



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Symbolism in Ritual: An Example of Teochew Opera Performance Among the Malaysian Chinese

Lin Ziqiao<sup>1\*</sup>, Chieng, Julia<sup>2</sup>, Ang Mei Foong<sup>3</sup><sup>1,2,3</sup> Department of Music, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia**ARTICLE INFO****ABSTRACT**

Received: Aug 12, 2024

Accepted: Oct 8, 2024

**Keywords**

Malaysian Chinese

Teochew Opera

Ritual

Symbols

Symbolism

**\*Corresponding Author:**

gs60231@student.upm.edu.my

In the diverse cultural landscape of Malaysia, Teochew opera, a theatrical tradition with its origin in China, serves as a significant aspect of the ritual practices within the Chinese community that are constituted by perceptible symbols that accumulate distinctive attributes and specific meanings over time. Teochew opera in Malaysia conveys symbols through performance, fostering symbolic interactions and meaning-making. Nevertheless, the symbolic nuances of Teochew opera often remain enigmatic to other ethnic groups within Malaysia and tend to be obscured even among the Chinese community, where alternative forms of entertainment and cultural expressions hold sway. Consequently, this study aims to elucidate the characteristics of ritualised Teochew opera and chronicle the timing and objectives of these performances through participant observation in fieldwork. The ritualised performances of Teochew opera are deliberately timed, aligning predominantly with celebrations of gods, ghosts, and ancestors pertinent to the Malaysian Chinese community. Besides, the study examines the scripted performance of Carp Jumping Dragon Gate as an example, observed that Teochew opera predominantly employs visual symbols as the primary means of conveying symbolic meaning; their signifiers and signifieds are distinctly recognisable, allowing participants to decode the embedded messages from the pictorial cues. Auditory symbols, especially in some music, facilitate the elicitation of narratives and acquire significance through personalised interpretation and the integration of meaningful lyrics, titles and characteristic instrumentations. These performances symbolically articulate the community's aspirational and pragmatic yearnings, such as seeking blessings and warding off malevolent forces. By examining the symbolism of Teochew opera, this study anticipates an expansion of cultural comprehension among varied ethnic groups in Malaysia.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia, situated in Southeast Asia, is distinguished by its diverse ethnicities and cultures. The Malaysian Chinese constitute the second-largest ethnic group, comprising 22.8% of the country's population, following the Malay majority (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021). This community includes a variety of subgroups such as the Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, Foochow, and Kwongsai.

Most Chinese in Malaysia are descendants of Southern Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaya (now Malaysia) between the early 19th and the mid-20th centuries. In the mid-19th century, Malaya experienced an influx of Chinese caused by both push factors in China and pull factors in Malaya (Wong, 2010). In China, severe poverty and scarcity of fertile land made sustenance farming increasingly difficult, driving many to search for better opportunities elsewhere. Following the Opium War (1860), the Qing dynasty's relaxation of coastal emigration controls enabled farmers to pursue prospects abroad. On the other hand, in Malaya, migrant-friendly policies welcomed legal immigrants to fulfil labour demands driven by economic growth and colonial expansion (Wong, 2010). Upon achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia granted citizenship to immigrants,

particularly those with locally-born offspring. At present, the progeny of Chinese immigrants are Malaysian citizens.

Chinese culture brought by past immigrants has firmly embedded and seamlessly integrated itself as an indispensable aspect in the Malaysian social landscape, with Teochew opera as a prime example (Kang, 2005). Teochew opera, a traditional Chinese theatrical form originating from the Teochew region of Guangdong, characterised by its unique blend of music, vocal performance, mime, dance, and acrobatics, often exploring themes of love, loyalty and social morality. In Malaysia, this art form often performed during festivals and community events, and it retains the essential elements of its roots, such as the use of the Teochew dialect and traditional music instruments, while also incorporating local influences and contemporary themes to engage modern audiences. The performances are characterised by elaborate costumes and intricate make-up, creating a visually captivating spectacle that reflects the rich cultural tapestry of the Malaysian Chinese community (Lai, 1993).

In modern Malaysia, the appeal of Teochew opera, akin to other traditional Chinese performing arts, has waned with the advent of new entertainment media. Nonetheless, it persists in ritual practices tied intimately to the beliefs of the Malaysian Chinese, most notably during the Hungry Ghost Festival (Kang, 2005; Lee, 2018). Historically, Teochew opera entertained both deities and audiences within these rituals in Malaysia. However, as the public's enthusiasm diminishes, its role has almost shifted to purely being an immaterial offering in ritual (Goh, personal communication, February 2, 2023). Music and opera are paramount in contemporary Malaysian Chinese rituals where performances, including Teochew opera, are tendered as esteemed oblations to please and appease supernatural beings of gods, ghosts, and ancestral spirits.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Teochew opera needs to be symbolic in its performances during rituals, which in rituals serve as a bridge between the physical world and the spiritual realm, enabling participants to engage with intangible forces in a meaningful and experiential manner. The efficacy of blessings and exorcisms hinges on using symbols to represent and invoke divine or supernatural power. These symbols—whether spoken words, gestures, sacred objects, or specific ritualistic actions—embody the presence and authority of spiritual entities, thus imbuing the ritual with a sense of sacred potency (Grimes, 2014). Participants engaging in rituals craft an evocative ceremonial milieu through various elements of Teochew opera performances—such as singing, dancing, acting, narration and possession—thus facilitating an experience of solace and spiritual fulfilment, which serve as a vessel for conveying symbolism.

The study of symbolism in rituals spans anthropology, sociology, and religious studies, highlighting how symbolic acts reinforce social cohesion and collective consciousness. Durkheim (1912) stated that rituals use symbols to represent and perpetuate core societal values. Turner (1969) explored how ritual performances foster a shared identity and unity through “*communitas*”. Bell (1992) argued that rituals are dynamic processes that construct and reflect cultural meanings, emphasising participants' roles in imbuing rituals with symbolic significance. Recent interdisciplinary approaches examine ritual symbolism's intersections with power, identity, and resistance. Schechner (2003) noted that symbolic performances can both reinforce and subvert social structures. Digital media has introduced new dimensions, with scholars like Boellstorff (2015) exploring virtual rituals in online communities, showing how digital platforms create new symbolic forms. Overall, the literature reveals a rich tapestry of theories and methods, underscoring the profound role of symbols in shaping and reflecting cultural contexts in rituals.

Although Teochew opera is practised in Malaysian rituals, studies on its symbolic significance remain limited, hindering a comprehensive understanding of its cultural role. Lai (1993) explored its historical migration from China to Malaysia, noting its use by Teochew immigrants to honour gods during festivals but not examining its ritual functions. Kang (2005) expanded on this by explaining Teochew opera as a ritual offering to gods, yet focused more on material aspects like offerings and

idols than on symbolic performance elements. Lee (2018) interpreted symbolic elements in Chinese rituals, including Teochew opera, but did not specifically analyse its symbolic performance aspects.

Previous scholarship has mainly emphasised the historical context of Teochew opera in Malaysia, categorising it as a Chinese custom, but lacks a comprehensive interpretation of its symbolic significance. This article calls for an in-depth exploration of the symbolic elements within Teochew opera performances to better understand its cultural role in the Malaysian Chinese community.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

This study addresses several key questions regarding Teochew opera's role within rituals. Firstly, it seeks to understand why Teochew opera qualifies as an offering in a ritual context. Secondly, it aims to establish a method for classifying the symbols inherent in Teochew opera. Lastly, it endeavours to uncover the symbolism embedded within Teochew opera performances.

To achieve these aims, the study sets out with specific objectives. It intends to examine the criteria and rationale that render Teochew opera an appropriate and meaningful ritual offering. Additionally, the study aims to develop a comprehensive framework for categorising the diverse symbols found in Teochew opera, considering their meanings, origins, and functions within the performances. Furthermore, it seeks to explore these symbols' cultural and metaphorical significance, interpreting how they convey messages, values, and narratives that resonate with the Malaysian Chinese community.

This study holds significant scholarly and practical implications. Firstly, it thoroughly analyses Teochew opera within Malaysian Chinese rituals, thereby addressing the gap in decoding its symbolic meanings. Secondly, it affords a novel research outlook on the objectives of these rituals, augmenting both public knowledge and academic discourse regarding Chinese religious practices. Lastly, including Teochew opera in rituals exemplifies Malaysia's commitment to a multicultural policy, with the research outcomes fostering inter-ethnic cultural understanding and yielding a positive influence on cultural interactions.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs an ethnographic approach to investigate the socio-cultural dynamics of a specific Malaysian Chinese community through the lens of artistic symbols in Teochew opera to elucidate the significance of these cultural symbols within the community. Data was collected through extensive fieldwork by immersing into the community's daily activities which facilitates the interpretation of meanings and behaviours from an insider's perspective through minimising the cultural gap between the researcher and the subjects to glean a deep understanding of the community or group being examined. Data were gathered through the methods of observation, participation, and semi-structured interviews. The questions probed the participants' perspectives on the significance of music, movements and props in Teochew opera performances and their emotional responses to capture insights of their experience.

This study employs an exponential, non-discriminative snowball sampling method to identify informants, with a total of 15 participants involved. The study began with a seasoned Teochew opera veteran Goh, who then furnished multiple referrals, and subsequent referees perpetuated this chain by providing additional referrals until the requisite sample size was achieved. The informants in this study can be categorised into four distinct categories: performers, organisers, researchers and participants ().

**Table 1 Informants for the study of Teochew opera in Malaysia**

Category of Informant	Example of Informant	Number of people
Performer	Ling Goh, a veteran performer of Teochew opera in Penang	5
Organiser	Persatuan Teong Guan Pulau Pinang (Zhong Yuan association in Penang)	4
Researcher	Kang Hailing, a researcher of Teochew opera	2
Participant	Lim Hong Beng, an audience of Teochew opera; Tan Yoong, a temple administrator in Penang; and Low Zhi Kai, a Teochew opera stage set designer.	4

The research site chosen for this study was Penang, Malaysia, where the researcher conducted year-long fieldwork from December 2022 to December 2023. The site selection was motivated by the frequency of Teochew opera performances. At the beginning of the study, the researcher contacted the agent of the Lao Yu Tang Teochew Opera Troupe in Malaysia. Initial inquiries revealed more frequent Teochew opera performances in Penang, totalling 86 performances hosted by Lao Yu Tang from January to September 2022, with 67 occurring in Penang. These performances were primarily held on gods' birthdays, such as the Kwun Yum, Mazu and Tien Kung, and during traditional Chinese festivals, including the Hungry Ghost Festival (Jiang, personal communication, September 11, 2022). The recurrent nature of rituals and performances not only facilitated the relatively convenient and credible collection of data, but also enhanced the precision in interpreting their symbolism. Simultaneously, this study examines the Teochew opera play *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* as an example to analyse its symbols and symbolic meanings. As a representative play in ritual performances, it embodies symbolic meanings related to exorcism and the invocation of good fortune (Jiang, personal communication, September 11, 2022).

Additionally, within the anthropological framework of symbolic studies, culture is perceived as a system of meaning comprising signs and symbols, or signifiers and the signified (Geertz, 1973). In line with Xue's (2003) theory on ritual music, this study delves into the characteristics of symbols in Teochew opera, exploring their definitions, types, and symbolism within performances in Malaysia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Teochew Opera in Rituals

The definition of Teochew opera in ritual needs to be discussed as a priority. In ritualised Teochew opera performances, symbols are conveyed by performers and interpreted by the audience, which includes both humans and deities. Distinguishing between ritualised and entertainment-driven performances is a fundamental discussion. From the differentiation between ritual and entertainment as listed by Schechner (1994) (Figure 1), Teochew opera in rituals is "efficacy"; it aims for results—wish fulfilment—and involves both physical participants and spiritual entities, even in their absence. The performer's dedication may culminate in states of "trance" and "possession". The ritual process is completed in a collective creation that includes the interaction of the actors with the participants. Audience engagement is characterised by believing and participation, with critique being generally unwelcome within the collective interaction of the group. Conversely, secular Teochew opera performances are entertaining, designed for amusement, focusing on the immediate experience of those present. Performers remain conscientious and grounded while the audience observes and evaluates. Criticism is permitted, reflecting the individualistic approach in creating and adapting the performance.

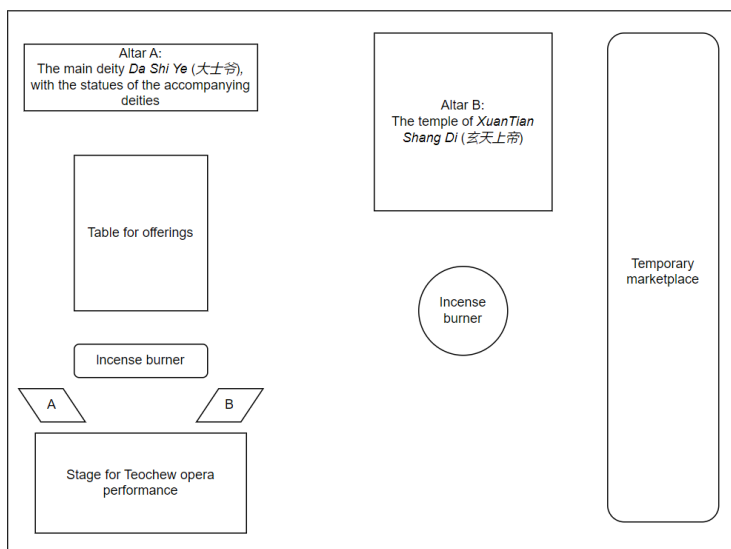
<i>Entertainment</i>	-----	<i>Efficacy</i>
<b>Theatre</b>		<b>Ritual</b>
fun for those here now performer displays learned skills individual creativity audience watches audience appreciates criticism flourishes		results for a divine Other performer possessed, in trance collective creativity audience participates audience believes criticism discouraged

**Figure 1 Division between theatrical entertainment and ritualistic efficacy (Schechner, 1994, p. 622).**

Based on Schechner’s (1994) framework for differentiating ritual from theatre, the most salient feature of ritualised Teochew opera performances within the Malaysian Chinese community is their enactment for deities. When Malaysian Chinese casually gather in the streets and squares to participate in or watch Teochew opera, neither performers nor the audience regard such activities as ritualistic. According to a performer, Lim:

We just sing [Teochew opera] casually for fun. We get together after work when we have time and improvise when we feel like it. We are all amateurs and do not worship the gods; it is just purely for entertainment, and people do not think we are worshipping the gods because we have no make-up and no rituals set up. (personal communication, July 20, 2023)

In contrast, on certain occasions, the Chinese community transports their deity statues to the opposite side of the stage, arranges elaborate offerings, and burns incense (Figure 3). Simultaneously, the ritual’s patron hires a professional Teochew opera troupe to execute a meticulously chosen repertoire in full costume on stage (Figure 2). 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.



**Figure 2 Structure of the ritual field. A and B beside the stage are spaces for the accompanying musical instruments: A for the orchestra whilst B for the percussion. (Drawn by Lin, 2023)**



**Figure 3** Tiong Chia Soon Heang Teochew opera troupe performing in front of the statue of *Da Shi Ye*. (Photo: Lin, August 24, 2023)

As Chua, a performer of the Sai Boon Fong Teochew Opera Troupe, said:

Nowadays, Teochew opera is performed in Malaysia almost only on occasions of paying tribute to the gods. The performance time is fixed every year, and only on god's birthdays or ancestors' birthdays will the troupe be hired to perform. Usually, it is performed at a temple or a guildhall if it is for ancestor worship. During the rituals, we cannot be as casual as we are in our private entertainment; we have to dress up and choose plays that fit the topic of the ritual. (personal communication, August 10, 2023)

The abovementioned scenario suggests that ritualised Teochew opera represents a form of hypernormal behaviour. Concerning the performance venue, ritualised Teochew opera is predominantly staged in sacred spaces like temples, distinguishing it from everyday settings. Regarding the frequency of performance, it is not a daily or weekly occurrence but is performed as part of a cycle of annual ritualistic activities. As for the intent behind the practice, ritualised Teochew opera embodies spiritual values, including faith and filial piety.

Furthermore, what kind of rituals in Malaysian society would present Teochew opera performances is another issue that warrants further discussion. This study found that Teochew opera is performed at Chinese faith-oriented rituals. Wolf (1999) posited that the Chinese belief system comprises three entities: gods, ghosts, and ancestors. The community reveres gods and ancestors for their ability to grant their wishes. In contrast, ghosts are typically those who have untimely deaths or lack descendants to make sacrifices on their behalf. Such spirits do not guard the townspeople but may instead disturb the living. Moreover, within a family, the deceased from other families are also referred to as "ghosts", viewed as "outsiders" who do not offer protection to the family members. Goh commented that:

Teochew opera is not performed in all rituals but in some important god's birthdays. Some wealthy Chinese businessmen also hire troupes to perform on the birthdays of their ancestors, and the timing is not fixed because the birthdays of each family's ancestors are different. In Malaysia, Teochew opera performances during Hungry Ghosts Festival are the most numerous, not to celebrate god's birthday, but to dedicate them to the king of hell, *Da Shi Ye*, and lonely souls [ghosts]. (personal communication, July 25, 2023)

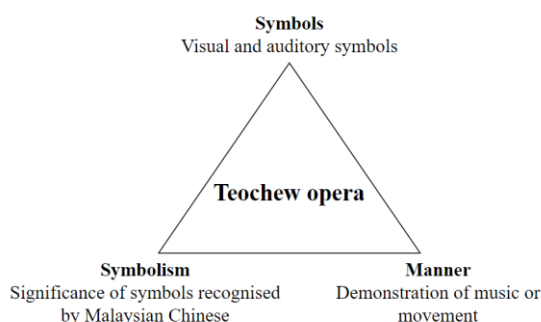
Based on the information provided by Goh (personal communication, July 25, 2023) combined with the researcher's fieldwork in Penang, Teochew opera is mainly performed at festivals, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 Dates of Teochew opera performances in Malaysia.**

Types of Ritual	Target of Appreciation in the Teochew Opera	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
	Da Bo Gong (大伯公诞)	The 15 <sup>th</sup> day of the 1 <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
	Huaguang 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
Ancestor's Birthdays	A deceased ancestor in a clan or family	It is not fixed, as the time of death varies
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

**3.2 Types of Symbols in Teochew Opera Performance**

Symbols signify entities other than themselves, with their representational rules established by consensus among users (Xue, 2003). Teochew opera is construed as a symbolic system because its integrally composed of three interrelated and interdependent elements: symbols, symbolism, and manner, each essential to the system's structure (Figure 4). Within the Malaysian Chinese community's rituals, Teochew opera constitutes an array of symbols presented to human and divine attendees through song and dance performances. The symbolism is recognised and endorsed by the Malaysian Chinese cultural code.



**Figure 4 Components of a Teochew opera.**



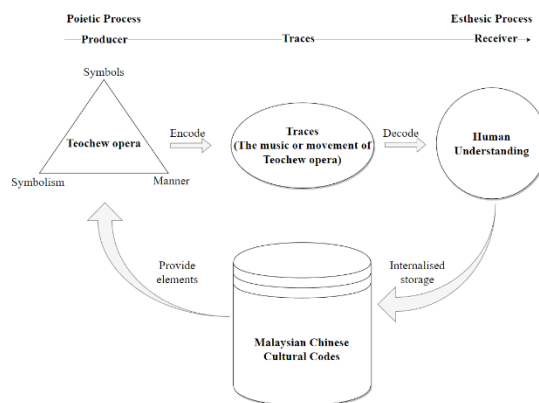
Not all of the Teochew opera elements in the ritual are symbols; some belong to other types of signs. The signs in rituals are diverse, yet they can be classified based on their defining characteristics. Peirce (2006) delineated three types of human cultural signs: icon, index, and symbol (Table 3).

**Table 3 Types of cultural signs (adapted from Peirce, 2006).**

Type	Characterised By	Example
Icon	Likeness	The image-like idols used in Teochew opera performance symbolise different deities
Index	Causal connection	The various onomatopoeic and mimetic words imitating animals in Teochew opera performances
Symbol	Stipulated convention	The peach in the Teochew opera performances symbolises longevity

Ritual symbols are commonly interpreted as symbolic signs; however, the principles of “likeness” in icons and “causal connection” in indexes also inform the construction of these symbols. For example, in Teochew opera performances, the image of the deity—central to the ritual—exhibits iconic characteristics. While inherently abstract and intangible, gods acquire concrete personifications in the human psyche. Adherents continually craft these divine representations to mirror their self-images, imbue them with human-like temperaments and structure the gods’ system to societal hierarchies. Consequently, the world of the gods was divided and hierarchised, with gods possessing distinct genders, personalities, names and unique visual representations. Over time, myths and their representations in paintings, sculptures, religious interpretations and ritual practices have firmly entrenched the vivid image of the divine in the collective consciousness. The statuary of deities used in Teochew opera and actors costumed as divine figures possess an iconic quality due to their resemblance to these ingrained perceptions.

In Teochew opera, symbols are utilised with greater frequency. Unlike icons and indexes, symbols—whether they manifest as behaviours, actions, gestures, signs, artefacts or sounds—have no inherent link to their significance. Instead, the relationship between a symbol and its meaning is anchored in a cultural code (Figure 5) that is collectively understood within the community and the ritual’s participants, and this understanding is retained cognitively. Comprehension of this cultural code is essential for interpreting the symbolic meanings embedded within these symbols.



**Figure 5 Encoding and decoding in Teochew opera symbols. (Adapted from Nattiez, 1990)**

As Eco (1976) articulated, a symbol is an “X” representing an absent “Y”. Consequently, any behaviour, phenomenon, or object within a ritual may assume symbols by transcending its literal meaning. Xue (2003) classified ritual symbols into language, behaviour, sound, and matter. However, some categories overlap, such as the linguistic category that contains lyrics with the behavioural category that contains the act of singing. However, the actor’s singing of the lyrics is a form of behaviour in itself. Consequently, this study posits, extending from Xue (2003), that symbols manifest



as two discernible types in Teochew opera rituals: visual and auditory. These symbols orchestrate an immersive world for the participants (Table 4).

**Table 4 Types of symbols in Teochew opera performance.**

Symbol	Concrete Form
Visual symbol	Dance, postures, movements, ritual acts, costumes, props, statues, images
Auditory symbol	Lyrics, recitations (dialogues of actors in opera performances), poems, incantations, songs, sounds of rattles, musical instruments, conversations or shouts of those present

The construction of symbols entails a societal selection of form and the subsequent ascription of meaning. The symbolism inherent in Teochew opera serves as a cultural code fostered by the Chinese community throughout its extensive history within Malaysian society. Like cultural customs, this code is cognitively preserved by individuals and social collectives who internalise it and express it through their practices.

### 3.3 Symbolisation and Interpretation of Meaning

Geertz (1973) stated:

It is in the context of a particular ritual—even if it is little more than reciting a myth, resorting to an oracle or decorating a tomb—that the emotions and motives evoked by symbols meet and reinforce the general ideas about the order of existence that symbols systematically articulate for people. (p. 112)

As previously outlined, Teochew opera employs auditory and visual symbols to create a symbolic system, necessitating an analysis of these elements' symbolism. Table 5 presents the symbols of an example of a frequently staged performance of Teochew opera *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* (鲤鱼跳龙门).

**Table 5 Symbols that are present in the ritual performance of Teochew opera.**

Types of symbols	Elements	Items
Visual symbol	Plot performance	Act 1: Demon Catching Act 2: Treasure Offering
	Movements	Ritualised steps or gestures
	Portrayals	Carp Spirit (鲤鱼精) Kwun Yum Bodhisattva (观音菩萨) Shan Tsai (善财童子) Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) White Ape (白猿) The Eight Immortals (八仙, eight persons)

	Props	Rattan ring Dragon costume Longevity peach Blessing couplets Calabash Palm-leaf fan Yu Gu (渔鼓) Sword and whisk Lotus flower Wicker basket Xiao (萧) Jade tablet
Auditory symbol	Singing with lyrics and dialogues	Offer treasures to represent the blessings of fortune upon you (献宝大吉昌) The ecological balance between man and nature has been sustained (山河万万年) People in the world are blessed with good fortune and longevity (人间添福寿) Well-being at any age (老少保安康) etc.
	Instrumental music	Drums, gongs, suona, temple block

**Visual Symbols**

The visual symbols in the ritual centre on the essential themes of blessing and exorcism. The narrative of *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* unfolds during the Jade Emperor’s birthday, with immortals gathering gifts for the celestial celebration. Notably, the protagonist is not an immortal but a demon known as the Carp Spirit. The plot is divided into two segments, each imbued with distinct symbols and connotations (Figure 6).



**Figure 6 The symbolism in the plot of *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate*.**

The symbolism of Act I revolves around exorcism. In the plot, the Carp Spirit harbours resentment for being excluded from the Jade Emperor’s birthday celebrations and robs the treasures of the immortals in attendance. The portrayal of the Carp Spirit is marked by the actor’s face, adorned with silver makeup, representing the archetype of the malevolent creature (Figure 7). This visual cue lets the audience instantly discern the character’s nefarious attributes, and the continuous martial arts movements during the performance symbolise the vicious and hideous image of the Carp Spirit.

In the play, the Carp Spirit personifies evil, disturbing the cosmic balance by unleashing tempests upon the tranquil sea, thus becoming the progenitor of maritime calamities. The tumultuous confrontations between the Carp Spirit and the deities encapsulate the disarray within the natural world, portraying how the Carp Spirit conjures tremendous storms and surges. This embodiment of chaos persists until Shan Tsai, the acolyte of Kwun Yum, subdues the Carp Spirit with a rattan ring—a talismanic weapon—thereby illustrating the creature’s eventual subjugation to Kwun Yum’s will. Symbols are conveyed to the audience in performance, generating interpretations of symbols in their perceptions of what they signify. In the play, the demon’s subjugation by Kwun Yum represents the expulsion of evil spirits from beyond the Chinese community by deities wielding supreme magical powers. It implies that calamities and misfortunes are kept at bay from the participants.



**Figure 7 The costume of the Carp Spirit. (photo: Lin, August 27, 2023)**

The symbolism of Act II revolves around blessings, titled *Treasure Offering*, which represents auspicious entreaties for prosperity. In this segment, performers depicting the Eight Immortals present celebratory gifts to the Jade Emperor for his birthday (Figure 8). A succession of symbols unfolds, collectively conveying wishes for good fortune. These symbols are primarily exhibited through material and verbal means, with the material symbols being the props utilised by the actors.



**Figure 8 The immortals offer their treasures to the Jade Emperor. (photo: Lin, August 27, 2023)**

The Teochew opera performers in Malaysia remain uncertain about the rationale behind the Eight Immortals' representation of diverse Chinese groups and the precise significance of their magical treasures, albeit broadly recognising them as symbols of good fortune and exorcism. This is exemplified by Chua, a Sai Boon Fong Teochew Opera Troupe member who attests to this knowledge gap:

We are confused about what group of people each immortal represents but know that they are all cultivated by Chinese of different classes, genders and ages, and therefore can represent the whole Malaysian Chinese community. The Eight Immortals' magical treasures are all efficacious, and some are very clear, like Calabash, which symbolises joy and blessing, and Sword and Whisk, which symbolises exorcism. For the other magical treasures, whether it is us or the audience, it is enough to know that it can bring beneficial effects. (personal communication, August 10, 2023)

Most of the audience at Teochew opera performances concurred with Chua's perspective, such as the Lau and Tan admitted their limited understanding of the functions of the magical treasures yet recognised them as emblematic of soliciting blessings and warding off evil spirits (personal communication, August 10, 2023). Nevertheless, Lim and Chen offered insights into the symbolism of the Eight Immortals and their magical treasures, with their explanations aligning coherently (personal communication, 2023, August 10, 2023). Table 6 illustrates that each immortal represents a different social group and the symbolism of their magical treasures.

**Table 6 The symbolism of the immortals and their props. (Adapted from Chen, 2012)**

Character	Groups Represented	Props (magical treasures)	Symbolism
Li Tieguai (李铁拐)	Underprivileged	Calabash	Joy and blessing
Zhong Hanli (钟汉离)	Impoverished	Palm-leaf fan	Longevity
Zhang Guolao (张果老)	Elder	Yu Gu (渔鼓)	Enlightenment
Lyu Dongbin (吕洞宾)	Male	Sword and whisk	Exorcism
He Xianggu (何仙姑)	Female	Lotus flower	Self-cultivation
Lan Caihe (蓝采和)	Child	Wicker basket	Cure
Han Xiangzi (韩湘子)	Wealthy	Xiao (箫)	Vibrant
Cao Guojiu (曹国舅)	Aristocratic	Jade tablet	Purification

In this context, words and gestures are less important, and the primary reliance is on the immortals' images to bring auspiciousness and good fortune to the audience offstage. In the Malaysian Chinese conceptual world, the presence of gods and immortals on the stage has become a kind of pictorial existence, which has the religious power to bring good luck and blessings to individuals. The props used by the actors on the stage are symbols of the magical powers of the immortals and can provide blessings and good fortune to those present, which the Malaysian Chinese strongly believe.

Notably, the symbolism of the performance is multifaceted. On a superficial level, the ritual entails performers embodying immortals representing various Chinese classes and groups. The offerings made to the Jade Emperor essentially symbolise the earthly offerings to the supreme deity, reflecting reverence and devotion. On a deeper level, under the influence of the ritual, the audience perceives the actors as vessels of divine possession and thus the benediction actions or sounds displayed by the performers as a blessing from the "immortals". These visual symbols align with the audience's notions of blessings or exorcism, serving the ritual's intended purpose.

Furthermore, upon completing the offerings by the Eight Immortals, the narrative reaches its most emblematic pinnacle with the *Carp Jumping the Dragon Gate* sequence. In this scene, Kwun Yum, presenting the final gift, commands the subdued Carp Spirit to enact the dragon gate leap as a tribute to the Jade Emperor. The *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* motif, steeped in Chinese legend, symbolises triumph in examinations, career advancement and perseverance against adversity. During the episode, the Carp Spirit dons the Dragon costume and, with Kwun Yum's magical power support, successfully jumps over the dragon gate, thus transforming from an evil presence into a revered mythical creature—the Chinese Dragon. This ritual embodies dual symbolism: firstly, the metamorphosis from an evil to a sacred entity represents the "purification" of evil spirits, a process of profound importance to the Malaysian Chinese community. Secondly, the Chinese dragon epitomises authority, dignity, and prestige within the Malaysian Chinese cultural totem, and the performance allegorically suggests that through the deity's favour, the ordinary can ascend to greatness, which is an intense aspiration of the Malaysian Chinese.

The symbolism inherent in props can be obscure, requiring interpretation by the community's knowledgeable elders. In contrast, the symbolism in written language is explicit, with meanings directly conveyed through words. In the final plot, the immortals take out "blessing couplets" with auspicious words written on them, all of which are literal symbols, such as the world is at peace (天下太平); the country is prosperous and the people are at peace (国泰民安); money and treasures will be plentiful (招财进宝); and a bumper grain harvest (五谷丰登).

The symbols are presented in the direction of the audience and the altar. On the one hand, the blessing couplets on the stage symbolise the wishes of the Malaysian Chinese. As the conveyors of the symbols, the performers presented the couplets filled with wishes to the altar, intending to let the embodied presence of the deities (the statues) informed about the people's aspirations and turn

them into reality. On the other hand, the deities receive the symbols and give the props of the present world the power of the ethereal and intangible. At this point, the couplets become the symbols of the oracles with the blessings of the deities, which the audience perceives. The auspicious words on the couplets match the people's wishes, and the significance is conveyed through visible symbols.

Overall, the visual symbols in Teochew opera are "consummated" (Xue, 2003), featuring distinct signifiers and corresponding signified meanings. For example, when the audience observes a performer presenting a peach in the performance, they readily associate it with the concept of longevity, a well-established convention within the cultural code of the Malaysian Chinese community.

### **Auditory Symbols**

In Teochew opera performances, actors convey symbolic meanings through visual symbols while reinforcing symbolic meanings through auditory symbols. Auditory symbols are mainly conveyed through human voices and instrumental sounds during performances. In Teochew opera, the human voice in the ritual is mainly speaking, which is called "koucai (口彩)", meaning words of good luck or compliments. Koucai in Teochew opera is usually accompanied by rituals and is presented through actors playing the role of a god issuing a decree or a dignitary congratulating the audience, which has a particular utility in Malaysian Chinese concepts. According to Austin's (1975) theory of speech acts, utterance acts are the most basic grammatical conventions, articulating sentences to express meaning. In appropriate situations, the speaker accomplishes a purpose through speech, such as giving an order or asking a question, and influencing the listener through the speech to produce a specific effect on the listener. Accordingly, speech acts are more influential in the functional occurrence of auditory symbols in Teochew opera than in other non-religious ritual occasions. From the perspective of the Malaysian Chinese, the actors' verbal behaviour represents the god's will, and its delivery caters to the purpose and desire of the public to eliminate calamities and bring good fortune. The human voices are straightforward, and the wishes of the people to be fulfilled by the spirits are stated directly by the actors and can be understood without elaborate explanation.

Besides the speaking-based vocals in the performance, musicality in the singing is also crucial. The singing by the performers is a form of blessing, and the auspicious connotations sung by the performers loudly stimulate the inner feelings and emotions of the listeners, intertwined with feelings of awe and joy. This behaviour influences their latent consciousness and gives them the power of autonomy in real life, achieving the effect that sincere wishes can be fulfilled.

Meanwhile, singing is instrumental in intensifying the ritual's impact in Teochew opera, with the most direct evidence of this being the effect of the vocal performance on inducing trance states. Rouget (1985) suggested that music plays a two-tiered role in the ritual, providing the participants with the emotions needed for the trance and triggering possession through its combination with dance. This trance causes the performer to experience a sense of divine possession and acquire marvellous abilities. In contrast, the trance gives the participant an illusion of miraculous manifestation, representing the fulfilment of a wish.

The auditory symbols of Teochew opera elicit two distinct states of trance: the "emotional trance" experienced by performers and the "communal trance" experienced by the audience (Rouget, 1985). The opera's music serves as a conduit for the performers, granting them the emotional capacity to plunge deeply into the religious ritual. In conjunction with their choreographed movements, this immersion enables performers to reach a profound state interpreted as being "possessed" by the gods. On the other hand, the opera initially ushered the audience into a trance state which give them an illusion affirming the ritual's validity, leaving them with the impression that the gods were indeed "present".

However, it is hard to measure whether Teochew opera is effective against trance. Underhill (2022) stated:

Dance, music, and other deliberately accentuated rhythms of nature are to be found and play the same role in the wine festivals of the Greeks, in the Gnostics, and countless other mystery cults. That such activities can influence human consciousness to a considerable extent has been proved by experience. However, the reasons for this are poorly understood. (2022, p. 165)

In the interview with the Teochew opera performer of Tiong Chia Soon Heang on whether the effect of trance could be achieved through music, he commented:

We hoped that we could get the god to possess us through this combination of singing and dancing [in Teochew opera]. Nevertheless, gods are very imaginary, and we are unsure if they came down; we know it is effective. (personal communication, Aug 28, 2023)

Those audiences who participated in the ritual also agreed that:

Music is a must for the ritual; otherwise, it will always feel like something is lacking. Under the influence of music, it feels like the gods are present, and wishes are more likely to be fulfilled. But in a daily situation, even if you play the same music, there is no such [trance] feeling. (personal communication, August 28, 2023)

Interviews indicated that performers and audiences recognised Teochew opera's musical function in rituals but could not articulate how music conveyed symbolism. Blacking (1995) posited that music is not a language that can be understood all the time but is more a metaphorical expression of emotion. However, if appreciated in a particular context, music can communicate precisely the message it carries. Thus, unlike language, music does not inherently explain itself; instead, it elicits narrative behaviour (Nattiez, 1990). As previously depicted (Figure 5), music is merely a trace, an empty symbolic vessel, where the expression and interpretation of its meaning (semantics) manifest solely through the poietic and esthetic processes (Nattiez, 1990). The onus of deciphering this meaning rests with both the performer and the audience.

The study suggests that while the precise effect of music on trance is challenging to quantify, its contribution is undeniable. The music enhances the narrative by amplifying the emotional impact of the actors' lyrics. It fosters a particular mood conducive to the ritual, facilitating a transformative experience for individuals on an auditory level and enabling an interplay between emotion and intention through the medium of music. Furthermore, instrumental sounds, particularly those from gongs and drums, are subtle in their symbolism within performances; they represent the magic instruments essential for ritual (Xiang, 1991). Gan, a professor from the Sichuan Conservatory of Music and a scholar in ritual music research, said:

The opera performance in the ritual is an artistic evolution of the Chinese Taoist ritual. The melodious scriptures in Taoist rituals became the song lyrics and chant in opera, and the ritualised movements became the dances and steps in opera performances .... In terms of musical instruments, the use of gongs and drums in the opera mimics the use of percussive props, such as wooden fish, in Taoist rituals. In Chinese tradition, loud sounds can drive away evil spirits, so drums and gongs are used as the main instruments in the ritual. So, it can be found that musical performances in rituals, including operas, are relatively simple in their instrumentation because the primary purpose of the performance is to fulfil a ritual function, not to produce beautiful music for people to enjoy. (personal communication, August 30, 2023)

Hence, in Teochew opera performance, musicians frequently strike gongs and drums to capture celestial attention, denoting these instruments as magical items for divine interaction. Simultaneously, the robust sound of gongs and drums acts as a ward against ghosts, symbolising an instrument for expelling malevolent entities. This auditory experience, reaching the audience during the performance, aligns with the established ritualistic role of gongs and drums in the collective consciousness, allowing for the interpretation of their symbolic auditory significance.

Overall, auditory symbols, except speech, are generally less obvious than visual symbols and are classified as “unconsummated” (Xue, 2003). In ritualised Teochew opera, the symbolic aspect of music assumes a subordinate position, and they possess indistinct signifiers and signifieds. For example, the audience cannot fully decipher symbolism through a particular melodic structure or harmonic progression. Some music passages do not independently convey specific meanings; instead, they require extra-musical elements—for instance, lyrics, titles, and instrumental functions—to communicate their intended message.

## CONCLUSION

Teochew opera, which can convey themes of praying for blessings or exorcising evil spirits, meets the criteria necessary to serve as a ritual offering. It is performed in periodic rituals in Malaysia, coinciding with prescribed festivities in honouring the gods. Teochew opera’s quintessential aim is to weave an enigmatic illusion, employing an array of visual and auditory symbols to resonate with the participants’ emotions. Within rituals, visual symbols are the primary vehicles for conveying symbolic meaning; their signifiers and signifieds are distinctly apparent, enabling participants to decode the embedded meanings from the pictorial cues swiftly. Auditory symbols, particularly in some music, facilitate the elicitation of narratives and gains significance through individualised interpretation and the incorporation of meaningful lyrics, titles and instrumental characteristics.

The essence of Teochew opera within ritualistic contexts centres on impersonation, where performers don the garb of deities or nobility, adorning themselves with elaborate costumes, intricate facial makeup or masks. Through this theatricality, they signal a departure from the mundane, thereby engendering a novel realm and conjuring an illusion that transports the audience beyond the confines of their typical existence. The study expands upon Schechner’s (1994) conceptualisation of ritual, integrating fieldwork findings to delineate the characteristics of the ritualised Teochew opera in Malaysia (Table 7).

**Table 7 Characteristics of a ritualised Teochew opera.**

<b>Characteristics of Ritualised Teochew opera</b>	
Context	Sacred
Purpose	Fulfilment of wishes for blessing or exorcism
Date	Periodic birthdays or festivals of gods, ghosts, and ancestors of the Malaysian Chinese
Venue	Temples or temporary shrines
For whom	The divine other and worshipers
Performer Status	Possessed in a trance
Audience Status	Believing in a trance
Performance characteristics	Performance is a collective interaction, ritualised actions are emphasised, and music is supplementary to the narrative
Evaluation	Criticism is discouraged

For the Malaysian Chinese, Teochew opera is a profound symbol of their spiritual offerings to deities, including ghosts and ancestors. These performances, considered offerings superior to material gifts, represent an exemplary medium to please or appease these entities. Concurrently, the Chinese imbue these presentations with their aspirations, transforming them into symbols they offer to supernatural beings in the hopes—prosperity and peace of community, family and individual—that their desires will be acknowledged and granted. Therefore, symbols in Teochew opera performances often centre on themes of exorcism and the pursuit of good fortune. As exemplified in the representative performance *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate*, specific symbols such as peaches symbolising longevity and calabashes representing joy are deeply ingrained within the cultural code



of numerous audiences. Others, however, may be less transparent, yet the audience readily apprehends the auspicious significance of the rituals even without explicit interpretation.

In conclusion, Teochew opera is a collection of symbols of the historical and cultural accumulation of the Malaysian Chinese. It reinforces the inner conviction in the vision and expectation of a better life through its visual and auditory symbols. The belief of the rituals as supernatural compels to achieve good intentions among the Malaysian Chinese.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Lin conceived the idea, designed the project, and wrote the manuscript. Julia provided the symbolic analysis approach and polished the paper. Ang reformulated the research questions and objectives and worked with Lin on the data triangulation. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## REFERENCES

- Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Blacking, J. (1995). *Music, culture, and experience: Selected papers of John Blacking*. University of Chicago Press.
- Boellstorff, T. (2015). *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Princeton University Press.
- Chen, Y. L. (2012). 传统吉祥纹样“暗八仙”及其审美意蕴 [Traditional auspicious pattern Dark Eight Immortals and its aesthetic meaning]. *民族艺术研究* [Ethnic Arts Research], (2), 92–95.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2021, Sep 29). *Highlight of MyCensus 2020*. <https://www.mycensus.gov.my/index.php/census-info/highlight-of-mycensus-2020>
- Durkheim, E. (1912). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Free Press.
- Eco, U. (1976). Peirce's notion of interpretant. *MLN*, 91(6), 1457–1472. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907146>
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Grimes, R. L. (2014). *The craft of ritual studies*. OUP USA.
- Kang, H. (2005). 潮剧在马来西亚的流传与发展 [The circulation and development of Teochew opera in Malaysia]. *艺苑* [The Arts], Z(1), 78–85. <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/61482x/2005z1/4000353581.html>
- Lai, B. (1993). *东南亚华文戏剧概观* [An overview of Chinese opera in Southeast Asia]. 中国戏剧出版社 [China Theatre Press].
- Lee, S. F. (2018). *Cultural representation of music and performing arts in Johor Old Temple's parade of deities in Malaysia* [Doctoral dissertation, Universiti Putra Malaysia]. Universiti Putra Malaysia Institutional Repository. <http://psasir.upm.edu.my/id/eprint/77682>
- Nattiez, J. J. (1990). *Music and discourse: Toward a semiology of music*. Princeton University Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (2006). The sign: icon, index, and symbol. In Manghani, S., Piper, A., & Simons, J. (Eds.), *Images: A reader* (pp. 107–109). SAGE Publications.
- Rouget, G. (1985). *Music and trance: A theory of the relations between music and possession*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schechner, R. (1994). Ritual and performance. In Ingold, T. (Eds.), *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology* (pp.613–647). Routledge.
- Schechner, R. (2003). *Performance theory*. Routledge.
- Schechner, R. (2003). *The future of ritual: Writings on culture and performance*. Routledge.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-Structure*. Aldine Transaction.
- Underhill, E. (2022). *Mysticism*. DigiCat.
- Wolf, A. P. (1999). *Religion and ritual in Chinese society*. Stanford University Press.
- Wong, T. C. (2010). *Asian cities, migrant labor and contested spaces*. Routledge.
- Xiang, S. (1991). 道教音乐之法器刍议 [Ruminations on Taoist music]. *黄钟: 武汉音乐学院学报* [Huang Zhong: Journal of Wuhan Conservatory of Music], (4), 75–80. <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/82792x/199104/1002972628.html>

- Xue, Y. (2003). *神圣的娱乐: 中国民间祭祀仪式及其音乐的人类学研究* [Sacred entertainment: An anthropological study of Chinese folk rituals and their music]. 宗教文化出版社 [Religious Culture Press].
- Yolla Margaretha, Popo Suryana, (2023). The Effect of Market Orientation, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Learning Orientation on Marketing Innovations and their Implications on the Marketing Performance of Micro Actors in Bandung Metropolitan Area. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*. E-ISSN: 2221-7630; P-ISSN: 1727-4915, Pak. j. life soc. Sci. (2023), 21(1): 478-498. [https://www.pjlss.edu.pk/pdf\\_files/2023\\_1/478-498.pdf](https://www.pjlss.edu.pk/pdf_files/2023_1/478-498.pdf)
- Yolla Margaretha, Popo Suryana, (2023). The Effect of Market Orientation, Entrepreneurial Orientation, and Learning Orientation on Marketing Innovations and their Implications on the Marketing Performance of Micro Actors in Bandung Metropolitan Area. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences*. E-ISSN: 2221-7630; P-ISSN: 1727-4915, Pak. j. life soc. Sci. (2023), 21(1): 478-498. [https://www.pjlss.edu.pk/pdf\\_files/2023\\_1/478-498.pdf](https://www.pjlss.edu.pk/pdf_files/2023_1/478-498.pdf)