ABSTRACT

Studies on Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochew traditional opera have been prominent in the academic circles. However, corresponding studies on traditional Hainanese opera have yet to emerge as a major topic of interest. This thesis is a case study of the oral history of Hainanese Traditional Opera in Singapore. As there has not been any systematic and in-depth study of Hainanese Traditional Opera in Singapore, this thesis aims to analyse the history of Hainanese Opera and to provide exploratory insights into the various aspects of this theatrical art.

Due to the lack of informants from the early twenties and thirties, this thesis is based mostly on the scenarios of the Hainanese Opera in the fifties and sixties. This exercise was based on a fieldwork of several interviews both face to face and telephone interviews with members from the Hainanese Association and amateur performers from the Singapore Hainanese Society, the Singapore Tien Heng Kang Heng Nam Dramatic Association and the Hymn Rhyme Sing Opera Club. The fieldwork was done within the period from August 1995 to February 1996.

The various aspects dealt with in the thesis are, the historical development of Hainanese Opera in Singapore, the professional and amateur Hainanese Opera troupes which has been active since their emergence in the fifties, the traditional practices and customs observed and finally, the characteristics of its music, its singing and the musical instruments used.

Among the findings of this thesis are, like many other dialect operas, Hainanese Opera in Singapore is on the decline and that Hainanese Opera has served as a cement that bond the Hainanese Community together because of their affinity in this traditional art. This search for cultural identity and the maintenance of community cohesiveness have in turn helped to preserve this art. To most Hainanese, participation through singing or watching an Hainanese Opera is like returning to their homeland in China.