Abstract

Studies on the composition of audience in the various performing arts and cultural activities have been prominent in the academic circles of the West. However, corresponding studies on traditional Chinese opera have yet to emerge as a major topic of interest. Hence, the aim of this exercise is to provide exploratory insights, as well as to test certain hypothetical assumptions, on the audience composition of one type of Chinese regional opera in Singapore: the traditional Cantonese opera.

This exercise was based on a fieldwork study of 14 Cantonese opera performances held in Singapore between the period June 1994 to December 1994. The first hypothesis assumed that two particular contexts of performance, namely the temporary stage context and the permanent theater context, each of which attracts a different group of audience. The second hypothesis assumed that the social class of the audience influenced their taste in Cantonese opera. Three major categories of audience: upper / upper-middle, middle and middle-lower / lower class were thus identified for the study. The sample was selected randomly among the audience present in the various Cantonese opera performances as mentioned. Fieldwork was conducted through face-to-face and telephone interviews. Data, collected in both written (fieldwork notes) and visual (photographs) forms, was used to test against the validity of the hypotheses.

Both hypotheses were supported by fieldwork findings, however some modifications were made: 1) the dichotomy model of temporary stage / permanent theater audience was replaced by a continuum model; 2) weak traces of middle class taste suggested cultural mobility in aesthetic tastes. Furthermore, due to constraints in time and monetary resources, the author is unable to locate a larger group of respondents, hence resulting in a relatively small sample size.
Therefore, the study does not claim to represent the composition of Cantonese opera audience in Singapore in general.

The findings in this exercise suggest that contextual and class analysis are useful theories in future research on the social aspect of Chinese regional opera in Singapore.