration for communion with the divine rather than in its tangible value (Mauss, 2002).

Teochew opera performances represent artistic manifestations of devotion and reverence towards the deities, fulfilling the gift criteria for presenting offerings within the ritual context. For instance, in *Eight Immortals Celebrating a Longevity Birthday*, the performers represented the eight immortals to honour the supreme goddess, Queen Mother. Similarly, the *Purification Stage* featured recitations praising the deified Tang Ming Emperor, while *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* extolled Kwun Yum's mystical powers and venerated the supreme deity, Jade Emperor.

Gifts are presented with the expectation of reciprocity. In the gift exchange among individuals, needs can be negotiated and addressed through communication. However, dialogue between humans and the divine is inherently one-sided, requiring the gift to convey an anticipated desire. Teochew opera as a gift also reflects the human yearning to commune with the divine. This tradition underscores the Chinese pursuit of connecting with the gods to achieve worldly desires. From the perspective of the Malaysian Chinese, the expression of secular wishes—such as exorcism, promotion, wealth and fertility—through dynamic performances makes them more accessible to the deities. Teochew opera illustrates Malaysian Chinese communities' diverse ambitions and wishes through its performances and narratives. For instance, the performances of *Six Kingdoms Granted the Prime Minister* and *Dance for Promotion* highlighted Malaysian Chinese aspiration for political elevation; the *Goddess Sends Her Son* expressed the wish to be full of descendants; and the *Capital Meeting* symbolised the quest for enduring love. Thus, the Malaysian Chinese embed their hopes within Teochew opera's performances, presenting them as intangible gifts to the deities, seeking their aid in realising these desires.

The Malaysian Chinese practice of offering gifts to the deities, such as in Teochew opera, is predicated on the expectation of reciprocal behaviour—the underlying reasons for this tradition of gift exchange and expected reciprocation merit further discussion. As Mauss (2002) posed the question: “What rule of legality and self-interest, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated?”

What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?” (p. 4). Mauss elucidated the concept of Maori gift exchange by highlighting the “hau”, a spiritual force inherent in the gift that symbolises a portion of the giver’s soul. This principle posited that if the recipient fails to reciprocate the gift by societal norms, the spiritual essence attached to the gift could afflict the recipient with illness or even lead to death (Mauss, 2002). This “hau”, henceforth referred to as the spirit of the gift, establishes the obligation to reciprocate.

Mauss (2002) articulated that the spirit of the gift (hau) compels individuals to fulfil their obligation of reciprocation. This principle extends to the gift exchange practices among the Malaysian Chinese, where the essence imbued in the gift is termed “favours (人情)” (Yan, 2000). Within the Chinese social exchange system, the concept of favour plays a pivotal and significant role. On the one hand, it denotes an essential emotional reaction to everyday human interactions, embodying a social dimension that necessitates an individual’s comprehension of others’ emotional responses through their feelings. On the other hand, favour encompasses a series of social norms and moral obligations that mandate an individual’s engagement in maintaining relationships through exchanging gifts, greetings, visits and assistance (Yan, 2000).

A straightforward example elucidates the concept of favours within the Malaysian Chinese community. When visiting each other, individuals present gifts such as expensive cigarettes, alcohol, food items, luxury goods or cash. Embedded in these gifts is the favour, anticipating that the recipient will assist the giver in achieving their demands. Acceptance of the gift imposes an obligation on the recipient to promptly address the giver’s needs; failure to do so may result in complications for the recipient.

The tradition of favours, deeply rooted in ancient Chinese society, continues to serve as an unwritten norm in modern contexts. This norm permeates the Malaysian Chinese’s interpersonal interactions and communicative relations with transcendental beings, underscored by a steadfast belief in the significance of gift-giving. Hence, elaborate offerings and gifts, including significant performances such as the Teochew opera, are meticulously prepared to symbolise sincerity during rituals. It is with the hope and conviction that such earnest gifts will be favourably received by the deities, who, in turn, will fulfil their worldly desires based on the principle of reciprocity. This belief underpins the continued practice of Teochew opera within Malaysian society.

#### **4.2 Ritual Significance and Effectiveness of Teochew Opera**

The aspirations of Malaysian Chinese, particularly regarding advancements in social status, were fulfilled through dedicated Teochew opera performances in rituals. Gift exchanges necessitate occasions, and the Malaysian Chinese have leveraged rituals as opportunities to embed gifts. During the ritual, Chinese Malaysians present Teochew opera as a gift that melds song, dance and theatre to dramatise myths, an

event resembling a potlatch. A potlatch is a ceremonial event in which wealth or valuable items are given away or destroyed to exhibit a leader's wealth and power. This ceremony emphasises reaffirming familial, clan and intertribal connections and the bond with the supernatural world. Potlatches typically feature music, dance, singing, storytelling, and speech-making. Central to many potlatches is the veneration of the supernatural and the recounting of oral histories (Clutesi, 1969).

Gift exchanges during rituals were characterised by competition, with participants striving to surpass their rivals in generosity to attain significant political, kinship and religious status (Mauss, 2002). In Malaysian society, affluent Chinese individuals commonly present Teochew opera performances as gifts to gods during rituals to enhance their status, encompassing political, clan and religious dimensions.

In the Malaysian Chinese community, material offerings for rituals, including drinks and food, are typically financed by management organisations of clan houses, streets, or temples through daily donations. Non-material gifts, such as Teochew opera, are often sponsored by voluntary contributions from Chinese Malaysians. Individuals seeking to gain “face”—dignity and honour—seize this opportunity to vie for greater community attention through the amount of their donations.

Before the ceremony, the organiser will inform attendees about the event's schedule, including any Teochew opera performances, which serve as fundraising activities within the community. Concurrently, the community ranks donations based on the amounts contributed and publicly displayed this ranking, giving prominent recognition to major donors. To underscore such contributions, the top donor is honoured as the Censer Master ( 炉主 ), symbolising the representative in ritual. Moreover, the second-highest donor assumes the role of Deputy Censer Master ( 副炉主 ). During the opening, intermission and end of the Teochew opera, the performers express gratitude towards the Censer Master and Deputy Censer Master, publicly acknowledging their significant philanthropy. In this instance, Teochew opera was presented to the deities as an extravagant and valuable gift, with individuals establishing competitive financial relationships over this gift, endeavouring to surpass their competitors in magnanimity and secure a position of superiority.

The rituals and Teochew opera performances attracted large audiences and created an occasion that allowed donors to enhance their influence. Within the ritual participants' perception, these generous donors were considered outstanding people within the community, having accumulated wealth and established a substantial material foundation through personal effort. Although they might have been strangers, their contributions during these events earned them significant public goodwill. As the frequency of their donations to Teochew opera performances increased, so did their visibility and recognition within the community, which are the critical factors in the donors' pursuit of political status. During elections, this accumulated public goodwill and recognition could translate into additional votes, thereby enhancing their political status.

When presented as a gift to the ancestors' spirits, Teochew opera not only honours these forebears but also enhances the status and influence of the provider within the clan. This cultural practice extends beyond celebrating deities' birthdays and positions Teochew opera as a revered tribute to clan ancestors. The Malaysian Chinese, deeply rooted in clan identity and often distinguished by surnames such as Tan, Lim, and Teo, recognise ancestors within these familial groups. It is widely believed among the Malaysian Chinese that ancestors, transcending death, exist as spirits retaining worldly pleasures and capabilities. Moreover, these ancestral spirits are thought to influence the living, both directly and indirectly, in various ways. Anchored in this belief, the Malaysian Chinese venerate their ancestors as clan protectors, organising rituals and presenting offerings on the anniversaries of their ancestors' births or deaths. These acts express gratitude for past blessings and pleas for future protection and prosperity for the clan and its members.

The veneration of ancestors as deities is a common practice. Ceremonies primarily focus on presenting gifts, whereas most ceremonious rituals are designed to satisfy their spiritual desires and feature beloved performances of ancestors. Consequently, Malaysian Chinese clans sometimes incorporate diverse performances, including Teochew opera, into their rituals, regarding these acts as superior gifts. Individuals contributing to these performances also acquire prestige and recognition within the clan.

In offering Teochew opera as a gift, Malaysian Chinese honour their ancestors and achieve moral satisfaction through contributions. This practice, rooted in filial piety, is central to sustaining family and societal harmony (Tan, 1983). The dedication of Teochew opera in rituals embodies this traditional virtue, demonstrating a commitment to cultural preservation and respect for ancestors. Suppose the continuity of this tradition is disrupted within a particular generation of Malaysian Chinese individuals. In that case, those who fail to fulfil their transmission duty are regarded as unfilial and irresponsible descendants. Such a breach is antithetical to Chinese values, potentially eliciting significant criticism and condemnation from the clan and family and adversely affecting familial relationships and individual status within clans (Goh, personal communication, December 29, 2022). Consequently, despite the decline in ritual performance due to modernisation, proponents of tradition within the Chinese community steadfastly maintain that Teochew opera aligns with the preferences of their ancestors, viewing it as a sacred gift and a behaviour of filial piety and responsibility.

Driven by the concept of filial piety, Teochew opera is still presented as a gift during ritual in contemporary Malaysia. Patrons who sponsor these performances enhance their social standing and earn respect within their clans for their commitment to filial piety. They derive psychological fulfilment from their adherence to this venerable tradition. This dual reward mechanism plays a crucial role in perpetuating the practice of Teochew opera.

In addition, Teochew opera, often regarded as a profound expression of devotion, confers a form of religious stature upon its patrons. It is regarded not as a hierarchical position within the religion but as a status in the god's mind. This perception is cultivated through ritualistic offerings, wherein the expenditure of their contributions is a measurement index of one's piety. Among the Malaysian Chinese community, the extent of financial spending is the primary metric of this devotion. Consequently, a pervasive willingness and a sense of contentment exists to invest generously in these offerings. This practice is widely interpreted within Chinese cultural paradigms as a testament to one's earnestness towards the divine. It is predicated on the belief that the value of ritualistic offerings is directly correlated with reciprocation (McCreery, 1990).

During fieldwork interviews, informants commonly believed that increased financial contributions garnered more attention from gods. Consequently, they engaged in significant financial investments to sponsor Teochew opera performances and acquire costly ritual items like dragon incense and joss oil to elevate their status in the divine perception. This practice distinguishes them among devotees, which benefits gods prioritising their wishes. Motivated by this psychological gratification, the tradition of Teochew opera continues to be upheld and preserved within these rituals.

## 5. Conclusion

In the sacred context of contemporary Malaysia, Teochew opera is maintained as a performance with the symbolic meaning of secular desire. Essentially, it transcends mere entertainment, serving as a gift of exchange between humans and transcendent beings. Teochew opera as a gift fosters a closer bond between mortals and deities, fulfilling secular aspirations. Gifts in ritual must embody deep respect and veneration for the divine (Mauss, 2002). Aligning with this principle, the Malaysian Chinese recognises Teochew opera as an apt gift. Its repertoires, rich in divine and ancestral praise, resonate with transcendent beings. Moreover, these performances artistically manifest desires, effectively communicating worshippers' petitions to the gods. Thus, Teochew opera is a dual assurance for devotees seeking to realise their wishes.

Besides, Teochew opera represents a gift, not for its artistic merit, but due to the considerable expenditure it embodies. Within the Malaysian Chinese religious beliefs, there is a direct correlation between the financial investment in rituals and the expression of devotion. Consequently, individuals offer substantial gifts within their means to demonstrate their piety to the divine. During rituals, the Malaysian Chinese partake in open competition (Mauss, 2002) aimed at eclipsing others in generosity. This competitive spirit manifests through increased financial contributions to Teochew opera performances, a strategy employed to secure their superior status in the divine's mind and to acquire honour and prestige within the community, ultimately leading to an elevation in social status.

This study posits that the enduring presence of Teochew opera in rituals stems from two primary factors. Firstly, it is rooted in the Chinese ethos of reciprocity, where there is a belief that sincere efforts will be acknowledged and rewarded by transcendent beings, surpassing the value of their contributions. Secondly, such performances offer tangible secular benefits to the Malaysian Chinese, including enhanced visibility within their clan or community. This visibility can subsequently catalyse political or economic advancement. Thus, despite the artistic experience of Teochew opera performances in rituals not compelling, the Malaysian Chinese community continues to actively support and engage in this cultural tradition, aiming to ensure its sustainability.

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### **Data Availability Statement**

Data are contained within the article.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.