

“Negotiation” Between a Religious Art Form and the Secular State: Chinese Puppet Theater in Singapore and the Case Study of Sin Hoe Ping

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“Negotiation” Between a Religious Art Form and the Secular State Chinese Puppet Theater in Singapore and the Case Study of Sin Hoe Ping

Traditional art forms often face rapid decline if they are not able to keep pace with a changing society. This article will examine puppet theater as performed by Chinese descent groups in temples and public spaces in Singapore as a case study of the adaptation of particular ethnic traditions at a time of an intense process of modernization. The island state of Singapore comprises various ethnic groups from different religious backgrounds living together in an advanced economy. On the one hand, the government ensures that the ethno-religious framework is protected through policies and laws. On the other, it seeks to maintain social cohesion by not favoring any religious group and by downplaying religious and ethnic divides. As discussed here, notions of “Chineseness” need to be accommodated within state policies based on the “harmonization” of racial and religious differences. The traditional art form investigated here, Chinese puppet theater, is characteristically linked to ethnicity and religion. How, then, does this ritual art form “negotiate” with a state that emphasizes secularism and seeks to elide multiracial and multi-religious differences? This study proposes a distinction between the “state-regulated realm” and the “state-tolerated realm” to suggest how Chinese puppet theater has engaged in negotiation with the Singaporean state to enable it to survive and even flourish. The focus will be on the Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Troupe, which has demonstrated considerable flexibility in adapting to secularized Singapore.

KEYWORDS: religion—ethnicity—Chinese puppet theater—state-regulated—state-tolerated—Singapore

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IN THE early twenty-first century Singapore has become an advanced economy while still retaining the framework of a multiethnic and multi-religious society.* Nonetheless, the public expression of religious and ethnic difference is treated with caution by a state intent on managing social cohesion. One of the lesser known ritual arts in modern-day Singapore is a type of puppet theater (木偶戲; *pok giao hi* in Henghua) commonly performed in temples.

For Chinese descent groups, the puppet show performed at their local temple is an important expression of ethnic and religious identity. For this reason, it has survived the vicissitudes of state formation in postwar Singapore to the present day, although it faces many challenges in transmitting this heritage into the future. In the Chinese tradition, temples would stage spectacular shows in order to “please the gods,” to entertain devotees, and to effectively communicate the prayers and concerns of the congregation to temple deities. In popular Chinese understanding, it is the visualization of religious activities in staged performances that is fundamental to the efficacy of the temple deity (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 181). This study will focus on the Sin Hoe Ping 新和平 Puppet Troupe, which has exhibited a remarkable adaptability in retaining its relevance in modern times. The Sin Hoe Ping troupe offers a valuable case study of a Sinophone cultural form that is not Mandarin speaking and hence in danger of marginalization within Mandarin-dominant Singapore. As discussed here, it survives by accommodating both Mandarin dominance and state secularization policies. This ethnographic study is based on eleven months of observation of Singaporean puppet performances from 2010 to 2011 and interviews carried out in a mixture of Mandarin, Hokkien, and Henghua with puppeteers, musicians, and ritual specialists.¹

CELEBRATION OF THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CITY GOD AT LI JIANG TEMPLE

It was the birthday of the City God 城隍爺 on the eighteenth day of the fifth moon in the year 2010 and the celebration was held at Li Jiang temple 鯉江廟. The temple was one of the many that belonged to the Henghua 興化 group in Singapore.² Everyone involved, from the ritual specialists and temple helpers, to puppeteers and musicians, was busy making preparations for the event. The usually quiet Li Jiang temple was suddenly filled with life. The Taoist priest 道士 in charge set up the altar, presented offerings to the gods, and chanted prayers.³ Temple helpers



FIGURE 1. Interlude of “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary.”

assisted in the preparation of incense paper and the display of food offerings. Members of the Sin Hoe Ping, the puppet troupe engaged in this performance, had set up a makeshift stage near the temple shortly before the performance. Mr. Yeo, the troupe leader, pulled up in a large truck and hauled down a number of metal boxes containing the puppets. It was his task to erect and dismantle the temporary stage. The musicians, mostly male, helped him set up the musical instruments on stage. Throughout the celebration of the deity’s birthday, there were feasts comprising various Henghua delicacies where everyone involved would be treated to a meal.⁴

By 8:00 p.m., the event was ready to commence. As night approached, the illuminated stage, which was riddled with fluorescent bulbs, suddenly lit up and the sounds of cymbals and *suona* (Chinese shawm) filled the neighborhood. As usual, the performance was divided into a ritual section followed by the performance proper.⁵ The ritual prelude included the set pieces, the “Eight Immortals” play 八仙戲 and “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary” 加官進祿. In the case of the “Eight Immortals” play, the puppets acting as the Eight Immortals were seen as manifestations of deities whose duty was to “communicate” with the City God.⁶ When the puppets representing the Eight Immortals had appeared on stage, the puppeteer would then recite:

Li: Inviting all deities!

Crowd: Invitation has been done!

Li: There is an event today.

Crowd: What event is it?

Li: The event is held at Li Jiang Miao to celebrate the City God's birthday. We are here to express our birthday wishes.

Crowd: Let's proceed!

The puppets then “knelt and bowed” to the City God on stage. Following this, four members of the Sin Hoe Ping troupe, including Mr. Yeo, carried the eight puppets from the stage to the temple. Stopping at the altar of the City God, the eight puppets carried out the “kneel and pray” pose and in this way sent their birthday regards to the God. The puppets were then placed backstage. Another puppet dressed in an official robe appeared on the stage for about thirty seconds before proceeding backstage. When it reappeared, the official was holding a red strip of paper with the Chinese characters “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary” written on it (FIGURE 1).⁷ The puppeteer appeared from behind the stage and took the official puppet “holding” the red strip of paper to the statue of the City God, where it was made to “bow” to this deity.

This brief ritual playlet is known as “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary.” When this solemn obeisance to the City God was concluded around 8:15 p.m., the puppeteers exclaimed “Prosper ah!” before proceeding back behind the stage.⁸ The red strip of paper was placed on the temple altar and the priest then conveyed the message to the City God that the temple keeper had staged a performance to celebrate this festive occasion.

The ritual playlet concluded, it was time for the performance proper to begin. According to sources about Henghua puppet performances and in line with my observations, the play proper is usually a story set in imperial China. The performance of “Chen Wenlong” 陳文龍 was no exception. It is a story about a poor scholar studying hard for the imperial examinations, as this was his only chance to break away from poverty. The ending of this type of story is usually auspicious in nature—the scholar achieves top results in the examinations, he marries the lady he loves, and is reunited happily with his family (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 351).⁹

The performance for the birthday celebration of the City God performed in the fifth lunar month of 2010 was typical of the genre. The play, “Chen Wenlong,” was staged to entertain the City God. The puppeteers used a written script, about thirty pages long, as *aide-mémoire* during the performance. “Chen Wenlong” was depicted as a budding scholar who was reduced to poverty after his father passed away. Forced by circumstances, he decided to visit his future father-in-law’s family to ask for help. However, the latter looked down upon Chen because of his poverty and even suggested giving him some money to call off the marriage arrangement. The unfortunate Chen was beaten and almost lost his life in his struggle against the father-in-law. However, his mother-in-law and betrothed kindly gave him some money, and he was later rescued by a stranger who saved his life. With the little money in his possession, Chen was able to set off for the capital where he sat for the imperial examinations. He eventually emerged as the top scholar 狀元 and was able to win back his beloved’s hand in marriage. Chen forgave the father-in-law for what he had done in the past and the story ended with a happy reunion. This performance of “Chen Wenlong” was mainly based on the script, although puppeteers occasionally extemporized on the text.¹⁰ The performance lasted for

about two hours. Around 10:00 p.m., the entire event was brought to a close when the Taoist priest sent off the gods, a ritual farewell known as *song shen* 送神.

The above account is a typical scene of Henghua puppet theater in contemporary Singapore. Although Singaporean puppet theater has been performed in temples for almost a hundred years, it has been relatively little studied and its role in Singaporean society is not well understood.¹¹ There are four types of Chinese puppet theater that still exist in Singapore today. They can be categorized according to the regional speech used and puppet type, specifically Hokkien glove puppet 福建/閩南布袋戲, Henghua string puppet¹² 興化提線木偶, Hainanese rod puppet¹³ 海南杖頭木偶, and Teochew iron stick puppet 潮州鐵枝木偶.

Scholarship on Singaporean puppet theater often covers the ritualistic or exorcistic aspects but tends to neglect the broader function of puppet theater within the framework of a secular state. Here I will adopt Lily Kong's idea of a process of "negotiation" that goes on between religious practices and the officially secular state of Singapore, in all its multicultural and multi-religious dimensions (KONG 2008). I will also draw upon Edwin Lee's notion of "selectivity" by the state in managing the ethnic dynamics of Singapore (LEE 2008, 534).¹⁴

This notion of the "selective" use of ideology is important as it applies to other policies adopted by the state to maintain a stable ethno-religious framework. This selectivity, or rather, oversimplification, conceals the diversity of cultures related to ethnicity and religion. This may partly explain why there has been little focus on how particular art forms, intrinsically linked to ethnicity and religion, may find themselves in conflict or engage in negotiation with the state policy of maintaining social cohesion. I will argue here that a contrasting modality—tradition and modernity, religious and secular, state-regulated and state-tolerated—is important in understanding how seemingly opposing forces can engage in a complex process of "negotiation" that serves to reinforce social cohesion.

THE RITUAL NATURE OF CHINESE PUPPET THEATER

Numerous studies on traditional theater in China have demonstrated that a symbolic relationship exists between religious ritual and theater, which includes opera and puppet performance (SCHIPPER 1993; RUIZENDAAL 2006; CHEN 2007).¹⁵ One of the most explicit examples to illustrate this relationship is the location where the performance is staged. A temporary stage is usually positioned directly opposite or a short distance away from the temple. The location is important, as it is believed that only a temple-based site will allow for direct "communication" with the gods. In addition, various types of "rituals" are conducted during a typical puppet theater performance. In the case of the Henghua puppet performance described above, the ritual segment was the "Eight Immortals" play and "Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary."¹⁶ In the former example, puppets representing the Eight Immortals of traditional mythology came on stage (Han Zhongli, Tieguai Li, Zhang Guo Lao, He Xianggu, Lan Caihe, Lü Dongbin, Han Xiangzi, and Cao Guojiu). These are all figures well known in Chinese mythology or Taoist culture. This ritual plays an important role in the invocation of the gods

which, in this case, is the City God. According to Taoist Priest Dai Wen Rong 戴文榮 who was in charge of this event, the “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary” playlet is performed by a puppet representing the prime minister (*zaixiang* 宰相). In traditional Chinese society, the prime minister is the highest ranking official in the imperial court. The enactment of this playlet can be understood as a wish to be promoted to the rank of prime minister.¹⁷ In contemporary times, long after the conclusion of the imperial examination system, the continuation of this ritual playlet can be interpreted as a symbol of the people’s wish for success in their careers and a belief that the gods have the means to grant their requests.

Although the duration of the ritual takes up a small proportion of time compared to the performance proper, which usually lasts for two to three hours, the ritual playlet is considered the core of the whole performance. This is because it is regarded as highly efficient in transmitting the wishes of the organizers and devotees to the gods. This religious belief explains why puppet performances continue to exist even though there is hardly any audience in contemporary Singapore.¹⁸ The “ritual” in theatrical performances is only a part of a larger set of ritual practices to ensure that the wishes of organizers and devotees are conveyed properly to the gods. It is believed that the increase in the number of rituals being performed will reassure organizers and devotees that their wishes are properly communicated (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 184).

Even though the performance proper is regarded as “entertainment” that includes live singing and musical accompaniment, it is staged primarily for the gods and secondarily for the human audience (CHAN 2006, 133, 135; RUIZENDAAL 2006, 3). Puppet performance is not the only means of communication between gods and mortals but the dramatic effect of theatrical performance does allow for the visualization of religion and communication between gods and mortals (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 181). In the case of the celebration of the birthday of the City God, the deity is invited to “watch” the performance.

The nature of the play proper is also important. In Henghua puppet theater, the repertoire is usually auspicious in nature. For example, the story chosen for the birthday of the City God, “Chen Wenlong,” is regarded as an “auspicious play” (*cai xi* 彩戲). The term “auspicious play” is related to the Chinese belief in “good omens” (*hao cai tou* 好彩頭) and is an expression of the people’s wish for happiness and prosperity. In imperial China, the literati class hoped that a family member would emerge as a successful scholar in the imperial examinations, while the common people wished for prosperity and good luck for their family, and so on. Even in a modern society like Singapore, the traditional wish for a good omen still continues.¹⁹

The story of “Chen Wenlong” is closely related to auspicious meanings such as “emerging as the top scholar” (*Zhong zhuang yuan, jin bang ti ming* 中狀元, 金榜題名). An “auspicious play” tends not to include scenes like death, murder, or other events deemed “inauspicious” (YE 2004, 141–42).²⁰ “Auspicious plays” are typically directed at deities, in this case the City God, to please him with celebrations.²¹ Through this performance, the community hopes that the City God will reciprocate by giving them blessings and protecting them from calamity and illnesses.

The celebration of a god’s birthday (*shen dan* 神誕) can be quite elaborate and

involves a significant amount of resources and manpower. Temple helpers prepare the food and incense offerings, Taoist priests are employed to conduct rituals, and a theatrical troupe is invited to perform. The cost of inviting a troupe can range from several hundred to a few thousand dollars. This is paid for by the temple, which in turn may be sponsored by donations from devotees and successful businessmen of the Henghua group. The willingness to sponsor stems from the belief that the gods will be able to grant the wishes of the people for good health, prosperity, and success. Successful businessmen may contribute more donations when their business prospers as an expression of gratitude to the gods.²² As there is little or no human audience watching the performance, Chinese puppet theater staged in religious institutions in contemporary Singapore is different from a ticketed performance where the audience pays to watch. In other words, if the puppet troupe has no other means of earning a living outside religious celebrations, it will have to depend on the celebration of religious festivals, such as the celebration of a deity's birthday, to make a living.

THE CHALLENGES OF MODERNIZATION

The live performance by Sin Hoe Ping at Li Jiang temple as described above is one of the many puppet shows staged throughout the year. There will be performances whenever there is a birthday celebration of a deity and during the Hungry Ghosts' Festival, which is held during the seventh lunar month.²³ However, these lively performances form a small and often neglected part of the life of contemporary Singapore today. Such performances can easily go unnoticed by the public. Although I grew up in Singapore during the 1980s, my first encounter with a Chinese puppet show was as late as 2007. Most people, particularly the young, have never seen a puppet performance in their lives. For those who have, it is regarded as something from a bygone era.²⁴ Performances are usually staged in temples located away from the bustling city. Even when performances are staged in housing estates where most Singaporeans reside, there is a limited audience aside from a few curious onlookers who may occasionally stop by for a glimpse. This lack of interest can be attributed to a number of factors. First, performances are staged in Chinese regional vernaculars which are generally incomprehensible to the public, particularly the younger Chinese who speak mainly English and Mandarin. According to the Population Census of 2010, only 5.7% of Chinese aged 34 and below speak one or more non-Mandarin Chinese languages.²⁵

This lack of proficiency in regional speech forms is due to the language policy implemented by the state from the late 1970s. When Singapore gained independence in 1965, the newly-established government chose to adopt English as the lingua franca, as it was believed that a workforce competent in English was needed to keep up with the global economy (CHONG 2011, 460). However, decades later, this emphasis on English resulted in too much exposure to Western ideas among the younger generation, to the extent that they have little regard for their traditions, and so the government decided to rectify the situation.

In 1979, the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) was launched. One of its objectives was to counter Western "decadence," which was believed to be adversely

affecting young Singaporeans. While Mandarin was emphasized in this campaign, it was done at the expense of eradicating the other regional vernaculars, which were regarded as hampering the bilingual learning of English and Mandarin in schools. The then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, made this announcement on the importance of learning English and Mandarin during the launch of SMC in 1979:

Children at home speak dialect; in school they learn English and Mandarin. After twenty years of bilingual schooling, we know that very few children can cope with two languages plus one dialect, certainly not much more than the 12% that make it to junior college. The majority have ended up speaking English and dialect. (TEO and LIM 2002, 3–4)

The effects of the campaign were far-reaching. The use of Mandarin in the homes of Primary One Chinese students rose from 25.9% in 1980 to 54.1% in 1999 whereas the use of non-Mandarin Chinese languages (dialects) dropped drastically, from 64.4% in 1980 to 2.5% in 1999 (TEO and LIM 2002, 5). The SMC resulted in a dramatic decline in the use of non-Mandarin Chinese vernaculars among the younger generation. Scholars and opera practitioners have expressed concern about the impact on traditional Chinese art forms like puppet theater, which uses regional speech as the performance medium. Some believed that the decreasing audience base could be attributed to a lack of understanding of the regional tongue by the younger generation, who now speak mainly English and Mandarin (CHONG 2011, 461).²⁶ According to one observer of puppet performances:

Chinese puppet shows here are performed by the travelling troupes in dialect ... They are for religious festivals and their stories of romantic classics do not appeal to the young.²⁷

Apart from language difficulties, the explicitly religious nature of puppet performance and the repertoire of traditional stories set during the imperial era are seen as unappealing to a contemporary audience. Language proficiency largely determines one's choice of entertainment. Television programs in non-Mandarin Chinese regional languages were phased out by the end of 1981. This eradication of regional speech in the media meant that opera- and puppet-related programs lost much of their audience. The older generation tend to watch Mandarin television programs while the younger generation watch programs in English and Mandarin, rather than traditional art forms that are performed in dialects that they can hardly comprehend. In this way, puppet shows that had flourished in Singapore for a hundred years have come to play a minimal role in the lives of most Singaporeans. The difficulty of appealing to contemporary audiences has been captured in these comments by puppeteers:

Even if we were performing just outside their flats, they would prefer to stay in and watch television or video shows.²⁸

When I was a child, kids of my age were fascinated with puppet shows. We would stand for hours on end watching the puppets. I suppose nowadays children are more interested in television shows.²⁹

The lack of understanding and interest in Chinese puppet theater has made it harder for youths to consider performance as a career. It is viewed as an industry that will be gone with the older performers. Even parents who are performers themselves do not encourage their children to perform.

The problem with puppetry is that it cannot help one to earn a living. That is why no one bothers to learn it.³⁰

I wouldn't want my children to follow in my footsteps, it's a hard life.³¹

The younger people are not keen to learn it.... I feel that after our generation has passed away, puppet shows may vanish altogether.³²

The same goes for Mr. Yeo Lye Hoe 楊來好, troupe leader of Sin Hoe Ping, who used to have his sisters helping him in the business until they got married. Now in his sixties, he is still looking for someone to take over his business.

While the decline of puppet theater in Singapore may be largely attributed to its lack of appeal to a modern audience, the state's attitude towards the art form has a role to play as well. Even though ethnic Chinese comprise more than 70% of the population, there are other ethnic groups such as Malays and Indians.³³ This context of Singapore as a multicultural, cosmopolitan city and secular state is important in understanding the impact of the social and political climate on the development of Chinese puppet theater today. Policies and laws have been established to protect the ethno-religious framework of this secular state and to foster art activities that support the state agenda. This objective was established not long after Singapore gained her independence. Wee Tong Boon, then Acting Minister of Culture, stated in a speech in 1969:

The development of art and crafts is one of the means by which the multiracial aspect of our national life can be made tangible.³⁴

The same applies for traditional art forms like Chinese opera and puppet theater. For example, the Traditional Theater Festival in 1987 was regarded as a “social defence project” that promoted harmony among Singaporeans of all races and religions. This was echoed by Miss Valerie Lim, assistant director of Cultural Programmes from the Ministry of Community Development, who stated that the festival was “a means for imbibing (inculcating) awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the three main ethnic groups’ heritage, across racial boundaries.”³⁵

The state’s attitude towards the arts was that it should serve to “perform multiracialism” and hence any state-endorsed arts will have to conform to this ideology (CHONG 2011, 26). This means that in the interests of racial harmony, the Singaporean state does not encourage strong expressions of religious difference.

In the case of Chinese ethnic expression, the state endorses performing arts that are Mandarin-speaking rather than non-Mandarin speaking, that attract broad multiracial audiences, and that are secular rather than religious. In other words, it promotes a version of “Chinese” ethnicity that elides non-Mandarin, regional, and religious expression. This investigation of a Singaporean puppet theater troupe explores the impact of state notions of “Chineseness” on the strategies adopted in the case of this Henghua-speaking ritual art form.

**“NEGOTIATING” THE DIVERGENCE
BETWEEN CHINESE PUPPET THEATER AND THE STATE**

Given the emphasis placed by the state on secularization, multiculturalism, and multiracialism, how can a performance form such as Chinese puppet theater, that is characteristically ethnic and religious in nature, “negotiate” with the state? (KONG 2008).³⁶ The analysis of Chua Beng Huat is pertinent here. Chua has proposed the idea of a “private” realm where the government places itself in a neutral space so that it does not privilege any ethnic or religious group. In this way, “racial cultural activities are then relegated to the realm of private and voluntaristic, individual or collective, practices.... While racial tolerance was given constitutional recognition, promotion of racial differences is carefully restricted to largely privatized celebration of festivals” (CHUA 1997, 106–107). However, the notion of a “private” realm may give the impression that these activities are conducted in a private home or institution to which the public has no access. In the case of Chinese temples and/or a temporary installation where puppet performances are staged, members of the public are free to visit these places. Nonetheless, the likelihood of participating in related religious celebrations is low due to ethnic and religious differences.

Instead of the concept of a “private” realm, I would like to propose the idea of a “state-tolerated” realm. By this I mean that the state tolerates religious and racial activities as long as these are confined to a defined domain, such as a temple. Within the defined domain the activity does not need to conform to the state requirement to “perform multiculturalism and multiracialism.” In other words, it does not need to explicitly promote racial or cultural harmony among Singaporeans of all races and religions. Arguably this is the situation for puppet performances staged in temples. Of course, there remain civic restrictions for certain sorts of activities. In densely populated Singapore, most people live in public housing and under the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP), such housing will have a mixed proportion of residents from different ethnic backgrounds in order to better promote racial integration and harmony.³⁷ Due to this ethnic mix in residential housing, religious activities have to conform to regulations concerning public order even though they are tolerated by the state. For example, the noise level is regulated. In the past, when most people lived in shop houses or low-rise houses, the duration of opera and puppet performances used to be longer, some lasting till midnight. Performances today must stop by 10:30 p.m.³⁸ As religious activities in Chinese temples usually involve the burning of joss sticks and incense paper, regulations have also been put in place limiting their use.³⁹ Temples and temporary installations are sometimes located near residential housing. Sound production in the form of live performances and music as well as incense burning that produces smoke may be regarded as intrusive by those who are not involved in the events and hence subject to regulation (LEE 1999, 89). The puppet performance by Sin Hoe Ping in Li Jiang temple described earlier is an example of a performance in such a “state-tolerated realm.”

In contrast to the “state-tolerated realm,” I will also propose the idea of “state-regulated realm.” In the “state-regulated” realm, the arts or cultural activities have

to conform more specifically to state regulations and be seen to promote racial harmony. As previously discussed, the state of Singapore sees the arts as a way of “civilizing” society and advocating multiracialism and multiculturalism (CHONG 2011, 26).⁴⁰ The “civilizing” effect of the arts hence justifies the regulation of the arts in order to make it accessible to the public within “state-regulated” realms, such as public theaters, museums, and schools. The same goes for state-encouraged arts which may take the form of arts festivals, arts programs, and museum exhibits or performances. In order to maintain religious harmony, religious elements have to be downplayed or omitted. Examples of state-endorsed Chinese puppet group activities include the event known as “Traditional Drama,” performed during Heritage Week in 1988, and the “Traditional Theater Festival” of 1989.⁴¹ Puppet performances in the “state-regulated” realm are not staged in temples or religious grounds, but in “secular” grounds such as public theaters and museums. They are often staged alongside art forms belonging to other ethnic groups like Malay *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) and Indian *therukoothu* (folk dance).⁴²

Another difference between the “state-regulated” and “state-tolerated” realms is the medium of performance. Chinese puppet performance in the “state-tolerated” realm is staged in non-Mandarin regional vernaculars. While some Chinese puppet performances in regional languages are allowed in the state-regulated realm, English is seen as the medium of “bridging cultures” and allowing the different ethnic groups to “enjoy each other’s rich theatrical heritage.” For this reason, within the state-regulated realm, English translations will usually be projected on stage or included in detailed brochures.⁴³ A good example of a puppet troupe which has flourished within the “state-regulated realm” is the Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Troupe.

THE SIN HOE PING PUPPET TROUPE

The Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Troupe has managed to maintain its vitality in contemporary Singapore by constantly modifying and adapting to shifting conditions. Sin Hoe Ping performs in both the state-regulated and state-tolerated realms and thus provides an illuminating study of how a traditional art form can creatively adapt within a dominant context of secularization and modernization.

To demonstrate the nature of this accommodation to state norms, I will turn now to an event, “Life, on a string” (FIGURE 2), held on 16 and 17 February 2012, that was part of a three-part arts and culture initiative called “Regenerating Communities.” This event, a joint initiative of the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Arts House, drew upon Singapore’s rich cultural heritage to revitalize Empress Place, a venue overlooking the iconic Singapore River. A temporary stage was set up on the grass plot outside the Asian Civilisations Museum and benches were provided for the audience. A television screen displaying a synopsis in both English and Chinese was placed next to the stage, together with a poster stand that stated “a puppet show not to be missed.” Besides the traditional string puppets that were hung backstage, there were modern puppets shaped like monkey dolls and glove puppets displayed in front of the stage. The troupe leader of Sin Hoe Ping, Mr.



FIGURE 2. Performance by Mr. Yeo, troupe leader of Sin Hoe Ping, at Empress Place. (Photo courtesy of Mr. Ng Cheng-Kiang.)

Yeo, and other performers, including puppeteers and musicians, were already there before the show commenced. They were dressed in Chinese dress suits and wearing lanyards stating their identities as artists. The shows were set to commence at 6:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m.—three shows lasting one hour each. By 6:00 p.m., there was a crowd seated at the benches provided. Seeing that most people had settled themselves comfortably, the host of the event made a brief introduction in English on the performance history of Sin Hoe Ping.

The first show that commenced at 6:00 p.m. was “Journey to the West.” This story is very popular among both adults and children, and characters like the Monkey King, Pigsy, and Tripitaka were well known to many. Glove puppets in the form of the Monkey King, Pigsy, Tripitaka, and Sandy were placed on the front side of the stage to serve as an illustration of the performance story. The sounds of cymbals, *suona*, and flute soon filled the air as the show commenced. It was performed in Henghua but as there were English and Chinese synopses available on the television screen, and especially because the show was a popular story known to many, the audience had a general idea of what was being performed. The spectators included a fair mix of adults and children, Chinese and non-Chinese. They were drawn to the bright colored lights that lit up the stage and the colorful costumes that Mr. Yeo had specially chosen for the event. The Monkey King, known for his magical skills, fought various enemies that tried to obstruct the pilgrims’ journey to the West. Somersaults and flying kicks were among the highlights that caught the attention of the audience. The show ended with a big round of applause. During the brief intermission before “The Monkey’s Wedding,” due to commence at 7:00 p.m., the host explained to the audience that the show and the puppets were created by Mr. Yeo himself. The part battery-operated,

part hand-manipulated puppets consisted of monkey-like dolls, one pair dressed in Chinese dress suits, and the other pair in Western suit and dress. Their cuddly and adorable appearances drew the younger members of the crowd and a few children went near the stage to have a closer look. The show was a hilarious story about monkeys who still lived in the forest but tried to imitate humans by reenacting a marriage ceremony. Laughter and applause filled the air as the comedy unfolded.

The last show, staged at 8:00 p.m., was “Wu Song Fights the Tiger,” another well-known Chinese classic where the main protagonist, Wu Song, triumphs over the ferocious tiger that had claimed many innocent lives.⁴⁴ Under the manipulation of the skilled puppeteer, the tiger puppet looked as if it had come to life. The battle was accompanied by the banging of cymbals and exclamations by the puppeteers, adding vivacity to the performance. Other than the vibrantly-colored puppets, there was also a brightly-lit prop to represent the battle of Wu Song fighting the tiger in a mountainous area. When the shows ended, there was a question-and-answer session with the audience and a demonstration of the puppets by Mr. Yeo. While Mr. Yeo spoke in Mandarin, the host translated in English for the non-Chinese audience. After the sessions, audience members were free to go backstage to interact with the performers, and before the event ended, members of the Sin Hoe Ping troupe posed for some photographs.

The above performance at Empress Place is an example of how Sin Hoe Ping has participated in the “state-regulated” realm. In this realm, Sin Hoe Ping took on a distinctly different role from its performances in Chinese temples. One could regard the Empress Place performance as an example of “negotiating” with and conforming to the state ideology of multiracialism and secularization. First, the venue outside the Asian Civilisations Museum in Empress Place could be regarded as a “state-regulated” realm because it was open to the public and supported by state-related arts organizations such as the Arts House, Asian Civilisations Museum, and the National Arts Council. This was in contrast to the performance in the “state-tolerated” realm which was sponsored by the temple committee and had no association with state-related arts organizations. The venue itself was closely related to the history of the Singaporean state. Empress Place is located near Singapore River. In colonial times it served as a Court House that was home to many government departments before being renamed Empress Place in 1907 to commemorate Queen Victoria’s visit to Singapore.⁴⁵ This event could be said to “perform multiculturalism” in that it was part of the initiative “Regenerating Communities” featuring Asian contemporary and heritage dance together with the Maya Dance Theater and ContempCo, and a Malay Bangsawan performance by Sri Anggerik Bangsawan.⁴⁶ The multiracial nature of this cultural event also aimed to promote racial harmony by featuring arts and heritage from the various ethnic groups of Singapore.

The notion of using the arts to “perform multiculturalism” was also reflected in the attempt to attract a multiethnic audience, including both adults and children. This could be seen in the use of English and Mandarin synopses, a poster display written in English, and the host speaking to the audience in English. The medium used during the event was a mixture of Mandarin, English, and Henghua.

Mr. Yeo's creation of modern puppets could also be seen as a way of attracting a younger crowd. His cute battery-operated puppets stood in marked contrast to traditional puppet performances, which are now commonly seen as an art form of a bygone era, or as something that only older people would appreciate. From my own observations, Sin Hoe Ping is the first traditional Chinese puppet troupe in Singapore to have invented modern puppets and used them in public performances.

As previously mentioned, religious elements are characteristically downplayed or omitted in the “state-regulated” realm. The audience in this realm was not the gods but human beings. There was no ritual conducted or ritual specialists involved in the event. Although shows like “Journey to the West” and “Wu Song Fights the Tiger” are set in imperial China, as one finds also with stories performed in the “state-tolerated realm,” these tales were drawn from popular classics known to broad audiences in Singapore. I also noticed that although Sin Hoe Ping customarily uses scripts in its temple performances, this was not the case in their performances in public spaces in the “state-regulated realm.” In the latter, plays were improvised according to the reaction of the audience and performers were not confined to follow a set script. The use of a variety of puppets, such as string puppets, glove puppets, and modern puppets, was also an attempt by Sin Hoe Ping to demonstrate the variety of Chinese puppetry to the audience. Traditional Henghua puppet performances usually use only string puppets. In the state-tolerated realm of temple performances, the string puppet, seen as a god itself, is believed to be the most sacred of religious dramas. String puppet performances are believed to be meant for the Heavely Emperor (CHAN 2006, 136). Marshal Tian (*Tian du yuan shuai* 田都元帥), the God of Theater, usually takes the form of a string puppet while engaging in exorcism. However, in a state-regulated realm such as the performance in Empress Place, all of these religious elements were removed. The audience saw the string puppets simply as objects of entertainment. Under the clever manipulation of the puppeteers, they could perform stunts and bring good cheer to their multiracial audiences.

THE VITALITY OF THE SIN HOE PING TROUPE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In Singapore, where traditional puppet theater has become a neglected part of life, Sin Hoe Ping has displayed vitality in continuing to prove its relevance in contemporary society. This has been illustrated in the two accounts provided above. According to my observations, since 2009, Sin Hoe Ping has been one of the most active troupes in Singapore with monthly performances staged throughout the year. In this study, a distinction has been made between the “state-regulated realm” and the “state-tolerated realm” in order to explain how a traditional art form like Chinese puppet theater “negotiated” with a secular state that placed emphasis on multiracialism and multiculturalism. It is clear that in the contemporary period, Sin Hoe Ping performs in both realms. Although most of the troupe’s performances are still staged in the Henghua vernacular, Sin Hoe Ping has increased the frequency of its performances by performing in religious institutions outside its own



FIGURE 3. Mr. Yeo performing as a puppeteer. Photo by author, 24 June 2010.



FIGURE 4. Mr. Yeo playing the *suona* (Chinese shawn) and flute. Photos courtesy of Mr. Ng Cheng-Kiang.

regional speech group. Other than the typical scene of performing at Li Jiang temple, Sin Hoe Ping established a Hokkien troupe under the same name. By performing in both Henghua and other Chinese vernacular religious institutions, as well as in public venues that come under the aegis of the “state-regulated realm,” Sin Hoe Ping has considerably increased its influence in the Singapore cultural domain.

The kind of adaptability demonstrated by Sin Hoe Ping is hardly seen in other puppet troupes in Singapore. The success of Sin Hoe Ping is due largely to the competitive strategy adopted by troupe leader, Mr. Yeo Lye Hoe (1950–). The troupe name “Sin Hoe Ping” (meaning “New Peace” in Mandarin) was registered as a Henghua puppet troupe during the 1980s by Mr. Yeo. However, the existence of Sin Hoe Ping (under a different name) can be traced back to the 1950s.⁴⁷ Even though the Henghua speech group made up less than 1% of the Chinese population in Singapore, there were at least four or five troupes in existence when Henghua puppet theater thrived from the 1950s to the 1970s. There was intense rivalry among troupes in competing for audiences. The competition between Sin Hoe Ping and Xin De Yue 新得月, from the 1950s to the 1970s, was particularly fierce. Troupes had to compete among themselves for survival in the market for temple performances. Sin Hoe Ping was more adaptable than its rivals and was able to maintain its relevance in contemporary society.

To understand the adaptability of Sin Hoe Ping, it is informative to explore the professional choices made by its current troupe leader. Mr. Yeo started out as a drummer and *gong* (percussion instrument in the shape of a flat, circular disc) musician at the age of seven. He stopped for a short period but has continued to perform until the present. Starting out as a musician, Yeo learned the art of puppetry at eighteen from his grandfather’s friends.⁴⁸ At many puppet performances that I have observed, the versatile Mr. Yeo would sometimes switch between his roles as musician and puppeteer (FIGURES 3 and 4), especially when there was a lack of manpower.

Mr. Yeo is also familiar with the various types of plays performed in Henghua puppet theater. In contrast to the “state-regulated” realm that has to downplay or omit religious elements in a typical puppet performance, Mr. Yeo must make sure he can meet the various demands required of a Henghua puppet troupe in the “state-tolerated” realm. In addition to “auspicious plays,” he conducts “ritual plays” (*yi shi ju* 儀式劇). There are two main types of Henghua ritual plays still performed today: the Mulian play (*Mulian xi* 目連戲) and the Northern Dipper play (*Beidou xi* 北斗戲). The Mulian play is usually performed during the Seventh Lunar Month, better known as the Hungry Ghosts’ Festival. The puppeteer, usually Mr. Yeo as he was more familiar with the ritual, would chant and call upon the souls of the dead to “watch” the Mulian play and “participate” in the purification ritual conducted later. This requires the skills of a religious specialist in order for the ritual to be carried out effectively. The other type of ritual play, the Northern Dipper play, is less frequently performed and only staged upon request. Typically this is a play of thanksgiving to the deities for protecting a sick child. As these plays were less frequently performed, other puppeteers and musicians would have to be led by Mr. Yeo, who was familiar with the ritual and story. Hence, in

the “state-tolerated” realm, a skilled performer like Mr. Yeo has to make sure he is well-versed in the traits of “Henghua-ness” to meet the requirements of temple sponsors. This involves the ability to master the repertoire, to play musical instruments, and to carry out religious and ritual customs. In this way he will be able to sustain himself and his troupe in the Henghua puppet theater industry.⁴⁹

Another reason for the success of Sin Hoe Ping was the way that the troupe, under the direction of Mr. Yeo, established an extensive network both in Singapore and internationally.⁵⁰ As noted by Dean and Zheng, who have conducted research on Putian, theater and puppet troupes have helped to maintain networks linking Putian to Southeast Asia (DEAN and ZHENG 2010, 248). In the context of Singapore, Mr. Yeo’s troupes, both Hokkien and Henghua, have created a name for themselves within the Chinese community. Sin Hoe Ping is frequently invited by both Henghua and Hokkien temples to perform. Considering that there are a number of Hokkien puppet troupes in Singapore, Sin Hoe Ping can be regarded as having maintained its competitive status with these troupes in order to continue its strong presence in the puppet scene. In addition to its connections within Singapore, Sin Hoe Ping has also established links in Malaysia, where it participates in Henghua temple and ritual celebrations (ZHENG 2008, 60; YUNG 1994). Mr. Yeo’s reputation has also spread to his ancestral hometown, Putian, in Fujian Province. According to Mr. Yeo, he has not needed to recruit puppeteers and musicians as there had often been requests from Putian to join his troupe.⁵¹

The recruitment strategy of Sin Hoe Ping has been particularly important in ensuring the ongoing resilience of this puppet troupe in contemporary Singapore. Today most of the puppeteers and musicians of Sin Hoe Ping are from Putian. As mentioned earlier, many puppet troupes feared extinction because there was no local interest in continuing with the art. In a way, the use of employees from China solves the problem of the lack of local manpower. As these puppeteers and musicians are also experienced in the opera or puppet theater in Putian, there is little or no need to provide intensive training when they arrive in Singapore, which in turn saves time and money. In addition, these foreign puppeteers have full-time jobs and do not rely on performing as a means for survival.

Sin Hoe Ping has also been innovative with regard to musical accompaniment. The troupe has mostly employed conventional musical instruments such as the *suona*, cymbals, drum, and octagonal lute (*ba jiao qin* 八角琴); however, the electronic keyboard has also been added, and this has helped to modernize the performances. It also means that fewer musicians can be employed, which saves expenses. Further, the keyboard is able to produce certain sounds that may be unattainable for Chinese musical instruments, thus enlivening the musical repertoire.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The ongoing survival of Chinese puppet theater is mostly invisible to those Singaporeans who believe that this art form belongs to a bygone era and only remains popular among the older generation. However, while modernization has been the main factor influencing the general decline of Chinese puppet

theater in Singapore, state policy has also played a dominant role. The eradication of regional vernaculars in order to promote English and Mandarin as the shared medium for education and daily use is one example of the impact of state policy. Younger Singaporeans who lack proficiency in their ancestral Chinese vernacular form will not find puppet theater appealing, because it is performed in a language which is hardly comprehensible to them. Despite the conflict between this traditional art form and the modern state, this does not mean that Chinese puppet theater is on the verge of extinction. Quite the contrary, one of the most active troupes in Singapore, Sin Hoe Ping, has demonstrated vitality both in the temple puppet scene and state-sponsored public performance spaces in contemporary society. The case study of Sin Hoe Ping and the profile of its troupe leader, Mr. Yeo Lye Hoe, can serve as an illustration of a traditional art form that can still “negotiate” with the state for survival. In this study, I have put forward the notion of a “state-tolerated realm” and a “state-regulated realm” to explain how the Sin Hoe Ping troupe has made this “negotiation” possible by successfully performing in both realms. Notions of Chinese ethnicity are also central to the type of accommodation the Sin Hoe Ping troupe has made in order to survive in multiracial, secular Singapore. In this case, the troupe has expanded its repertoire to include a cosmopolitan Mandarin-speaking public expression of pan-Chinese identity, while at the same time preserving an old ritual art form that continues to shower blessings on Singapore’s Henghua-speaking community.

NOTES

* I would like to thank all my interviewees, particularly Dai Wen Rong and Yeo Lye Hoe, for providing me with useful information on Henghua tradition and puppet theater. I am grateful to my Master’s degree supervisor, Crossland-Guo Shuyun, for her patience in guiding me through my research on Sin Hoe Ping from 2009 to 2011. Special thanks to my PhD supervisor Anne McLaren for her kind patience in guiding me through the writing of this article. I would also like to thank Ng Cheng-Kiang for his generosity in sharing his photos that are used in this article.

1. I have been observing the Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Troupe and the Henghua community since 2009, and I conducted the observation at Li Jiang temple from 30 June 2010 to 20 June 2011. I continued further verification with informants, including puppeteers, musicians, and ritual specialists, until early 2013. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin but at times I asked for the pronunciation of basic terms related to puppet theater in the Henghua language. The local-born Henghua Chinese also spoke Hokkien, which I was able to comprehend.

2. The “Henghua group” here refers to Singapore-born Chinese descendants whose forefathers migrated from Putian (Southeast China) and also, in more recent cases, the new wave of immigrants born in Putian. These people speak *Puxian hua* (莆仙話) or *Puxian fangyan* (莆仙方言). The term “Puxian” refers to “Putian” (莆田) and “Xianyou” (仙游), the former being a city in southeast Fujian and the latter a county. Speakers of Puxian are also known as Xinghua (興化), which is spelled “Henghua” in the Southeast Asian context. As the term “Henghua” is commonly used in official Singapore statistics, I shall adopt this term throughout the article. Even though the term “dialect” has been commonly used in the Singapore context, I will choose to use terms like “regional vernacular,” “regional speech,” and “regional variant” interchangeably and the use of “dialect” will be minimized in this article. The Chinese term, *fangyan* (方言), is quite different from the Western notion of dialect as the latter usually refers to mutually intelligible varieties of a single language. On the contrary, the Hen-

ghua speech is a Min (閩) language but the speech forms of the different groups of the Min language group are in fact mutually unintelligible. The English term “dialect” is misleading in this context. Until the mid-twentieth century, Chinese speaking different regional speeches (*fanyan*) resided in different parts of Singapore. However, this phenomenon is less visible in contemporary Singapore.

3. According to Taoist Priest Dai Wen Rong, there are different ritual texts for different occasions. For example, there will be a ritual text meant for congratulating the deity on his birthday. However, because there are many occasions of celebrating the god's birthday, he does not need to rely on the ritual text for his chanting. The “spiritual petition” (*shu wen* 疏文) will still have to be written in order to convey the message to the deities. Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 21 March 2013.

4. In the course of my observations I came to know the community quite well and was often invited to have a meal with them.

5. The ritual playlet consists of the “Eight Immortals” play and “Getting a Promotion and an Increase in Salary.” In daytime performances, the ritual playlet is staged after the performance proper because the Taoist priests require some time to invoke the gods. During the night performance, the ritual playlet is staged after the performance proper because the gods have already been invoked in the day (Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 21 March 2013). I was also told that there is no specific time for staging the ritual playlet but it should start only when the deities have “arrived” upon invitation. In the Li Jiang temple, I have not observed the presence of spirit mediums (*shen tong* 神童) but in other Henghua temples, disciples go into a trance on the arrival of the deities. This would signal to the troupe it was time to start the ritual playlet. (Observation made at Ling Ci Xing Gong 靈慈行宮, 1 May 2013.)

6. Dai Wen Rong explained to me that the seniority of the City God is such that it is appropriate that the Eight Immortals send birthday regards to him. In the case of a deity with a lower seniority like the Earth God (Tudigong 土地公), the “Eight Immortals” play would not be performed. Instead, a ritual known as “Ushering Wealth and Prosperity” (*zhao cai jin bao* 招財進寶) is performed instead (Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 9 May 2011).

7. I revisited and again witnessed the celebration of the City God's birthday at Li Jiang Miao on 20 June 2011.

8. The exclamation “Prosper ah!” was also observed by the Hokkien community in Singapore. There is likelihood that the Henghua borrowed this custom from the Hokkien. However, it is not known when this custom began. In Putian where I conducted my fieldwork in 2013, they do not utter this exclamation.

9. Ruizendaal noted that the scholar, the highest graduate of the imperial examinations, is the most important character in frequently performed plays. Since the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the scholar has been one of the most auspicious symbols in Chinese culture (RUIZENDAAL 2006).

10. Even though Sin Hoe Ping uses a script, the performance may vary according to the context and the required duration. If the performers realize that the performance is coming to an end and the two-hour target is not met, they may think of ways to extend the performance time by decreasing the speed of singing or speaking. Also, improvisation may affect the actual time of a performance.

11. To date there is no record of the earliest existence of Chinese puppet theater in Singapore. According to the information I gathered from interview records of the National Archives of Singapore, one of the earliest puppet troupes that existed in Singapore could be a Teochew iron stick puppet troupe known as San Zheng Xing (三正興). According to the interviewee, Mr. Tay Lee Huat (1940–), it was established between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. However, Mr. Tay was unsure of the exact date. Another troupe was Chye Sin Hong or Cai Xin Feng (彩新鳳) believed to be derived from Zhongzhou (中州), Henan, in China. It arrived in Singapore in 1926. This troupe comprised Hakka speakers and sang the Waijiang (外江) tune, a melody believed to derive from the ancient Zhongzhou tune in Henan (OU 1988).

12. TANAKA Issei (2008) and YUNG Sai-Shing (1997) have examined the ritual aspects of Henghua puppet theater in Singapore; see also the update by ZHENG (2008).

13. For Hainanese rod puppet theater, see WANG Zhenchun (2000); LIN Jia (2009); TEH Seh Hwee (2004).

14. An example of the notion of “selectivity” is the decision by the state to adopt Confucian ideology. See LEE (2008, 534).

15. Chinese opera and puppet theater are similar in that both are theatrical art forms that require music accompaniment and singing. Dai Wen Rong has commented that compared to Chinese opera, puppet theater is the “bigger show.” He relates this to a common belief among the Henghua folk that he heard as a child. The high status of puppet theater was related to Emperor Liang Wudi (AD 464–549) who was a vegetarian. His family followed his vegetarian habits but his mother, the Empress Dowager, was reluctant to do so. The vexed Emperor Liang Wudi was unsure of what to do but he was approached by a scholar who invited the emperor and his family to watch the show titled “Mulian Saves his Mother” (目連救母). The Empress Dowager was shocked to see how people who feasted on meat would suffer in the underworld and decided from then on to become a vegetarian. The emperor was overjoyed by the outcome and ordered that all temple celebrations in the country should engage puppet shows on the first day followed by opera performed by humans. Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 21 March 2013.

16. Other ritual plays include “Ushering in Wealth and Prosperity” and “Playing the Big Gods” (*nong da xian* 弄大仙). According to Dai Wen Rong, “Ushering in Wealth and Prosperity” is meant for gods of a “lower” rank like the Earth God (土地公). “Playing the Big Gods” is a play of a longer duration, lasting about one and a half hours. It is performed for gods of “higher” rank such as Mazu (媽祖), God of Mystic Heaven (Xuan tian shang di 玄天上帝), and the Heavenly Emperor (Yu huang da di 玉皇大帝). However, these plays are rarely performed today. Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 13 March and 21 March 2013. See note 21 for the explanation of gods of high and low ranks.

17. Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 20 June 2011.

18. A similar observation has been made by Ruizendaal in his study of marionette theater in Quanzhou, China (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 184).

19. As Ruizendaal has noted, this is also the case for Quanzhou in China. New Year prints illustrating successful imperial graduates still symbolize status (*gong ming* 功名) and wealth (*fu gui* 富貴) in Quanzhou today (RUIZENDAAL 2006, 103).

20. Ye Mingsheng classified the “auspicious play” under the category of *san xi* (散戲), also known as *qing xi* (清戲), which is distinguished from ritual or liturgical play (*yi shi ju* 儀式劇) (YE 2004, 61–62; 141–42). Regardless of the name given, these plays are of an auspicious nature and are contrasted to ritual plays like the Mulian play and Northern Dipper play. I have also verified the term “auspicious play” with Ms. Li and Dai Wen Rong (Ms. Li, personal interview, 6 October 2010; Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 9 May 2011).

21. Margaret Chan observes that Chinese marionette theater is mainly designed to attract the attention of the deity and spirit guests, whereas opera is performed mainly to entertain the spirits (CHAN 2006, 135, 137). In the Taoist religious system, gods (神) and spirits (鬼) may be categorized as spiritual beings but it is sometimes hard to make a clear distinction. Dai Wen Rong, who has trained as a Henghua Taoist priest for more than two decades, states that it is a case of “human when alive, a god when dead” (*sheng wei ren, si wei shen* 生為人, 死為神). This implies that both gods and ghosts are people who have died but who are now regarded as spiritual or supernatural beings. However, the gods rarely descend to the mortal world to take charge of human affairs and instead call on ghosts to undertake these tasks. Ghosts are spiritual beings who committed good deeds when they were alive. They are “assigned” by gods to help out with human affairs, including the receiving of temple offerings. They also report back to Heaven which temple has engaged in celebrations meant for the gods. Ghosts who do the bidding of the gods are set apart from another category of ghosts who bring harm to humans. Offerings are made to appease the latter. Feuchtwang has also made a dis-

tinction between gods and ghosts in terms of how offerings are made. For example, offerings made to the former are usually placed on an altar inside the temple, whereas offerings made to the latter are often placed on the ground outside the temple. The ranking of gods may differ as well, depending on whether they received honorary titles from imperial emperors (FEUCHTWANG 1974, 109–11). Dai Wen Rong used the example of Mazu and mentioned that she was bestowed the title of “Water Celestial” (水上聖仙) by the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝). She was “promoted” to the rank of “Goddess of Heaven” (Tian shang sheng mu 天上聖母) by reigning emperors for her good deeds. This means that gods that had received honorary titles from reigning emperors may be promoted to a higher rank than gods who did not receive such titles. In this way one can distinguish between “big gods” (大神) and “small gods” (小神) (Dai Wen Rong, personal interview, 21 March 2013).

22. I observed a celebration where a businessman invited Sin Hoe Ping to perform in celebration of Zhanggong Shengjun’s birthday. The performance was held at an industrial estate at 31 Defu Lane 10, Singapore.

23. During the seventh month, Sin Hoe Ping is invited to the main Henghua temple, Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng (興安天后宮), to engage in universal salvation for the purgatory (*pu du* 普度). In this event, the Mulian show (目連戲) is staged.

24. In 2013, I conducted an online survey with 32 Singaporeans aged 20 to 35 about their experience with puppet shows. In response to the question whether they had ever seen a Chinese puppet performance before, about 70% (22 out of 32) of the participants said they had never seen one. Further questions explored how they perceived puppet performances, even if they had no previous experience of watching them. The general impression is that Chinese puppet performance is an outdated art form meant mostly for old people. Even for those who had seen one, the perception was also that such performances were old-fashioned and outdated. See the results of the survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-F2L239YD/> (accessed 31 May 2015).

25. Even though statistics from the census indicate the number of Chinese who claim to speak non-Mandarin regional languages, the level of actual proficiency is unknown. This is important because understanding the performance requires at least an intermediate level of proficiency in a regional language. The percentage of fluent speakers of Chinese regional languages may be even lower than the census figures indicate. See Singapore Department of Statistics Table 49, Census of Population 2010, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_release1/cop2010sri.pdf (accessed 13 June 2017).

26. The author also conducted brief research on Cantonese opera in Singapore from 2009 to 2011. Cantonese opera practitioners like Chee Kin Foon, Joanna Wong, and Lynn Ng Mui Leng have expressed concern about the impact of the lack of understanding of regional speech in Cantonese opera (CHIA 2013). Chee also added that since non-Mandarin regional languages could not be used in schools, it had become a challenge to promote Cantonese opera to students (Chee Kin Foon, personal interview, 15 June 2009; Joanna Wong, personal interview, 7 August 2009; Lynn Ng, personal interviews, 24 July 2009 and 27 August 2009).

27. Interview with Chow Pak Hong, *The Straits Times*, 4 December 1985, 3, NL15286.

28. Interview with Madam Huang Yamei of the Bai Hua Chun Fujian Glove Puppet Troupe, “Playing for the Gods,” *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1984.

29. Interview with Madam Ooi Kooi Geok of the Beng Geow Hong Hokkien Puppet Show troupe, “Playing for the Gods,” *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1984.

30. Interview with Lui Choo Guan of the disbanded Chye Sin Hong (still performing during the time of the interview in 1990), “Puppet Passion,” *The Straits Times*, 11 September 1990, 5.

31. Interview with Madam Ooi Kooi Geok, “Madam puppeteer,” *The Straits Times*, 14 December 1979, 10, NL10401.

32. Interview with Madam Huang, “Playing for the Gods,” *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1984.

33. Singapore Department of Statistics Population Census 2010, http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_release1/cop2010sr1.pdf (accessed 7 August 2015).

34. Speech by Acting Minister for Culture at the Opening of the Art and Crafts Exhibition, held in conjunction with the Singapore Youth Festival, Victoria Memorial Hall, 9 July 1969 (CHONG 2011, 26).

35. "Room for festival to grow," *The Straits Times*, 23 October 1989, 1, NL16796.

36. In her discussion on the religious processions of Thaipusam (a Hindu festival) in Singapore, Kong explored the kinds of conflicts that have to be negotiated in the continued performance of religious practice. This question is explored using the multicultural, multi-religious case of Singapore, a modern city and officially secular state (KONG 2008).

37. Housing Development Board (HDB) InfoWeb, http://www.hdb.gov.sg/fio/fio321p.nsf/w/BuyResaleFlatEthnicIntegrationPolicy_EIP (accessed 15 February 2013).

38. National Environmental Agency, "Noise Pollution," <http://www.nea.gov.sg/anti-pollution-radiation-protection/noise-pollution-control> (accessed 7 August 2015).

39. According to the National Environmental Agency (NEA) of Singapore, the government introduced control measures on 1 March 1998 to minimize problems when burning joss paper, candles, and so on: "Joss sticks shall not exceed 2 metres in length and 75 mm in diameter. For large joss sticks up to 2 metres in length and 75 mm in diameter, no more than six may be burnt at any one time. Candles shall not exceed 600 mm in length. For large candles up to 600 mm in length, no more than two may be burnt at any one time. The burning of large joss sticks and candles shall not be within 30 metres from any building." See <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;page=0;query=CompId%3Ac10459fd-7d86-4488-96f7-8828d6fe6eb1%20ValidTime%3A20160103000000%20TransactionTime%3A99991231000000;rec=0> (accessed 17 June 2017).

The Ministry of Environment and Water Resources has introduced specially designed joss burners for use at wayang (theatrical performance) sites, which will be loaned to organizers who will ensure that there is no indiscriminate burning that will dirty or damage common property. See <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/MEWR20010816001.pdf> (accessed 7 August 2015).

40. Chong quoted Acting Minister of Culture Wee Toon Boon's speech in 1969: "The development of art and crafts is one of the means by which the multiracial aspect of our national life can be made tangible."

41. The Traditional Theater Festival started out as a project financed by the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board and was supported by the then Ministry of Culture. This festival has also been singled out as a social defence project in which "social defence" refers to "Singaporeans of all races and religions living and working together in harmony." See "Room for festival to grow," *The Straits Times*, 23 October 1989, NL16796, 1; "Capture traditional art forms on video," *The Straits Times*, 8 September 1988, NL16248, 22. For the definition given by the Ministry of Education (Singapore) of "Social Defence," see: https://www.minsdef.gov.sg/mindef/mindef_websites/topics/totaldefence/about_us/5_Pillars.html (accessed 8 May 2016).

42. "Room for festival to grow," *The Straits Times*, 23 October 1989, 1.

43. "Room for festival to grow," *The Straits Times*, 23 October 1989, 1.

44. The stories of the Monkey King ("Journey to the West" and "Wu Song Fights the Tiger") are classic pieces in Chinese glove puppet theater. The latter is often performed as a classic in Zhangzhou puppet theater and has received international acclaim.

45. See <http://www.singaporeflyer.com/visitor-guide/views-from-the-top/empress-place-2/> (accessed 18 February 2013).

46. See <https://www.facebook.com/RegeneratingCommunities/info>.

47. There are two accounts offered by scholars on the establishment of “Sin Hoe Ping” and the names of its previous troupe leaders. Zheng Li mentioned that the predecessor of “Sin Hoe Ping” was “He Ping.” The name was changed when its previous troupe leader, Huang Ah Fa, sold the troupe to Yeo Lye Hoe in 1981 (ZHENG 2008, 60). On the other hand, Jennifer Chen believes that “Sin Hoe Ping” had kept this troupe name since its establishment (CHEN 1995, 8). Its previous troupe leader, Chen Jin Chang, sold the troupe to Mr. Yeo.

48. Yeo Lye Hoe, personal interview, 7 January 2010.

49. Mr. Yeo demonstrated the “eight-trigram dance” (*cai ba gua*) to me. This exorcistic dance is conducted by the God of Theater, Chief Marshal Tian (*Tiandu yuanshuai*), to engage in the expiatory purification of the souls of the dead.

50. For a list of activities participated in by Sin Hoe Ping both locally and internationally, see the Appendix.

51. Yeo Lye Hoe, personal interview, 7 January 2010.

52. The author has witnessed the use of keyboard during one of Sin Hoe Ping’s performances. The musical instruments used during the performance included the keyboard, drum and cymbals. In a way, the keyboard was seen as a replacement of the *suona* and octagonal lute. However, the keyboard is only occasionally used in most of Sin Hoe Ping’s performances in Henghua temples. Personal fieldwork, 20 April 2011, Singapore.

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Appendix

*List of activities of Sin Hoe Ping, 2010–2015**

*Those marked with “ST” denote performances in the “state-tolerated” realm and “SR” for the “state-regulated” realm. All events were held in Singapore unless otherwise stated.

2010

- 6 February: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Kiew Lee Tong (ST)
- 14 February: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at An Ren Gong (ST)
- 17 February: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Hao Pu She (濠浦社) (ST)
- 8–10 March: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance in celebration of Monkey God/Qi Tian Da Sheng (齊天大聖)'s feast day at Tian Xing Gong (天性宮) (ST)
- 31 March: Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance at Po Chiak Keng (保赤宮) (ST)
- 15 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Hokkien celebration of Xuan Tian Shang Di (玄天上帝)'s feast day (ST)
- 15 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Chong Fu temple (崇福堂) (ST)
- 28 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Xian Gong temple (ST)
- 23–24 June: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) all-male performance at Hokkien celebration for the feast day of Zhang Tian Shi (張天師) (ST)
- 30 June: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Li Jiang temple (ST)
- 21 July: “In the main hall of Cao Family's Residence,” 8:00–8:30 p.m., 9:00–9:30 p.m., Central's River Promenade, in conjunction with “Singapore Food Festival 2010,” held from 16 to 25 July (SR)
- 28 August: Mulian performance by Sin Hoe Ping at Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng (ST)
- 5 September: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Futsing Association (ST)
- 6 November: Beidou/Northern Dipper play by Sin Hoe Ping at Xian Ying Gong (顯應宮) (ST)
- 16 November: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Zhao Ling temple (昭靈廟) (ST)
- 2–5 December: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at secret meditation event held at An Ren Gong (ST)

2011

- 8 January: “Journey to the West,” Bukit Merah Community Library (SR)
- 16 January: Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance in celebration of Dua Ya Pek (大爺伯)'s birthday at private residence (ST)
- 18–19 January: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng (ST)
- 20 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at industrial site, 31 Defu Lane 10 (ST)
- 27 October: “Puppetry in Chinese Opera,” 2–4 p.m., Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall (SR)
- 29 October: “Puppetry in Chinese Opera,” 10 a.m.–12 p.m., Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall (SR)

2012

- February (exact date unknown): Mr. Yeo Lye Hoe's TV appearance, OKTO channel (SR)
 16–17 February: "A puppet show not to be missed," Asian Civilisations Museum (SR)
 24 February "Young President Organiser": Presentation of "Journey to the West" & "Wu Song Fights the Tiger," Sunday, Marina Bay Sands, Event Plaza (SR)

2013

- 13 March: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng (ST)
 7 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Tian Xing Gong (天性宮) (ST)
 10 April: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Chong Fu temple (崇福堂) (ST)
 16 June: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Hin Ann Thain Hiaw Keng (興安天后宮) (ST)
 26 June: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Li Jiang temple (鯉江廟) (ST)
 15 July: Puppet performance and demonstration at River Valley High (Secondary and High school institution) (SR)
 19–20 July: Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Zhao Ling Miao (昭靈廟) (ST)

2014

- 15–16, 22–23 March: "Reliving Haw Par Villa," organized by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) in conjunction with Tourism. (SR) The Haw Par Villa (虎豹別墅), originally called Tiger Balm Gardens, was established in 1937 by the famous Aw brothers, Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par. The name "Haw Par" was derived from the names of the Aw brothers. It is now regarded as a heritage building symbolizing Chinese culture in Singapore.
 24 October: Heng Ann Association Melaka (馬六甲興安會館), Malaysia.
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2015

- 25 January: Invitation by Nick Shen of Tok Tok Chiang (SR)
 7 February Performance in conjunction with SG50 (SR)
 20 February: (second day of first lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance at Xian Zu Gong (仙祖宮) (ST)
 22 February: (Fourth day of first lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Kiew Lee Tong (ST)
 27 February: (Ninth day of first lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance at Jin Shan Si (金山寺) (ST)
 2 March: (Twelfth day of first lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at An Ren Gong (安仁宮) (ST)
 5 March: (fifteenth day of first lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Kiew Lee Tong (九鯉洞) (ST)
 21 March: (second day of second lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) Tua Pek Kong (大伯公) birthday celebration at Amoy Street (ST)
 22 March: Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) at Gor Cho Tua Pek Kong temple (梧槽大伯公廟) at Balestier Road (ST)

21–22 April: (Third and fourth day of third lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance at Rong Fu Tang (榮福堂) (ST)

26 April: (Eighth day of the third lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Henghua) performance at Xian Gong Tang (仙宮堂) (ST)

9 May: Performance for elderly folks in conjunction with SG50 (50th anniversary of Singapore) (SR)

11–12 May (Twenty-third and twenty-fourth day of third lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) performance at Ping An Tang (平安堂) (ST)

16–17 May (Twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth day of third lunar month): Sin Hoe Ping (Hokkien) at Wu Feng Miao (五風廟), Geylang Lorong 34 (ST)