ABSTRACT

Teochew opera is one of the four major Chinese operas in Singapore. It originated from the Teochew district in China and came into being about 300 years ago, at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, its history is relatively short. It came to Singapore only when the Teochew Chinese migrated here in the 19th century.

This thesis focuses on the development of Teochew opera troupes in Singapore from the beginning of this century to the 1960s. The objective of this study is to examine the development of Teochew opera and its relationship with the society. A combination of techniques was used. Interviews, fieldwork and research from books have all contributed to support case studies through oral history. The result of this study is as follows:

In prewar years, there was a strong identity in each dialect group. Teochew opera, performed and sung in the Teochew dialect, was very popular with the Teochew society in Singapore for some reasons: First, Teochew opera served a religious purpose when it was used to ward off evil spirits. Next, it provided entertainment to gods and people. Finally, it was used as a means to maintain the Teochew culture and ways of life in a foreign land. No wonder activities of Teochew opera troupes were mainly found in places where the Teochew people gathered, such as areas around the Singapore River.

Based on the supply and demand theory, Teochew opera appeared in Singapore, due to demand. This demand was brought about by
immigrants from Teochew. Besides catering to local needs, opera troupes in Singapore were also invited by Teochew people to perform in other South East Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaya. At times, they even performed in China. As for supply, it depended on various sources. Troupes were formed in China before arriving in Singapore; child actors were recruited from China and Malaya; tutors came from China and Thailand; musical instruments, costumes, props and scripts were bought from China, Hong Kong and Thailand.

Through the study of the religious and cultural functions of Teochew opera, we can see a local and regional communication network among the Teochew people. It is hoped that this work will be useful to those doing research in related fields.