ABSTRACT

Studies on Chinese traditional opera has been a major topic of interest in the academic circles. However, there seems to be a lack of corresponding studies of Peking Opera in the Singapore context. Although Peking Opera is not a representative genre of traditional Chinese opera in Singapore, where Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew and Hainanese operas are the four major representations, Peking Opera still plays a vital role in the local arena. Thus, this exploratory thesis aims to provide some insights into the historical development and various aspects of Peking Opera in Singapore, from the late nineteenth century to the sixties.

Due to lack of written materials, the study was based on a series of fieldwork, carried out through interviews in the form of face-to-face and telephone conversations with several professional and amateur Peking Opera performers. Another source of information was obtained from recordings and transcriptions of interviews carried out by the Oral History Department of The National Archives on Singapore’s ex-professional Chinese opera performers.

This thesis adopts an approach to the topic set in a socio-economic framework. It begins by treating Peking Opera as a commodity, then focusing on discussions of the supply side, namely the organisation and structure of professional Peking Opera troupes. Next, it dwells on the field of transaction, namely the various contexts of performance. Finally, it deals with the demand side, namely audience composition and amateur performers in Peking Opera.
The results of the study show that, until mid-sixties, with the presence of street performances and amateur groups, Peking Opera was not a mere economic activity. Also, apart from cultural identity, the popularity of Peking Opera among Hokkien businessmen and the educated proved that it seemed to be some form of an elitist culture.