# Reflection of My First Fieldwork Experience[1]

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## Introduction

This report reflects on my first independent fieldwork during my master's programme, conducted on Teochew opera and puppetry in Malaysia, with a particular focus on a performing family in Penang. It is structured in three parts. The first outlines the preparatory phase prior to the fieldwork, including a brief theoretical review, my positionality in the research, and preparations for entering the field. The second part details the conduct of the fieldwork. The third part considers the organisation of the data collected in the field, my use of the data, and ethical issues arising from the research. By reflecting on this fieldwork, I aim both to record my first experience and to identify avenues for improvement in future research.

## Stage One: Before the Field

### Theoretical Consideration

In their book *Research Methodology. An Introduction* Wayne Goddard and Stuart Melville argue that the methodology employed in research strongly shapes the validity of its results,[2] and that research methods encompass not only techniques and rules but also the underlying principles and theoretical framework that support them.[3]

The principal method I adopted was ethnographical fieldwork. As a discipline concerned with "people making music", ethnomusicology extends the researcher's everyday life and facilitates by engaging with people, observing environments, asking questions, and listening attentively to responses.[4]

1 The content of this report derives 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, guidance, patience and friendship during my fieldwork. The Latinized spellings of names and terms appearing in this article are the ones used by the community and are derived from the Teochew or Hokkien that is traditionally spoken by the community.

2 See Wayne Goddard and Stuart Melville, *Research Methodology: An Introduction*, Cape Town: Juta Academic 2004, p. 1.

3 See Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin (eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences*, London et al.: SAGE Publications 2005.

4 See Lisa Gilman and John Fenn, *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2019, pp. 5–6.

Beyond interacting with people and understanding the relationship between their musical behavior and their community/environment, duo to my research partner is embedded in a family tradition, I also reviewed biographical methods. Jolanta T. Pekacz notes that music biographies often present a coherent narrative through a linear, chronological account of events, enabling an ostensibly objective, external perspective without direct experiential immersion.[5] Drawing on biographical and narrative approaches, I planned for my fieldwork to focus on the activities of two performance groups— the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe* and the *Teochew Puppet and Opera House*— run by a Teochew opera and puppetry performing family in Penang, Malaysia.

### My Position

Given the importance of interpersonal relationships and the "self,"[6] I remained attentive to my positionality, which shapes perspective and directs inquiry.

Regarding Teochew opera and puppetry, I was an outsider. Nonetheless, cultural affinities and pre-existing friendships with community members helped to shorten the distance between "researcher" and "community". In addition to navigating the insider-outsider dynamic, I also occupied the dual roles of observer and learner, acquiring aspects of the performance practice. This was a distinctive and inclusive position in which I was, in fact, observing myself. By adopting these perspectives, which involve learning to practice this performance form like the community members and observing their actions, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of my research topic.

### Design of Fieldwork

After determining the topic and initial direction, I began liaising with the community in December 2023 to clarify the purpose of my visit and identify potentially observable activities. Owing to geographical distance, communication took place online. Although personal connections facilitated contact, challenges remained. Before entering the field, I did not plan specific events for documentation because of uncertainty of location and the contingency of my research partner's activities. In addition, online interviews rarely reached depth: not knowing interlocutors personally, and being unable to meet them in person, constrained rapport and detail. Consequently, apart from a few online interviews, I primarily maintained contact through communication applications.

## Stage Two: Fieldwork

On arriving in Penang, Malaysia, I was able to establish in-person connections with my research partner relatively quickly. My partner operates a professional Teochew puppet troupe[7] which mainly performs

5 See Jolanta T. Pekacz, "Memory, History and Meaning: Musical Biography and its Discontents", in: *Journal of Musicological Research* 23/1 (2004), pp. 39–80, here p. 48.

6 See ibid.; and Brian Roberts, "Sociological Lives and Auto/Biographical Writing, Huddersfield", in: *Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions*, ed. by Christine Horrocks et al., Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press 2002, pp. 163–170.

7 Lee Tong Soon explains that professional and amateur Chinese opera troupes differ in that professional troupes rely primarily on performance income to sustain their operations. See Tong Soon

at religious occasions in Chinese temples across Malaysia, as well as a Teochew opera and puppet house that serves multiple functions, including teaching, rehearsing, exhibiting, and hosting activities and performances.

The methods employed were participant observation and structured or semi-structured interviews conducted in person and online. In my usage, a structured interview fixed the time and questions in advance and shared the questions with the interviewee; unstructured interviewing involved eliciting information from everyday interactions.

For participant observation, I documented performances by the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*. I positioned video equipment in front of the stage. Because performances were held outdoors, placing the camera at the front often proved the most stable solution given the weather and the environmental constraints. I also used a mobile phone to record surrounding activities, yielding additional short video clips.

During fieldwork, I found that most substantive information came from semi-structured conversations. My research partner was not as receptive to formal, structured interviews: when asked to participate in them, or when approached with formal questions, the response was often "I don't know… I can't explain… it's tradition… there's nothing interesting to research actually…" By contrast, questions raised casually in conversation were consistently answered more completely.

For participant observations and structured interviews, I used a standardised fieldnote template to record basic information, for example:

Fieldnote, 23.01.2025

| | |
|---|---|
| Participants | Members of *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe* (e.g., Goh Lih Tat, Toh Ai Hwa, …) |
| Event | Chinese temple performance for the birthday of the gods |
| Location and Date | Persatuan Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Penang, Bukit Mertajam, 23.01.2025 |
| Start Time | 20:00 |
| End Time | 23:00 |
| Summary | The researcher arrived with the performers and set up the camera equipment.<br>The troupe members began setting up… the puppeteers—Seng and Kow—began to… |

Reflecting on the process of contact and entry into the field, I am reminded of Bruno Nettl's observation that researchers may face difficulties entering the field or securing trust.[8]

In my case, the entry was smooth. However, once in the field, my research partner expressed reservations regarding the role of "researchers" and the aims and nature of "research" itself. From their perspective, researchers are outsiders, unfamiliar with Teochew opera traditions, who conduct brief

Lee, "Professional Chinese Opera Troupes and Street Opera Performance in Singapore", in: *Asian Music* 31/2 (2000), pp. 35–70 and Tong Soon Lee, "Chinese Street Opera Performance and Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in Contemporary Singapore", in: *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 34 (2002), pp. 139–161.

8 See Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press 2015, pp. 157–168.

observations and then publish for their own advancement. I typically responded by avoiding confrontation and maintaining silence. My view is that the most effective response is to invest time with the community, coupled with repeated explanation and sustained respect for their values and perspectives.

## Stage Three: After Fieldwork— Data Organisation, Music Transcription, and Usage of Data

### Data Organisation

In this section, I reflect on my approach to handling and using the fieldwork data.

I organised my materials, which include photographs, video and audio recordings, systematically. For instance, I named a video recording of a Teochew puppetry performance "My25.V.001a.Teochew-Puppet" where "My" denotes Malaysia, "25" the year, "V" video, and "TeochewPuppet" the activity I observed. Interview files followed the pattern "My25.I.01.Gohhooiling," where "I" indicates interview and "Gohhooiling" records the interviewee's name.

### Music Transcription

Teochew opera and puppetry employ traditional notational practices for both percussion and melodic instruments.

To analyse performances, I first played back my field recordings and transcribed them into the traditional percussion notation, and subsequently into Western staff notation.[9]

### Use of Data

The organisation and analysis of fieldwork data enabled me to characterise contemporary Teochew puppetry performance in Malaysia and to address my research questions. Based on performances by the *Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe*, I developed a more comprehensive view of current practice. Regarding interpretation, one line of inquiry concerns gender construction. As shown in Figure 1, which depicts a male puppet cross-dressing as a woman, I discuss gender construction on stage and how cross-gender performance is enacted.

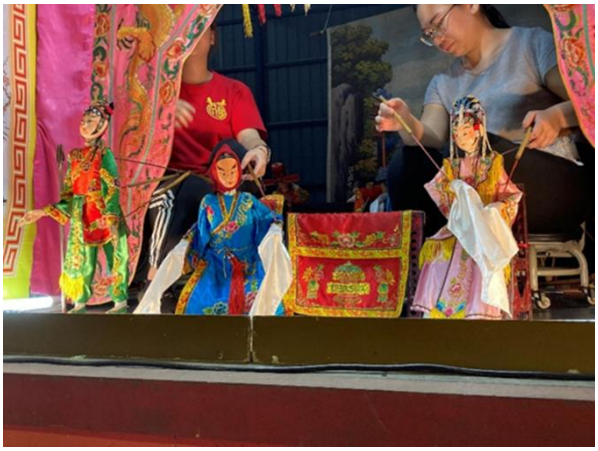


Figure 1: Male puppet cross-dressing as a woman in the Teochew puppetry production 'Hundred Flowers Giving Sword'[10]

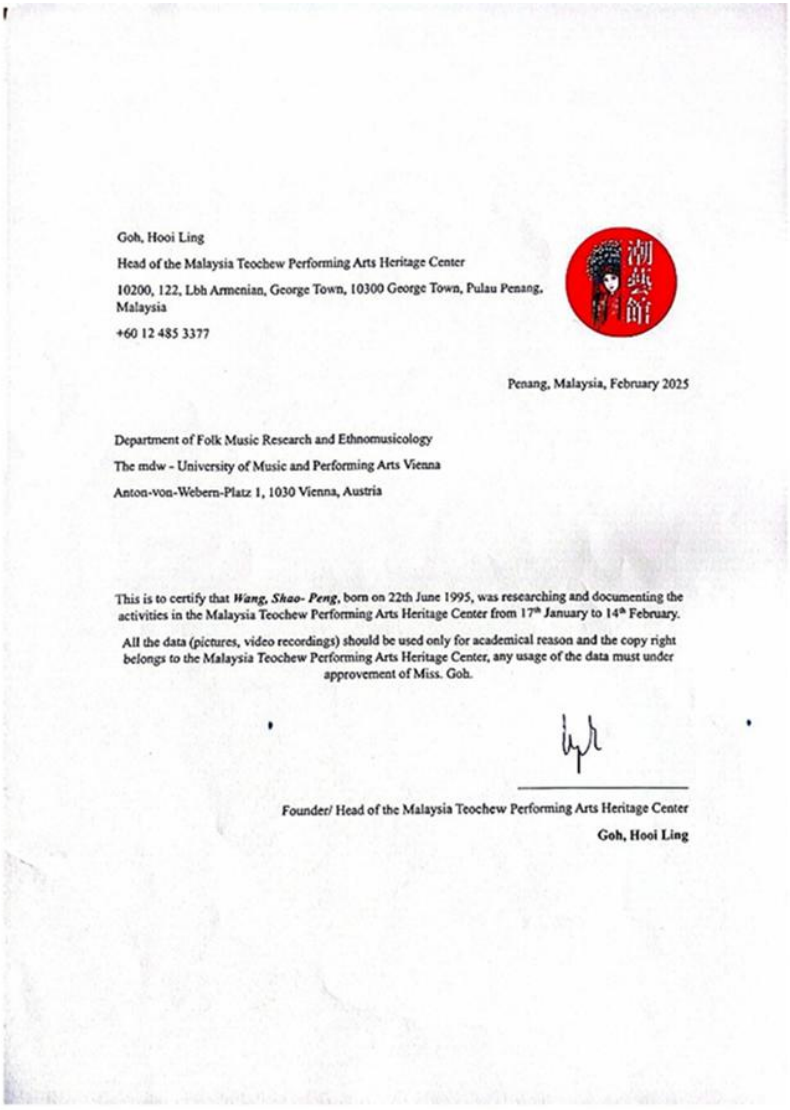
9 See in this issue: Shao-Peng Wang, "An Introduction to the Teochew Iron Rod Puppet Theater in Malaysia Today", in: *AN:klang. Magazin der Jungen Musikwissenschaft* 4/1 (2026), pp. 45–60, here: pp. 52–58.

10 Original in Mandarin: 百花赠剑 (bǎihuāzèngjiàn) Photograph by the author, taken at the Chinese temple Persatuan Zhen Shan Kok Lau Hut, Bukit Mertajam, Penang, Malaysia, on 24.01.2025.

## Ethics

As research involving human participants, this project followed an ethical framework aligned with normative ethics and cultural relativism, as discussed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay in her article "The Ethics of Ethnomusicology in a Cosmopolitan Age".[11]

From the outset, I informed the community by phone and via Zoom of my aims. After my arrival, I always notified them before each activity that I would be recording and photographing. To safeguard the integrity of the research and the rights of all parties, we signed an agreement governing the use of fieldwork data (Figure 2). The document sets out the copyright status of all material obtained during fieldwork and delineates usage rights for the researcher, the community, and any third parties.



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This is to certify that ***Wang, Shao- Peng***, born on 22th June 1995, was researching and documenting the activities in the Malaysia Teochew Performing Arts Heritage Center from 17th January to 14th February.

All the data (pictures, video recordings) should be used only for academical reason and the copy right belongs to the Malaysia Teochew Performing Arts Heritage Center, any usage of the data must under approvement of Miss. Goh.

Founder/ Head of the Malaysia Teochew Performing Arts Heritage Center
**Goh, Hooi Ling**

Figure 2: Agreement with the community regarding the use of fieldwork data and the rights and interests of both parties[12]

11 See Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "The Ethics of Ethnomusicology in a Cosmopolitan Age", in: *The Cambridge History of World Music*, ed. by Philip V. Bohlman, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press 2013, pp. 786–806, here p. 788.

12 Form by the author.

## Conclusion

In summary, despite the challenges of distance, the fieldwork benefited from a smooth process of contact and entry. Although I later faced questions from the community about the nature and benefits of research, I was able to build trusting and friendly relationships.

From the initial theoretical considerations to the completion of the project, I progressed through selecting a topic, defining research angles, establishing contact with the community over distance, travelling to the research site, conducting participant observation and interviews, building friendships within the community, organising and analysing data, and incorporating findings into my thesis. This constituted my first complete, independent ethnomusicological study. The vivid moments—both joyful and difficult—remain memorable. I recognise that there are likely limitations due to limited fieldwork duration and ample scopes for improvement, yet I regard this as a meaningful beginning.