



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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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 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. This study explores Teochew opera's role in Malaysian Chinese rituals, focusing on its temporal and spatial arrangement and symbolic elements. This paper also proposes a framework for categorising and interpreting these symbols, and presents an analysis of the representative performance of Carp Jumping Dragon Gate. The research found 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 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 musical instruments. Teochew opera performances in rituals 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 Chinese 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 a significant aspect in the Malaysian social landscape, with Teochew opera as a prime example (Kang, 2005). Teochew opera is a traditional Chinese theatrical form originating from the Teochew region of Guangdong. It is characterised by its unique blend of music, vocal performance, mime, dance, and acrobatics, which often explore themes of love, loyalty, and social morality. In Malaysia, Teochew opera is 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 Chinese traditional musical instruments, while also incorporating local influences and contemporary themes to engage modern audiences. For example, it uses bonang, guitar and cello; or adopts folklore stories such as *Si Tanggang* to innovate the script. 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 present-day 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).

## Literature Review

Teochew opera performances during rituals emphasise symbolism, which serves 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). Teochew opera serves as a vessel for conveying symbolism where performers engaging in rituals craft an evocative ceremonial milieu through various elements of Teochew opera performances—such as singing, dancing, acting, narration and possession—facilitate an experience of solace and spiritual fulfilment.

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. Previous studies also examine ritual symbolism's intersections with power, identity, and resistance. For example, 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 have yet to discuss in detail how performances of Teochew opera fulfil their functions and their effects in rituals. Lai (1993) explored the historical migration of Teochew opera from China to Malaysia and pointed out that Teochew immigrants used it to worship the gods during festivals. Kang (2005) expanded on this by explaining Teochew opera as a ritual offering to gods focusing on material aspects like offerings and idols. Lee (2018) interpreted the performance types in Malaysian Chinese rituals, including

Teochew opera. However, these studies have yet to analyse the symbolic elements of the movements, gestures and music in Teochew opera.

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 Objectives

This study addresses several key questions regarding the role of Teochew opera within rituals. Firstly, this study aims to elaborate on the configuration of Teochew opera in Malaysian rituals, focusing on the arrangement of temporal and spatial elements. Second, it proposes a framework for categorising the various symbols in Teochew opera and offers a conceptual interpretation of how these symbols convey meaning. Finally, the study examines the representative Teochew opera performance *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate*, which is frequently performed in rituals, to explain how its symbolic elements convey information, values, and narratives resonating with the Malaysian Chinese community.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an ethnographic approach to investigate the symbolic meaning of the elements of Teochew opera in the Malaysian Chinese community. The study focuses on the Chinese community in Penang, Malaysia, as an example. 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; Lao Yu Tang hosted 86 performances from January to September 2022 with 67 occurring in Penang. These performances were primarily held on gods' birthdays, such as the Kwun Yum (观音), Mazu (妈祖) and Jade Emperor (天公), 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.

Fieldwork was conducted by immersing into the community's daily activities to obtain an insider's perspective which facilitates the interpretation of meanings and behaviours. The data for this study were collected from December 2022 to December 2023 through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The questions probed the informants' 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**).

**Table 1. Informants of 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
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This study builds upon Xue’s (2003) theory of musical symbolism, which suggests music is intrinsically without symbolic meaning. He argued that music conveys symbolic meaning not through individual tones but through an array of musical symbols composed of language, objects, actions, and sounds. The relationship between music and its meaning is fluid; the same musical symbol may convey varied emotions or meanings based on the performance context, allowing for multiple interpretations.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Teochew Opera in Rituals

A ritualised Teochew opera is distinguished from its entertainment form. Based on Schechner (1994), Teochew opera in the ritual context is concerned with efficacy, which is intended to achieve results—the fulfilment of desires—as shown in **Figure 1**.

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

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

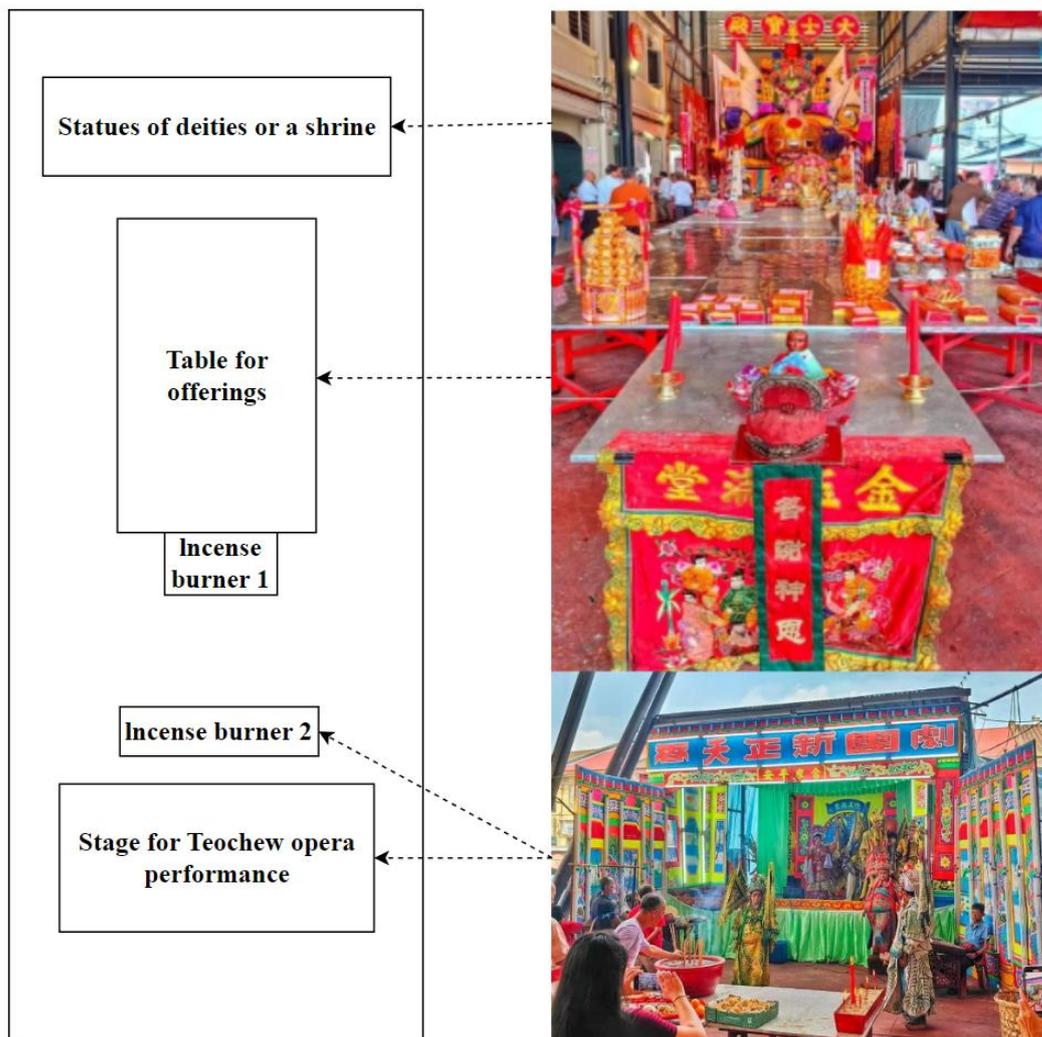
The most salient feature of ritualised Teochew opera performances within the Malaysian Chinese community is their enactment for deities. In the entertainment setting, when the audience casually gather in the streets and squares to participate, neither performers nor the audience regard such activities 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. Simultaneously, the ritual’s patron hires a professional Teochew opera troupe to execute a meticulously chosen repertoire in full costume on stage, as shown in **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. Chua, a performer of the Sai Boon Fong Teochew Opera Troupe, said:

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)

**Figure 2. The layout of the venue for Teochew opera ritual performances. (photo: Lin, August 27, 2023)**



The abovementioned scenario suggests that ritualised Teochew opera is not casually performed but is aligned with the regulations of ritual activities. On the performance venue, ritualised Teochew opera is predominantly staged in sacred places like temples, distinguishing it from everyday spaces. Regarding the frequency of performance, it is not a daily or weekly occurrence but rather 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.

Ritualised Teochew opera is faith-oriented in Malaysia and incorporates beliefs in supernatural powers to achieve prosperity and harmonious stability in communities. Wolf (1999) posited that the Chinese belief system comprises three entities: gods, ghosts and ancestors, which are related to the occasions of Teochew opera performances. According to Goh:

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. ... The purpose of these performances is to pray to the gods to fulfil wishes or to thank the ancestors for the prosperity they have brought to the family and community. ... 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] ... These performances aim to appease the ghosts and reduce the harm they cause to the communities. (personal communication, July 25, 2023)

Based on fieldwork and the information provided by Goh (personal communication, July 25, 2023), 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
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). It is an “X” representing an absent “Y”. Consequently, any behaviour, phenomenon, or object within a ritual may assume symbols by transcending its literal meaning (Eco, 1976). Xue (2003) classified ritual symbols into language, behaviour, sound, and matter. However, some categories overlap, such as language, which contains lyrics, and behaviour, which includes the act of singing: the performer’s singing of the lyrics is a form of behaviour in itself. Extending from this, this study posits that symbols manifest as two discernible types in Teochew opera rituals: visual and auditory, as shown in **Table 3**. These symbols orchestrate an immersive world for the participants.

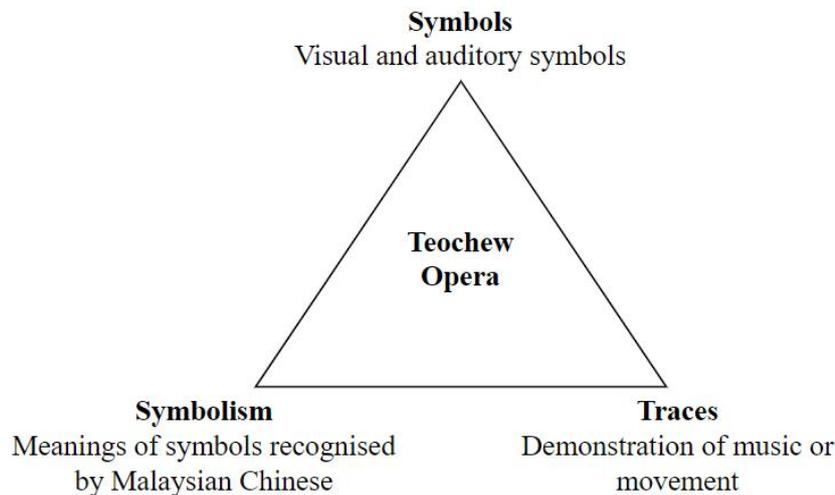
**Table 3. Types of symbols in Teochew opera performance.**

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

Teochew opera is construed as a symbolic system because its integrally composed of three interrelated and interdependent elements: symbols, symbolism, and traces, each essential to the system’s structure, as shown in **Figure 3**. Symbols in Teochew opera encompass visual and

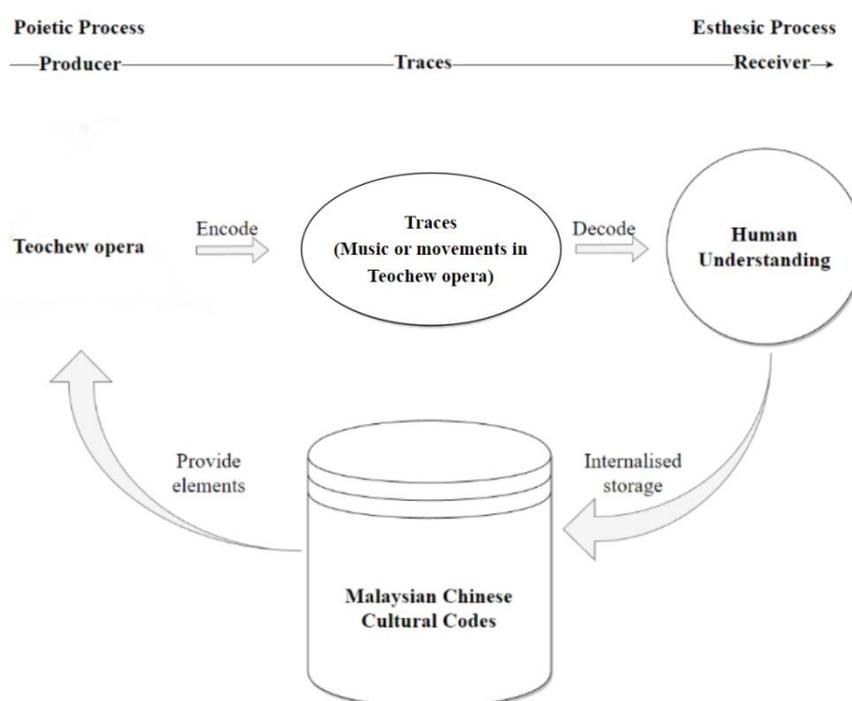
auditory components. Traces refer to the methods by which these symbols are presented. For instance, performer express visual symbols through gestures and movements and convey auditory symbols through singing. Symbolism is the cognitive meaning of symbols shared by participants in a ritual.

**Figure 3. The symbolic system of Teochew opera in rituals.**



Some elements of Teochew opera, such as plays praising the gods or movements symbolising blessings, align with the ritual’s purpose and are thus performed in sacred contexts. In these contexts, performers intentionally present traces, such as the symbolic music and movements of Teochew opera. These elements are consistent with the audience’s intentions to invoke blessings or ward off evil. They are becoming internalised in their cultural codes where symbolic meanings are interpreted based on shared cognitive understanding. During performances, Teochew opera practitioners routinely adapt the content to match the audience’s preferences. For example, if the audience favours themes related to social status enhancement, this guides the performers to innovate continuously, creating a dynamic cycle, as shown in **Figure 4**.

**Figure 4. Encoding and decoding in Teochew opera symbols. (Adapted from Nattiez, 1990)**



### 3.3 Symbolisation and Interpretation of Meaning

This section takes the *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate* (鲤鱼跳龙门), a common Teochew opera performance in Malaysian Chinese rituals, as an example, which conveys both blessing and exorcism meanings for the participants. **Table 4** presents its visual and auditory symbols.

**Table 4. Symbols that are present in the ritual performance of *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate*.**

Types of symbols	Elements	Items
Visual symbol	Plot performance	Act I: 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 (箫), 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* (鲤鱼跳龙门) unfolds during the Jade Emperor's (玉皇大帝, one of the representations of the primordial god in Chinese myths) birthday, with the Eight Immortals (八仙) gathering gifts for the celestial celebration. Notably, the protagonist is not an immortal but a demon known as the Carp Spirit (鲤鱼精). The plot is divided into two segments, each imbued with distinct symbols and connotations, as shown in **Figure 5**.

**Figure 5. The symbolism in the plot of *Carp Jumping Dragon Gate*.**



The symbolism of Act I titled Demon Catching (捉妖) 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 Eight Immortals in attendance. The portrayal of the Carp Spirit is marked by the performer's face, adorned with silver make-up, representing the archetype of the malevolent creature, as shown in **Figure 6**. This visual cue allows the audience to 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.

**Figure 6. The costume of the Carp Spirit. (photo: Lin, August 27, 2023)**



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 Eight Immortals 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 (善财童子), the acolyte of Kwun Yum (观音), subdues

the Carp Spirit with a rattan ring—a talismanic weapon—thereby illustrating the creature’s eventual subjugation to Kwun Yum’s will. In this scenario, Kwun Yum’s victory over the demon symbolises the expulsion of evil from the Chinese community by deities with supreme divine power. For the participants in the ritual, this convinces them that disasters and misfortunes will remain distant.

The symbolism of Act II revolves around blessings, titled Treasure Offering (献宝), which represents auspicious entreaties for prosperity. In this segment, eight performers depicting each of the Eight Immortals present celebratory gifts to the Jade Emperor for his birthday, as shown in **Figure 7**. 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 performers.

**Figure 7. 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 which 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 Lau and Tan who admitted their limited understanding of the functions of the magical treasures (法宝) 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. They pointed out that such symbolism is a legacy from Chinese mythology, with the Eight Immortals representing mortals of all classes and

genders. Their magic treasures play different roles, such as curing diseases, purification, and prolonging life (personal communication, 2023, August 10, 2023). **Table 5** illustrates that each immortal represents a different social group and the symbolism of their magical treasures.

**Table 5. 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 ritualised Teochew opera performances, 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 exists as a kind of pictorial existence, imbued with religious power believed to bring good luck and blessings to individuals. The props used by the performers are symbols of the magical powers of the Eight Immortals, which are believed to provide blessings and good fortune to those present.

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, during the ritual, the audience perceives the performers as vessels of divine possession and thus the benediction actions displayed as a blessing from the "Eight 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 main plot point of the Carp jumping the Dragon Gate. 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. Steeped in Chinese legend, this 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 spirt 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 are perceived as the symbols of the oracles with the blessings of the deities.

Overall, the visual symbols in Teochew opera are "consummated" (Xue, 2003), meaning that they exhibit a certain degree of completeness and refinement. These visual symbols go beyond mere decoration or aesthetics, serving as deliberate and integral parts of the performance that convey culturally specific meaning, emotions, or narrative content. Each symbol is purposefully chosen to enhance the audience's understanding of the story or character, creating a rich semiotic layer where the symbolic representation aligns seamlessly with its intended cultural significance.

### **Auditory Symbols**

In Teochew opera performances, performers 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.

According to Austin's (1975) theory of speech acts, utterance acts are the most basic grammatical conventions, articulating sentences to express meaning. In certain 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. In Teochew opera, the human voice in the ritual is primarily speech, which is called "koucai" (口彩), meaning words of good luck or compliments. Koucai in Teochew opera is presented through performers playing the role of a god issuing a decree or a dignitary congratulating the audience. From the perspective of the Malaysian Chinese, the performers' 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 performers and can be understood without elaborate explanation.

Besides spoken voice, singing by the performers serves as a blessing, and the auspicious contents sung loudly evoke the inner feelings of the audience, intertwined with emotions of awe and joy. This act influences their latent consciousness and empowers them with autonomy in real life, instilling the belief that sincere wishes can be fulfilled.

Singing is instrumental in intensifying the ritual's impact in Teochew opera, with the evidence of this being the effect of the vocal performance on inducing trance states. Schechner (1994) defines trance as a state of consciousness in which an individual undergoes an altered mental or physical condition. During trance, the person may experience dissociation from the self or their immediate surroundings, often leading to behaviour beyond ordinary control, such as intense focus, heightened energy, or involuntary actions. Trance, often associated with rituals and religious ceremonies, serves as a means of connecting individuals to the spiritual world or allowing them to transcend the boundaries of their typical identity. According to Schechner, trance can be both induced—through repetitive music, movement, or other ritualistic elements—and voluntary, depending on the cultural and situational context. He also highlights that trance states are socially recognised as a collective phenomenon in which communities share an understanding of their meaning and purpose.

Performers in Teochew opera rituals regard their performances as compelling and capable of inducing a trance, which enables them to perform better and communicate with the gods. The performer of Tiong Chia Soon Heang 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)

Similarly, 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)

The musical symbols of Teochew opera facilitate a deep immersion for performers in their roles. During performances, the repetitive rhythms, elaborate vocal techniques, and spiritually resonant themes allow the performers to embody the characters they portray to an extraordinary degree. In this altered state of consciousness, performers act as intermediaries between the human and the spiritual worlds. Additionally, this heightened focus and emotional intensity evoked by auditory symbols enable performers to convey complex themes of reverence, creating an atmosphere of divine presence and fostering the belief that secular wishes can be fulfilled. A participant shared his experience 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 feeling. (personal communication, August 28, 2023)

Although the performers and audiences recognised Teochew opera's musical function in rituals, they could not articulate specifically how music conveyed symbolism. Blacking (1995) argued that music, unlike language, cannot always be comprehended explicitly and directly through which we understand spoken words. Instead, music operates as a metaphorical expression of emotion, evoking feelings, ideas, and associations in a more abstract and indirect manner. Blacking also suggested that music can convey specific messages when appreciated within a specific cultural or social framework. For example, some music passages in Teochew opera do not independently convey specific meanings; instead, they require extra-musical elements—for instance, lyrics, titles, and instrumental functions—to communicate their intended message. The audience cannot fully decipher symbolism through a particular melodic structure or harmonic progression. However, their familiarity with the broader cultural and ritual meanings enhances the music's emotional and symbolic power. In other words, Teochew opera music in ritual is a trace, an empty symbolic vessel (Nattiez, 1990). Music does not possess a fixed or clear meaning, instead, its meaning emerges from its performance (the poetic process) and the audience's interpretation (the esthetic process).

Furthermore, instrumental sounds are subtle in their symbolism within performances (Xiang, 1991). Gan, a professor from the Sichuan Conservatory of Music and a scholar in ritual music research, said:

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)

In Teochew opera performances, the auditory symbols such as gongs and drums are integral to the performance's ritualistic and cultural essence. Their sounds serve a dual purpose: they invoke the supernatural and act as a protective force within the community. The striking sounds with carefully

structured rhythmic patterns and tonal variations create an auditory landscape connecting humans and the divine. Beyond their spiritual associations, gongs and drums also serve a protective or apotropaic function. As rooted in their cultural belief passed down through generations that loud, sharp sounds repel negative energies, the resounding beats are believed to ward off malevolent forces. This symbolic use purifies the performance space, consecrating it as a safe environment for performers and audience.

Overall, auditory symbols, except speech, are generally less obvious than visual symbols and are classified as “unconsummated” (Xue, 2003). Thus, the symbolic aspect of music assumes a subordinate position, and they possess indistinct signifiers and signifieds in ritualised Teochew opera. These auditory symbols resonate deeply in the collective consciousness of the Teochew community, activating shared cultural memories, recalling ancestral traditions, and reinforcing communal identity. The sounds are not passive; they interactively draw the audience into the performance’s spiritual dimensions. This creates a unique layer where the audience experiences the opera’s narrative and the embodiment of cultural values, engaging them on a symbolic and sensory level.

## CONCLUSION

In Malaysia, apart from entertainment, Teochew opera is performed in Chinese rituals dedicated to gods, ancestors and ghosts. It serves a significant ritual role and conveys symbolism of blessing or exorcism. 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 make-up 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, as shown in **Table 6**.

**Table 6. Characteristics of a ritualised Teochew opera.**

Characteristics of Ritualised Teochew opera	
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	An immersive performance
Audience Status	Believing in the efficacy of performance
Performance characteristics	Emphasis on visual symbols with auditory symbols supplementing the narrative
Evaluation	Criticism is discouraged

The Malaysian Chinese imbue these presentations with their aspirations, transforming them into symbols they offer to supernatural beings in the hopes that their desires of prosperity and peace among the community, family and individual will be acknowledged and granted. Therefore, symbols in Teochew opera performances often centre on themes of exorcism and the pursuit of good fortune.

Teochew opera employs an array of visual and auditory symbols that 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 immediately. Auditory symbols in some

music facilitate the elicitation of narratives and gain significance through individualised interpretation and the incorporation of meaningful lyrics, titles and instrumental characteristics. 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 in rituals is a collection of symbols representing the historical and cultural accumulation of the Malaysian Chinese. Through its visual and auditory symbols, it reinforces the inner conviction in the vision and expectation of a better life. The belief of the rituals as supernatural compels to the Malaysian Chinese to pursue good intentions.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Lin Ziqiao: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing-Original Draft Preparation, Visualisation. Ang Mei Foong: Writing-Review & Editing, Supervision. Chiang, Julia: Writing-Review & Editing, Supervision.

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