An Introduction to the Teochew Iron Rod Puppet Theater in Malaysia Today[1]

Shao-Peng Wang

Teochew puppetry originated in the Chaoshan region of southeastern China and was introduced to Malaysia by Chinese migrants between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historically, it has been performed primarily during Chinese temple festivals as a ritual offering to deities on their birthdays. Chinese people worship many different deities who are believed to possess different protective powers. When the Chinese from southeastern China moved, they brought these deities from their ancestral homeland with them to seek protection in the new places. Drawing on participant observation as well as structured and semi-structured online and in-person interviews, this study examines the contemporary practice of Teochew puppetry in Malaysia, focusing on the composition of troupes, staging conventions, the puppets, musical content and elements, repertoire, and socio-religious functions—areas that remain underexplored in existing research. The findings indicate that Teochew puppetry in Malaysia continues to be performed predominantly at Chinese temple festivals and has undergone only minimal changes in content, performance style, and function since its introduction. By providing an overview of its current forms and practices, this article seeks to contribute to the foundational research on Teochew puppetry in Malaysia.

Introduction

Although the Chinese presence in Malaysia can perhaps be traced back to the Han Dynasty (202 BC–9 AD; 25–220 AD),[2] the principal wave of migration arose from a confluence of factors beginning in the mid- to late 18th century. These included development needs following the establishment of Malaya as

1 The content of this paper is derived from my master's thesis: Shao-Peng Wang, *Negotiating Diasporic Identities of Malaysian Chinese through Teochew Opera and Puppetry*, Master Thesis, University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna 2025. I would like to thank the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*, the *Teochew Puppet and Opera House*, and the Goh family for their cooperation and guidance throughout the duration of my research. The Latinized spellings of names, terms, and instrument names appearing in this article are the way community used and are derived from the Teochew or Hokkien that traditionally spoken by the community. Where Chinese characters are displayed, pinyin and the community's way of pronunciation are added.

2 See Bon Hoi Lew, *A History of the Malaysian Chinese*, Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre 2025, p. 14.

a colony,[3] the signing of treaties in Beijing after the Opium Wars,[4] and economic conditions in China's southeastern coastal regions.[5]

The Chaoshan region, located on China's southeastern coast, has a long tradition of maritime trade due to its mountainous terrain and limited arable land.[6] With the opportunities created by the aforementioned opening of Southeast Asia, migrants from Chaoshan arrived in Malaysia, and Teochew puppetry was introduced alongside these migration flows in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[7]

The origins of Chinese puppetry could be traced back to funerary puppets and the practice of puppet worship[8] during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–c. 1046 BC). Over time, entertainment elements were incorporated to attract audiences, and as puppetry spread across regions, it assimilated local languages and melodies, developing into the diverse forms of Chinese puppetry known today. Teochew puppetry emerged when shadow puppetry, brought to the Chaoshan region by migrants fleeing south after the fall of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), merged with local language, music, and storytelling.[9]

In this article, I employ participant observation, structured and semi-structured online and offline interviews, and biographical research methods[10] to examine the activities of the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*, which is considered the oldest extant Teochew puppet troupe in Malaysia,[11] and the family who run this troupe, in order to investigate the performance of Teochew puppetry in Malaysia today.

3 See Kim Hong Tan, *The Teochews in Penang: A Concise History*, Penang: Penang Teochew Association 2010, pp. 10–15.

4 After the Opium War, the so-called "Treaty of Beijing" (1865) between the Chinese government and the British and French governments allowed the Chinese laborers ("coolies") to go abroad for work. The main reason for this treaty was the attempt by the British and French to address the labor shortage that emerged after the abolition of the slave trade in 1834. See, e.g., Lew, *A History of the Malaysian Chinese* (like fn. 2), p. 59, and Jacob L. Shapiro, "The Third Opium War? – Understanding China through History", in: *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 13 (2019), pp. 52–65.

5 See Tan, *The Teochews in Penang* (like fn. 3), p. 6.

6 See ibid.

7 See Hooi Ling Goh, *Toh Ai Hwa: Mistress of Teochew Rod Puppetry*, Penang: Persatuan Kebudayaan Dan Kesenian Teow Goey Guan Pulau Penang 2024, pp. 23–24.

8 See Margaret Chan, "The Magic of Chinese Theatre. Theatre as a Ritual of Sacral Transmogrification", in: *Change and Innovation in Chinese Opera. A Post Conference Publication*, ed. by Cai Shupeng, Singapore: National Heritage Board 2009, pp. 144–164, here p. 159.

9 See Goh, *Toh Ai Hwa* (like fn. 7), p. 7.

10 See, e.g., Jolanta T. Pekacz, "Memory, history and meaning. Musical biography and its discontents", in: *Journal of Musicological Research* 23/1 (2004), pp. 39–80, as well as Brian Roberts, "Sociological Lives and Auto/Biographical Writing", in: *Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions*, Huddersfield: Univ. of Huddersfield 2002, pp. 163–170.

11 See Tan, *The Teochews in Penang* (like fn. 3), p. 261.

Origins and Occasions of Performance

Owing to its origins in shadow puppetry, Teochew puppetry retains operational features of the shadow puppetry tradition, including the manipulation of puppets with three rods attached at the back (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The relationship between Chinese shadow puppetry (left)[12] and Teochew puppetry (right)[13]

This performance tradition arrived in Malaya in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, propelled by ritual and entertainment needs associated with large-scale Chinese migration. It toured Singapore, Malaya, and Thailand, following concentrations of Teochew communities, and some troupes gradually settled in these areas. For example, the first generation of the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*—the principal subject of this study—led a Teochew opera troupe from China to Singapore before settling in Penang, Malaysia (Teochew opera and Teochew puppetry differ only in performance medium; performers and troupes generally move between the two).[14]

According to Goh, a fourth-generation member of the performing family in Malaysia:

> "At that time, there were many theatre troupes that came to Malaysia from China. The predecessor of the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe* was the *Lao Rong Xiu Chun Puppet Troupe*, which was the earliest Teochew puppet troupe in Malaysia. Later, the troupe leader planned to retire, and my mother took over the troupe and changed the name to its current name."[15]

12 Huang Han, "Shadow dance under the lights – come to these places in Beijing to feel the charm of traditional shadow puppetry" [2019], <https://www.visitbeijing.com.cn/article/47QkKHM345z> (30.03.2026).

13 Photograph by the author, taken at Persatuan Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 23.01.2025.

14 See Goh, *Toh Ai Hwa* (like fn. 7), p. 39.

15 Hooi Ling Goh, interview by the author, conducted at the Teochew Puppet and Opera House, Penang, Malaysia, on 30.01.2025, 05:20. Translated from Mandarin by the author. Original in mandarin: 那个时代从中国来到马来西亚的剧团有很多，金玉楼春潮州木偶戏团的前身是"老荣秀春"，应该属于马来西亚最早的潮州木偶戏团，后来剧团团长打算退休，我妈妈接手剧团后将名字改成今天的名字.

Today, Teochew puppetry in Malaysia is performed primarily at Chinese temples to celebrate deities' birthdays or during temple festivals.[16] Temples that invite the troupe typically maintain long-term relationships with it; according to Goh, some of these relationships have persisted across generations, while others are more recent.[17] Performances are usually staged on a temporary platform in the temple square (outside the temple), typically oriented toward the temple gate.

Teochew Puppets

Early puppets measured approximately eight inches when first introduced to Malaysia; today they typically range from 14 to 18 inches, a change intended to improve visibility for the audience.[18]

A Teochew puppet comprises separate parts: hat, head, hands (made of iron wire and paper), feet, and body. As the hands, body, and feet are connected, the three principal components that can be detached and replaced during performance are the hat, head, and body. There are three iron rods attached to the puppet's hands and body. The heads are made of clay and painted according to role types. Character categories in Teochew puppetry commonly include general, officer, young man, servant, soldier, maidservant, lady, and madam. The facial types and costumes differ by role and the sex of the character. Furthermore, differences in social status can be inferred from the sleeves of a puppet's costume: long sleeves indicate roles not engaged in physical labour.

Character conventions in Teochew opera also inform hat design. Typically, a dedicated set of puppets is prepared for a given repertoire. To hold a puppet, the puppeteer's left hand grasps the iron rods connected to the puppet's left hand and body, while the right hand holds the rod connected to the puppet's right hand. Basic operating techniques include pushing, pulling, lifting, plucking, and shaking. In some cases, props are added—for instance, a horsewhip placed in the puppet's hand to symbolise riding a horse (Figures 2a and 2b).



Figures 2a, 2b: Props for puppetry[19]

16 See ibid., 05:50.

17 See ibid., 07:12.

18 See ibid., 10:15.

19 Photographs by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Yudi Gong, Kedah, Semeling, Malaysia, on 05.02.2025.

Stage

If the temple does not provide a fixed stage, the troupe constructs its own portable stage from an iron frame and wooden boards before a performance.[20] More commonly, an empty platform is available in the temple square or nearby; in this case, the troupe erects a frame on the platform and hangs printed plastic cloth strips. The troupe's name is inscribed at the top centre of the front cloth, with blessings written on the left and right sides (Figure 3). In earlier periods, Teochew embroidered curtains were used; later, as Teochew puppet performances became popular, troupes adopted custom-made wooden stages from China.[21] According to Goh, this box-shaped wooden stage comprised three wooden platforms and was fitted with glass light tubes. In the 1980s, most troupes used aluminum stages. Today, owing to durability and ease of storage and transport, troupes primarily use plastic stages.[22]



Figure 3: Front cloth with the name of the troupe, blessings written on the left and right sides[23]

From the audience's perspective, one table and two chairs are placed on the stage. In the centre of the backstage area there is a puppet stand. On the audience's right stands a drum set; on the rear right are other percussion instruments. At the rear left are the melodic instruments (Figures 4 and 5).

20 See Goh, *Toh Ai Hwa* (like fn. 7), p. 25.

21 See ibid., pp. 23–24.

22 See ibid.

23 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 24.01.2025.





Figures 4 and 5: Percussion and melodic instruments[24]

Performer and Music Ensemble

Historically, Teochew puppetry was performed exclusively by men. This reflected prevailing conventions in Chinese society, in which women were not expected to appear publicly and menstruation was

24 Photographs by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 24.01.2025.

regarded as inauspicious. After 1950, women were gradually permitted to perform.[25] According to Toh, the third generation of the performing family and former leader of the troupe, the company once comprised 15 members. Today, a Teochew puppet performance typically requires six performers.[26] In the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*, these usually include two puppeteers, two percussionists, one melodic-instrument player, and one drummer, who also acts as conductor. The drummer assumes this role because traditional music notation in Chinese theatre does not specify rhythm explicitly; during performance, the drummer provides a clear pulse on the drum set to lead the other performers. According to Seng, in some cases the troupe can perform with as few as three people.[27]

Based on my fieldwork, the troupe's current percussion instruments (Figure 6) include a drum set comprising Dua Gor, Tiong Gor, Siew Gor, Kok[28] for the drummer/-conductor; as well as Chim Bo and Soh Lo (types of Chinese gongs) and other percussion instruments (Table 1). For melodic instruments, they use the Yaoqim[29] (a Chinese dulcimer) and the Suona (a Chinese double-reed woodwind). The Suona is typically employed in passages representing the gods.



Figure 6: Percussion Instruments of the Troupe[30]

25 See Goh, *Toh Ai Hwa* (like fn. 7), pp. 25–31.

26 See Ai Hwa Toh, interview by the author, conducted at the Teochew Puppet and Opera House, Penang, Malaysia, on 13.02.2025, 02:45.

27 Wei Sin Seng, interview by the author, conducted at the Chinese temple Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 24. 01. 2025, 03:23.

28 Dua Gor, 大鼓 (dà gǔ) 'Big Drum', Tiong Gor, 中鼓 (zhōng gǔ) 'Middle Drum', Siew Gor, 小鼓 (xiǎo gǔ) 'Small Drum', Kok, 木鱼 (mù yú) 'Wooden Fish'.

29 Here I use the term how the community calls the instrument in the Teochew language instead of in Mandarin, which would be called Yangqin.

30 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 24.01.2025.

Chinese Character	Teochew Pronunciation	English Translation/Description
dòuluó 斗 锣	Te lo	Relatively small Gong
dàbó 大钹	Dua Buak	Cymbal
dàgǔ 大鼓	Dua Gor	Big Drum
zhōnggǔ 中 鼓	Tiong Gor	Middle-sized Drum
xiǎogǔ 小 鼓	Siew Gor	Small Drum
mùyú 木 鱼	Kok	Wooden Fish
shēnbō 深 波	Chim Bo	Type of Gong
sūluó 苏锣	Soh Lo	Type of Gong
yángqín 扬 琴	Yaoqim	Chinese Dulcimer

Table 1: List of Instruments of the Troupe

Music

Teochew opera is performed in the Teochew language using the natural (unamplified) voice. Musically, performance comprises two components: a sung/recited component and an instrumental component. The instrumental forces include a percussion ensemble—consisting of a drum set for the drummer, two different gongs (Chim Bo and Te Lo), Kong Gia, and other Chinese percussion instruments—and a small orchestra that typically features the Suona (double-reed woodwind), the Erhu and Yehu (string instruments with two strings), the Pipa (four-string lute), the Yaoqim (hammered dulcimer), and related instruments. The singing is accompanied by the percussion ensemble and other instruments, while the reciting is accompanied by percussion alone.

Traditionally, pitch is noted in a 'two-four system' tablature, an older method that uses Chinese characters to represent pitch; the characters from two to six represent the amplitude from G to E. Today, however, the troupe uses numbered musical notation. The percussion parts (non-pitched) employ a separate system of notation that uses Chinese characters to indicate instruments or instrument combinations, known as 鼓谱 (gǔpǔ) (Go Po in Teochew). For example, the first character in Figure 7, 仓, signifies a *tutti* for the percussion

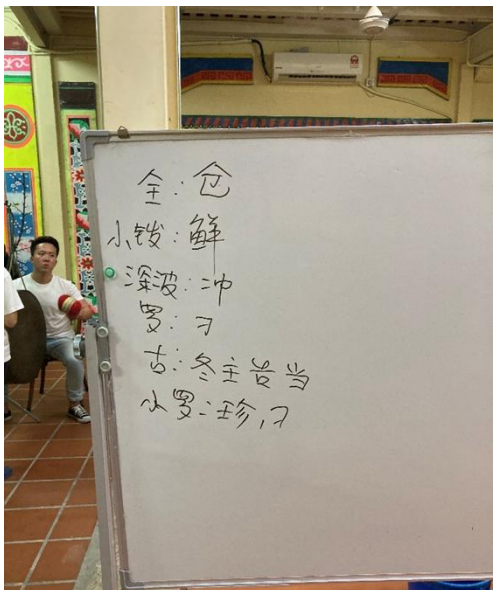


Figure 7: Traditional percussion notation of Teochew puppetry

ensemble, indicating that every instrument should sound (Figure 7).[31] To clarify this system, Figures 8 and 9 present my transcription of a recorded section of percussion performance: first into traditional notation, and then into Western musical notation (Figures 8 and 9). In the first three characters of Figure 8 we see 木 木木; the second and third 木 are underlined, indicating half-beat values. Rendered in Western notation, this corresponds to the first three notes of the Wooden Fish line in Figure 9.

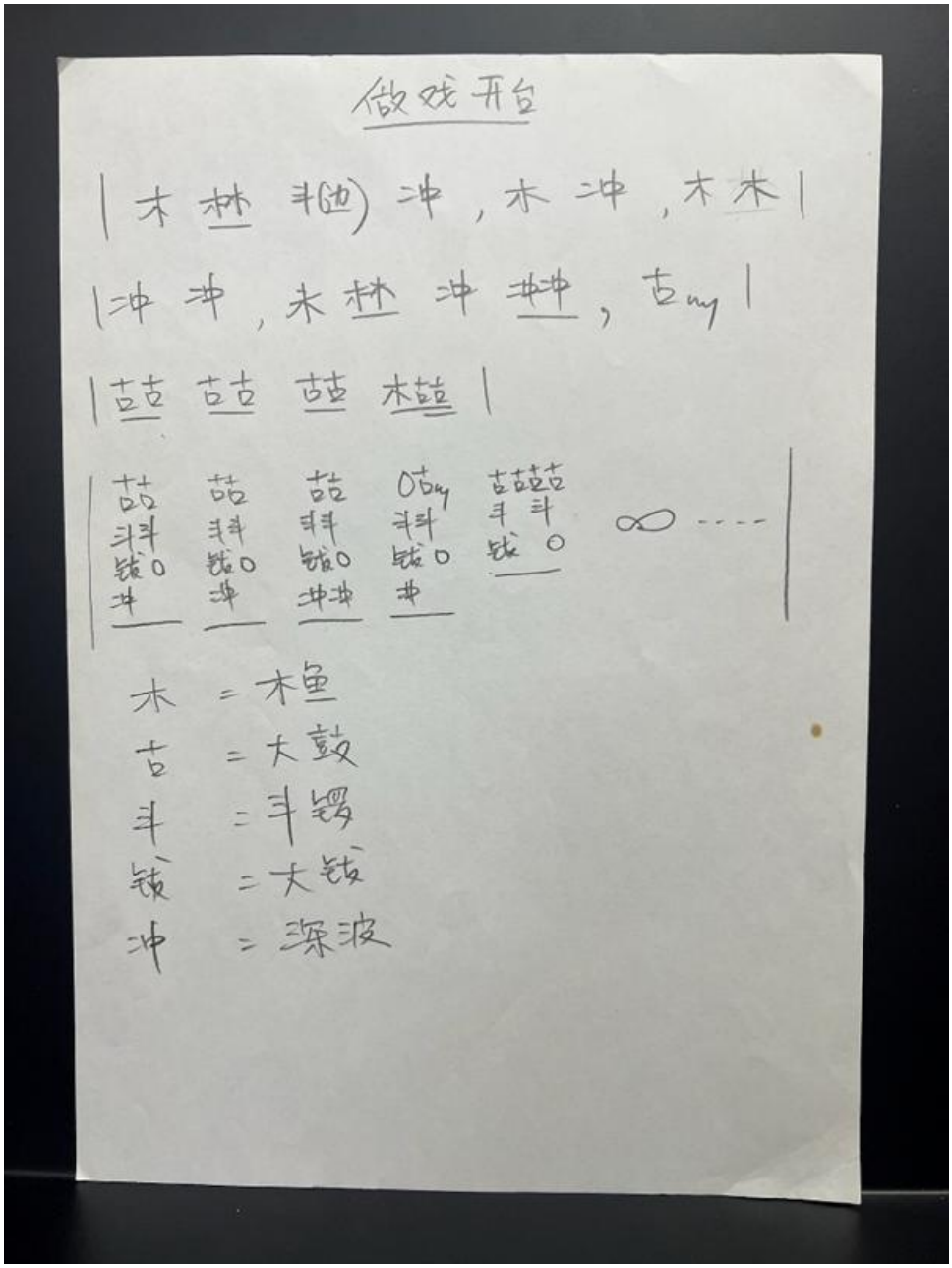


Figure 8: Handwritten percussion score[32]

31 Photograph by Wei Sin Seng, taken at the Teochew Puppet and Opera House, Penang, Malaysia, on 19.01.2025.

32 Transcription by the author from the opening percussion section of an afternoon performance by the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*.

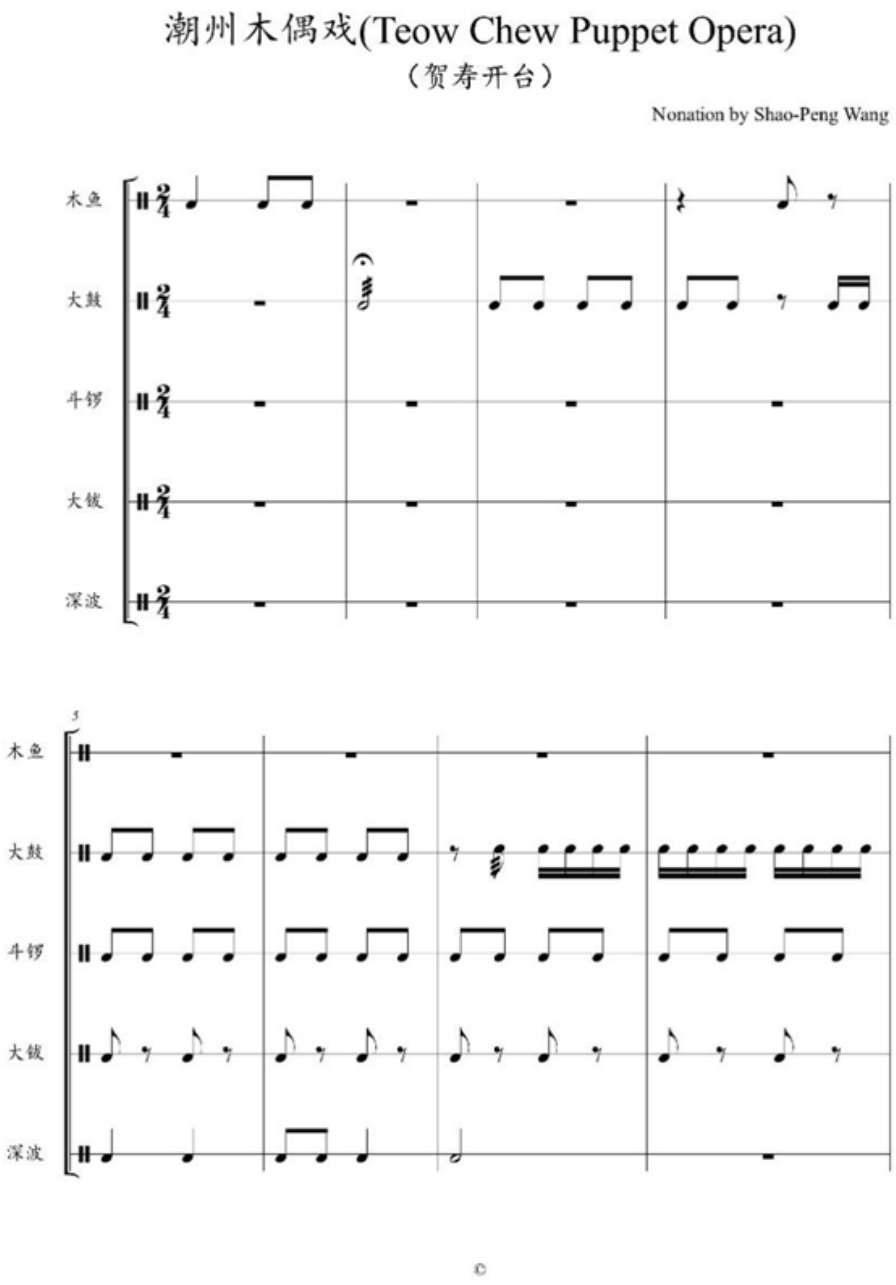


Figure 9: Transcription of Figure 8 into Western staff notation[33]

33 Instruments from top to bottom: 木鱼 (Kok in Teochew; Wooden Fish), 大鼓 (Dua Gor in Teochew; big drum), 斗锣 (Te Lo in Teochew; a Teochew Gong), 大钹 (Dua Buak in Teochew; Chinese cymbals), 深波 (Chim Bo in Teochew; a Teochew Gong-like instrument). Transcription by the author.

Contents of Performance for the Chinese Temple Events

Although Teochew puppetry also serves entertainment functions, in Malaysia it is performed primarily for Chinese temple events, which constitutes the troupe's main livelihood.[34]

Performances for a temple typically extend over more than one day, with stage construction on the first day. The troupe therefore arrives at the venue two hours in advance on day one; on subsequent days, members arrive one hour early to prepare instruments and puppets. Based on fieldwork observations, performances are divided into afternoon and evening programmes. The afternoon performance celebrates the deity's birthday; in troupe terminology it is called 贺寿 (hè shòu) 'birthday celebration'. Its repertoire is fixed and lasts around one hour. Seng, a puppeteer with the troupe, explained:

> "The purpose of the afternoon performance is to offer blessings to the deity in the temple. The performance lasts one hour and comprises five parts: 八仙贺寿 (bā xiān hè shòu) 'Eight Immortals Celebrating Birthday'; 狄仁杰加官 (dí rénjié jiāguān) 'Di Renjie's Crowning'; 仙姬送子 (xiān jī sòng zǐ) 'The Fairy Sending a Child'; 唐玄宗净棚 (tángxuánzōngjìngpéng) 'Tang Xuanzong's Purification of the Stage'; and 京城会 (jīngchénghuì) 'Capital Meeting'. These five parts are called 五福连 (wǔ fú lián) 'Five Blessings Chain' and may be understood as five distinct episodes. Each part draws on Chinese historical allusions, conveying blessings for the gods, the temple, and its devotees".[35]

A special ritual occurs in the third part, 'The Fairy Sending a Child'. The story tells of a fairy who secretly bore a child with a mortal; angering the gods, she was forced to return to heaven, later, descending to return the child to the father. In Teochew puppetry, the "child" represents the troupe's patron saint. The performance symbolically "sends" the patron saint to the temple (Figure 10).[36] As the actual image of the patron saint is sacred and cannot be used as a puppet, a red-clothed puppet (the child) serves as a symbol (Figure 11). During the performance, the fairy hands her child—the troupe's patron saint—to the temple. At this moment, temple staff welcome the real statue of the patron saint (Figure 12) and place it beside the temple's principal deity, symbolising the patron saint's arrival for the birthday celebration and presence among the gods as a spectator (Figure 13). Before the evening performance begins, the patron saint's statue is returned to the rear of the stage. The temple then offers red envelopes (with money) and gifts (such as sweets or fruit) to the troupe as blessings.

After that, the troupe performs 'Tang Xuanzong's Purification of the Stage', a story from Chinese history. Tang Xuanzong, an emperor of the Tang dynasty, is honored as the "ancestor" of Chinese opera for his contributions to the art. In performance, sleeve movements symbolise ritual purification of the stage and a prayer for the success of the performance. The afternoon performance concludes with 'Capital Meeting', in which a scholar who has taken first place in the imperial examination returns home to

34 See Goh, interview (like fn. 15), 12:40.

35 Wei Sin Seng, interview by the author, conducted at Gurney Plaza Starbucks, Penang, Malaysia, on 12.02.2025, 01:37. Translated by the Author. Original in Mandarin: "下午演出的目的是给庙里的神明贺寿，时间是一小时，内容是固定的，分为五个部分，分别是：八仙贺寿、狄仁杰加官、仙姬送子、唐玄宗净棚、京城会。这五个部分被称为五福连，可以理解为五个故事的表演。每个部分的内容取材于中国历史典故，寓意对神明、寺庙和信徒的祝福".

36 See Goh, interview (like fn. 15), 15:20.

reunite with his wife. Although the repertoire is fixed, on the first day of the celebration, the piece 六国封相 (liùguó fēngxiāng) 'Six Kingdoms Enthroning Prime Ministers' is added before these five parts.





Figure 10 (left): Patron saint of the troupe[37], Figure 11 (right): Puppet in red clothing symbolising the patron saint[38]



Figure 12: Temple member welcoming the troupe's patron saint[39]

37 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese Temple Yudi Gong, Kedah, Semeling, Malaysia, on 05.02.2025.

38 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese Temple Yudi Gong, Kedah, Semeling, Malaysia, on 05.02.2025.

39 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese Temple Yudi Gong, Kedah, Semeling, Malaysia, on 05.02.2025.

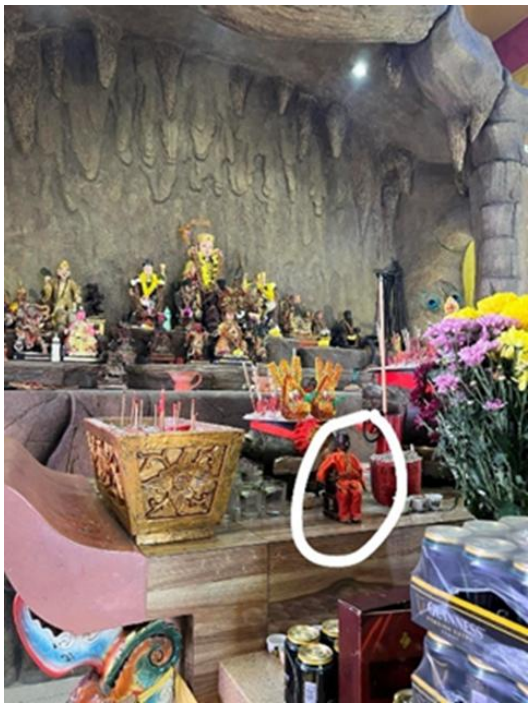


Figure 13: The troupe's patron saint seated with the temple gods[40]

Afternoon performances normally begin at 11 am and last about one and a half hours. The troupe then rests until the evening performance. The evening performance —intended as entertainment for both gods and humans—[41] lasts three hours and is termed 做戏 (zuò xì) 'to make drama' in troupe usage. It usually starts at 8 pm. Unlike the afternoon programme, the evening repertoire is not fixed and differs from the afternoon. According to Goh, the repertoires performed in both afternoon and evening programmes were brought from China in the past.[42]

Before each performance, the drummer leads an opening section with the other percussion instruments. There are two versions of this opening—one for the afternoon and one for the evening—and both are fixed. Each performance begins with this "base frame" (Figures 14 and 15), after which performers engage in extensive improvisation upon the frame.

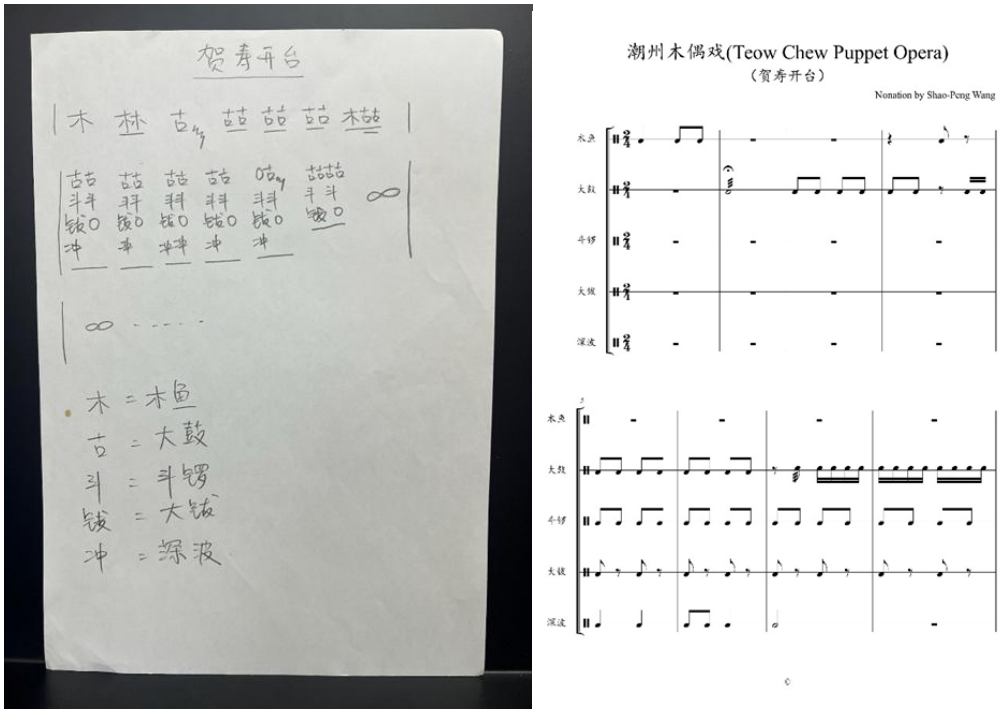


Figure 14: Traditional and Western Notation of the afternoon opening[43]

40 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese Temple Yudi Gong, Kedah, Semeling, Malaysia, on 05.02.2025.

41 See Seng, interview (like fn. 35), 02:18.

42 See Goh, interview (like fn. 15), 15:23.

43 Transcription by the author. Note: in Figures 14–15, the instruments from top to bottom in the Western notation are the same as in Figure 9.

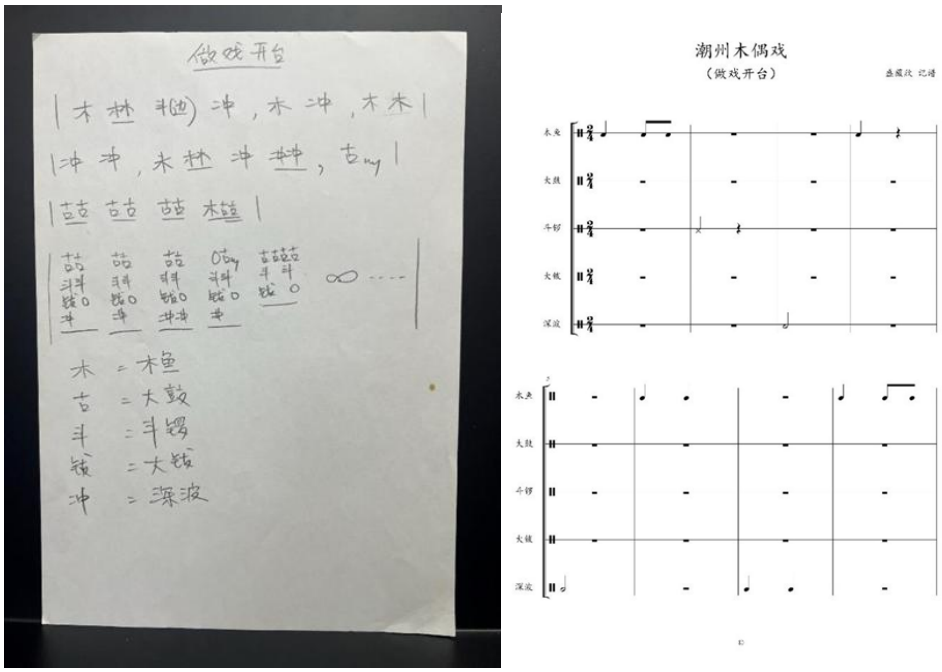


Figure 15: Traditional and Western Notation of the evening opening[44]

During performance, the puppeteer must rapidly change puppets according to the plot, add props, change hats and costumes, or manipulate more than one puppet simultaneously. As a basic principle, when a character speaks or sings according to the script, that puppet's hands must move to indicate action, while other puppet(s) remain still when not performing. The puppeteer models the puppet's movements on those of a real performer.[45] For example, when mounting or dismounting a horse, the puppeteer gathers the puppet's three iron control rods in the left hand and uses an iron rod in the right hand to lift the puppet's right foot, creating a stylised crossing pose. The vocal component comprises singing and reciting, both delivered in the natural voice. The vocal component is divided into sections accompanied by percussion alone and sections accompanied by percussion and Yao Kim. The instrumental and percussion components feature a high degree of improvisation, and the instruments also provide interludes.

Although scores exist for Teochew puppetry, my fieldwork indicates that performers generally play from memory, relying only on scripts that contain text and mark the places for singing and reciting (Figure 16).

The transmission of Teochew puppetry relies primarily on imitation. When the troupe recruits new members, senior performers provide oral instruction and demonstrate puppet control. For percussion, the new member learns from listening to and watching the guidance of senior performers.

44 Transcription by the author. Note: in Figures 14–15, the instruments from top to bottom in the Western notation are the same as in Figure 9.

45 Seng, interview (like fn. 35), 02:46.

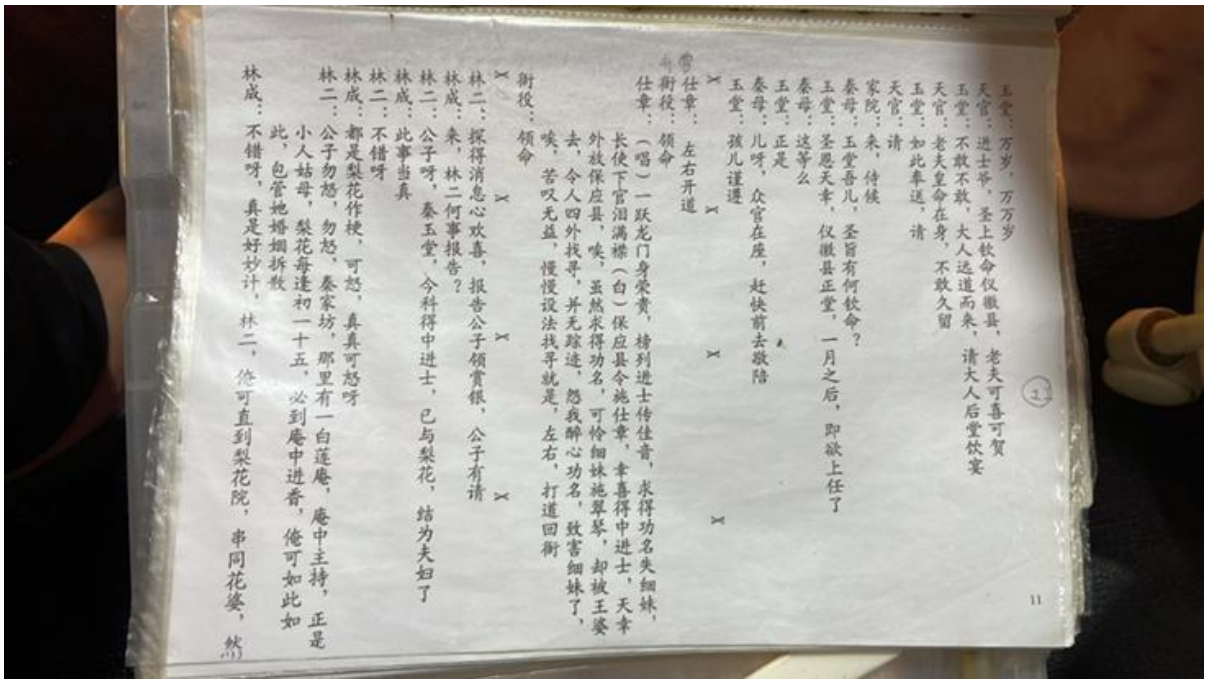


Figure 16: Script containing only text; places for singing are marked[46]

Conclusion

The findings of my fieldwork regarding the puppet, the musical context and the performance, demonstrate that Teochew puppetry in Malaysia maintains performance practices and pedagogies inherited from China and remains closely intertwined with Chinese temple activities.

Teochew puppets in Malaysia today are approximately 14–18 inches tall and consist of three main parts: hat, head, and body. These components are designed according to character type. And the puppeteer must replace them promptly during performance.

It is performed on a temporary outdoor stage near a Chinese temple. Before the performance, troupe members first erect a frame on the platform provided by the temple. A table and two chairs are placed at the front; puppets are set centre backstage; the drum set is placed to the right, facing the audience; other percussion instruments are positioned to the right-rear; and melodic instruments such as the Yaoqim are placed to the left-rear.

Temple celebration performances are divided into afternoon performances—lasting about one and a half hours, with a fixed repertoire of benedictory content to celebrate the gods' birthdays—and evening performances—lasting three hours, with a variable repertoire for entertainment. A typical performance comprises two puppeteers, two percussionists, one melodic-instrument player, and a drummer who leads the performance from the drum set. In both afternoon and evening programmes, the drummer leads the percussion in an opening section based on fixed frameworks specific to each performance. The programme comprises a recitation section accompanied by percussion and a singing section

46 Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Tokong Ular, Bayan Lepas, Penang, Malaysia, on 04.02.2025.

accompanied by percussion and melodic instruments; percussion and melodic interludes also occur. The musical realisation in Teochew puppetry is highly improvisational.

By documenting the current performance contents and methods, this article aimed to provide a foundation for further research on Teochew puppetry in Malaysia and for ethnomusicological studies of the diaspora.