

Conservation Efforts and Historical Evolution of Chinese Puppetry in Southeast Asia: Insights from Singapore

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Abstract

Chinese puppetry, particularly *Potehi* (glove puppetry), holds profound cultural significance within Southeast Asian Chinese communities, serving as a vital bridge between traditional art forms and contemporary identity amid globalisation and disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its rich heritage originating from southern Fujian province and its adaptation across dialect groups (including Hokkien, Henghua, Hainanese, and Teochew communities), scholarly research on *Potehi* in Malaysia remains limited and fragmented, especially when compared with the more extensive studies and collaborative conservation efforts in neighbouring Singapore, where active troupes and institutional support have sustained diverse puppet forms. This article addresses this research gap by examining Singapore as a model for preservation, drawing on a comprehensive literature review and content analysis of sources from cultural institutions (e.g., National Heritage Board, Roots Singapore) to highlight the historical evolution, active troupes (e.g., *Sin Hoe Ping*, *Jit Guat Sin*, *San Chun Long*), and adaptive strategies (e.g., secular performances, workshops, modernisation of puppets for younger audiences) that counter challenges like dialect erosion and generational decline. Key findings reveal Singapore's robust civil society and institutional efforts through documentation, restoration, outreach, and secular adaptations which have enabled these puppet traditions to persist and evolve despite an ageing population and modernisation pressures, providing a benchmark for diaspora heritage sustainability. These insights underscore the implications for Malaysia, where ethnic diversity, limited discourse, and reliance on niche groups (e.g., innovative troupes like *Ombak Potehi* in Penang) fragment conservation. Enhanced academic attention, policy support and cross-border collaborations could bridge this gap, fostering intergenerational transmission and ensuring *Potehi* and related forms remain culturally resonant in contemporary society.

1. Introduction

Originating from southern Fujian province in China, *Potehi* (glove puppetry) is one form of wooden puppet theater, alongside wooden, leather, rod, and string (marionette) variants. In China, it is known as *Budaixi* (布袋戲), meaning "cloth bag theater," derived from Hokkien dialect terms. *Potehi* literally translates to "puppet glove" or

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"cloth bag theater." It was popular in Taiwan with Southern Fujian dialect dialogues and songs, accompanied by Nanqu music in Quanzhou or Xiangju opera in Zhangzhou (Kuardhani, 2018). Western scholars have extensively examined *Potehi* from historical and anthropological perspectives, adopting terms like *Budaixi* in China-focused studies and *Potehi* in Southeast Asian contexts (Stenberg, 2015). In Indonesia, it evolved into *Wayang Potehi*, associated with colonial-era entertainment. English names include "cloth bag theater," "theater within the palm," or "finger puppet show" (Stalberg, 1984).

In Southeast Asia, Chinese puppet types are linked to dialect communities: Hainanese rod puppets (large and colorful), Teochew iron-stick puppets (intricate), Hokkien string and glove puppets, and Henghua string puppets (mythological stories). While research on *Potehi* in Malaysia is limited, Singapore offers *more* prevalent studies due to collaborative conservation by communities and institutions. Literature on *Potehi* explores conservation from anthropological perspectives, but Malaysian adaptations remain underexplored. Singapore's efforts provide insights into shared diaspora heritage, reflecting similar immigration waves as in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines existing scholarly and institutional discussions on the historical development, characteristics, and conservation of Chinese puppetry in Singapore, with particular attention to four major traditions: Hokkien glove and string puppetry, Henghua string puppetry, Hainanese rod puppetry, and Teochew iron-stick puppetry. The review synthesises literature from academic studies, heritage documentation, and archival sources to understand how these traditional art forms have evolved within the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora. Particular emphasis is placed on the challenges threatening their continuity, including ageing practitioners, declining dialect fluency, reduced youth participation, and competition from modern entertainment. At the same time, this section highlights adaptive preservation strategies undertaken by community troupes and cultural institutions, such as documentation, restoration, public outreach, and secular performances. By reviewing these themes, the literature provides an important foundation for understanding how Chinese puppetry continues to negotiate between cultural preservation and contemporary relevance in Singapore and the wider Southeast Asian context.

2.1 Singapore's Conservation Effort on Chinese Puppetry

There are five major puppetry forms practised across four dialect communities in Singapore: Hainanese rod puppetry, Henghua string puppetry, Hokkien string and glove puppetry, and Teochew iron-stick puppetry. Each of these forms has a history exceeding a century, yet they remain largely unfamiliar to the local population (Chia and Yeo, 2022). Several established puppetry troupes continue to practice their art despite having moved past their golden era. Among the Hokkien puppetry troupes, *Jit Guat Sin* (日月星) remains active. For Hainanese rod puppetry, only two troupes persist: *San Chun Long* (三春隆), the oldest known Hainanese rod puppet troupe in Singapore, and *Tien Heng Kang* (新兴港琼南剧社). In the realm of Teochew iron-stick puppetry, the sole remaining active troupe is *Sin Ee Lye Heng* (新怡梨兴). As for Henghua string puppetry, most troupes have vanished over time, with *Sin Hoe Ping* (新和平) being the last active troupe. *Sin Hoe Ping* has also expanded its repertoire by establishing a Hokkien troupe under the same name, performing both string puppetry and glove puppetry.

The Singapore Hokkien Puppetry Troupe, *Jin Guat Sin* has repainted many of the puppets to restore their appearance as the original paint has faded over time due to wear and tear. Some puppets feature white faces, a characteristic that dates back to earlier times when puppet makers used oil lamps for lighting, causing the puppets to appear in a skin-tone hue. The Hokkien *Potehi* is operated by inserting the hand into the puppet's interior, with the index finger positioned in the head compartment and the remaining fingers supporting the area below the head to control its movements. The puppeteer, concealed behind the stage backdrop, manipulates the puppet using only their arms, which are visible on stage. Traditional glove puppets are generally smaller, measuring between 25 and 35 cm in length, while modern designs have grown larger, reaching up to 40 cm (Chia, 2017). While the Hokkien string puppetry, as documented by the National Heritage Board in Singapore, offers valuable insights into a once-thriving traditional art form that may have also existed in Malaysia but is now largely absent. According to the National Heritage Board in Singapore (2022), the art's decline is due to modern entertainment alternatives, a diminishing pool of skilled puppeteers, and changing audience preferences. While no direct evidence currently links Hokkien string puppetry to Malaysia's contemporary cultural landscape, the shared Hokkien heritage between the two nations suggests a historical presence that may have faded due to similar socio-cultural shifts. This decline reflects broader challenges faced by traditional puppetry in Malaysia, where competing forms like Teochew iron-rod puppetry and *Wayang Kulit* overshadow less-documented traditions.

Chinese puppetry faces significant challenges in preserving its relevance, one of which is the language barrier. As fewer younger Singaporeans speak dialects, the art form has become increasingly confined to the older generation who understand the linguistic nuances essential to traditional performances. Another obstacle is the perception that string puppetry is primarily tied to rituals, which has historically limited its appeal for

entertainment. Despite this, many puppet troupes have expanded beyond temple settings, staging secular performances targeted at a broader audience, including tourists and children. Efforts to modernise puppets by making them more visually appealing and relatable to younger audiences have also gained momentum. The Hokkien and Henghua branches of Sin Hoe Ping have played a pivotal role in revitalising Chinese puppet theatre in Singapore. Hokkien puppetry continues to maintain a significant presence, reflecting ongoing efforts to sustain this traditional art form. Notably, changes in performance styles are emerging. Many puppeteers now rely on more spontaneous performance methods, often with less formal training in puppet manipulation. Simultaneously, as secular performances featuring child-friendly puppets gain popularity, a contemporary evolution of Chinese puppetry is taking shape alongside its traditional counterpart. These developments highlight an adaptive approach to preserving and reimagining the art form in a modern context (Roots Singapore, 2019).

2.2 Henghua String Puppetry

Henghua puppetry, a traditional art form originating from Putian in China's Fujian province, has been preserved in Singapore through the dedicated efforts of the Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Troupe. Established in the 1930s, this troupe is the sole surviving Henghua puppet ensemble in Singapore. Yang Lai Hao, the third-generation inheritor, developed a passion for puppetry in 1957 while observing his grandfather, who had brought the troupe from China (Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Show, n.d). Over more than a decade, Yang mastered various aspects of the craft, including stage setup, puppet construction, costume selection, prop creation, musical accompaniment, singing, and puppet manipulation.

The troupe specialises in two distinct forms of puppetry: String Puppets (*Jia Li Xi*) and Hand Puppets (*Pu Dai Xi*), performing in both Hokkien and Henghua languages. Hand puppetry, more commonly seen in temples and streets, involves manipulating wooden puppets with silk costumes using hand movements. In contrast, string puppetry, a more traditional form passed down from Putian, requires significant skill and practice to manage the complex movements controlled by multiple strings, especially during dynamic scenes like martial arts sequences. Performances are typically held in secluded corners of detached houses or temples, often as offerings to Taoist deities during their birthdays. Despite the challenges, Yang's unwavering passion has kept this intricate art form alive, allowing audiences to experience the rich cultural heritage of Henghua puppetry. Henghua string puppets typically stand between 80 cm and 1 m tall, with puppeteers controlling them from a standing position using 12 attached strings. Additional strings may be incorporated to enable more intricate and sophisticated movements. In comparison, the Hokkien string puppet, a southern variation, measures between 60 and 90 cm in height and generally uses 12 strings. However, experienced puppeteers in Singapore note that Hokkien string puppets can feature as many as 19 strings, depending on the performance's demands and complexity.



Fig. 1 Henghua string puppetry in Singapore (a) Image from Sin Hoe Ping Puppet; (b) Image from Biblioasia. *Chinese Puppet Theatre: Rekindling a Glorious Past*

2.3 Hainanese Rod Puppetry in Singapore

Puppetry in Singapore holds a unique place in the cultural heritage of its diverse communities. Among the traditional forms, Hainanese rod puppetry stands out as a significant yet endangered art form. Hainanese rod puppetry is the least recognised, primarily due to the smaller size of its community compared to the Hokkien and Teochew groups. Even within the Hainanese community, many older individuals are unaware of this century-old tradition, highlighting the importance of documenting it.

This type of puppetry, brought to Singapore by Hainanese immigrants from southern China, employs intricate wooden puppets controlled using thin rods. The performances often centre on historical tales, myths,

and moral lessons, providing not just entertainment but also a medium for transmitting cultural values and community identity. Hainanese rod puppetry is deeply rooted in Singapore's temple culture, where performances were traditionally staged during religious festivals and deity birthdays. The puppets, crafted with remarkable attention to detail, are brought to life through skillful manipulation, requiring years of training to master. Accompanied by live music, narration, and dialogue, these performances are a vivid showcase of storytelling and craftsmanship. However, this once-thriving art form has seen a significant decline in Singapore.

Information regarding Hainanese rod puppetry in Singapore is limited. Scholar research has gathered oral history interviews conducted by the National Archives of Singapore as part of the Vanishing Trades project in the 1980s and reported the first Hainanese rod puppet troupe *San Chun Long* (三春隆). According to the documentation, puppet troupes from Hainan would perform in the region but mainly as itinerants. It was not until 1947 that these Hainanese rod puppeteers united to form San Chun Long, with the character "Chun," represented as "Soon" in Hainanese transliteration, symbolising Foo's name.



Fig. 2 Troupes of Hainanese rod puppetry in Singapore (a) Image from esplanade, the Hainanese puppetry troupe in Singapore; (b) Customs and musicians playing backstage

Efforts to preserve this art form have been spearheaded by institutions such as the National Heritage Board of Singapore, which has hosted workshops and demonstrations to raise awareness and educate the public. These programs aim to highlight the historical and artistic value of Hainanese rod puppetry, inspiring renewed interest and appreciation. Despite these efforts, the art form remains at risk, as it relies heavily on community support and the willingness of younger generations to learn and carry on the tradition. Hainanese rod puppetry reflects a broader narrative about cultural preservation in Singapore. It illustrates the challenges faced by traditional art forms in a rapidly evolving society and underscores the importance of sustained efforts to document, promote, and revive such practices. By valuing and supporting this heritage, Singapore seeks to ensure that its rich cultural tapestry continues to flourish for future generations.

2.4 Teochew Puppetry

Puppetry Besides Hokkien, Henghua, and Hainanese traditions, Teochew puppetry (潮州木偶戏) represents another important form of Chinese puppetry preserved within Southeast Asian Chinese communities, particularly in both Malaysia and Singapore. Originating from the Chaoshan region in Guangdong Province, China, Teochew puppetry is closely associated with Teochew opera and ritual performances, carrying strong cultural and dialect identity among the Teochew diaspora (Perris, 1978; Wee, 2022).

In Malaysia, Teochew puppetry remains especially prominent in Penang, where it survives through dedicated institutions and family-based troupes such as the Teochew Puppet and Opera House and Kim Giak Low Choon Teochew Puppet Troupe (金玉楼春潮州木偶剧团). These institutions play an important role in preserving Teochew iron-rod puppetry through exhibitions, public performances, educational workshops, and intergenerational transmission of performance knowledge. However, similar to other traditional performing arts, the troupe faces ongoing challenges including ageing practitioners, declining youth participation, and weakening dialect fluency among younger Malaysian Chinese (Wee, 2022).

Similarly, in Singapore, Teochew puppetry survives primarily through community-based troupes such as Sin Ee Lye Heng (新怡梨兴), widely recognised as the last remaining active Teochew iron-stick puppet troupe in the country. A defining characteristic of Teochew puppetry is its use of iron rods to manipulate intricately crafted wooden puppets, requiring high technical precision to produce expressive movements. These performances are

typically accompanied by traditional Teochew music, including instruments such as the erhu, gong, and cymbals, creating a highly immersive storytelling experience (Soon, 2000).

Singapore's conservation efforts demonstrate a more structured institutional approach through heritage documentation, public outreach, and community support. Cultural organisations and heritage agencies have increasingly promoted awareness of Teochew puppetry through exhibitions, workshops, and public performances, enabling younger generations to engage with this endangered art form. The continued involvement of younger practitioners, such as Christine Ang, the third-generation successor of Sin Ee Lye Heng, further reflects active intergenerational transmission and adaptation in sustaining this tradition (Kaya Singapore, 2026). The survival of Teochew puppetry in both Malaysia and Singapore reflects broader adaptive strategies in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, where preservation increasingly depends on balancing ritual continuity, cultural education, and contemporary public engagement.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach centred on a comprehensive literature review to examine the conservation efforts and historical evolution of Chinese puppetry in Southeast Asia, with a primary focus on Singapore. Relevant scholarly materials were systematically collected from academic databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, as well as institutional repositories including Roots Singapore, the National Heritage Board, BiblioAsia, and archival sources. The selection criteria prioritised sources that specifically discussed Chinese puppetry forms in Singapore, including Hokkien glove and string puppetry, Henghua string puppetry, Hainanese rod puppetry, and Teochew iron-stick puppetry.

Approximately 20 to 30 relevant sources published between 1980 and 2022 were reviewed to capture both historical and contemporary developments. Search keywords included "Chinese puppetry in Singapore," "*Potehi*," "Hokkien puppetry," "Henghua string puppetry," "Hainanese rod puppetry," and "Teochew puppetry." Sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and their contribution to understanding conservation strategies, historical development, and adaptive transformation.

To analyse the landscape of Chinese puppetry in Singapore, thematic content analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The data were manually coded into four key themes: (1) forms and characteristics of puppetry traditions, (2) conservation challenges, (3) adaptive strategies, and (4) institutional and community preservation efforts. This analytical approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns across sources and facilitated a deeper interpretation of how Singapore has sustained Chinese puppetry as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Ethical considerations were minimal, as the study relied solely on publicly available secondary data, with all sources appropriately cited to avoid plagiarism.

4. Results and Discussions

The content analysis reveals a vibrant yet precarious landscape of Chinese puppetry in Singapore, characterised by five enduring forms: Hainanese rod puppetry, Henghua string puppetry, Hokkien string and glove puppetry, and Teochew iron-stick puppetry, each of which is tied to specific dialect groups and sustained through a century-long history. (Chia and Yeo, 2022). Active troupes, such as *Jit Guat Sin* (Hokkien), *San Chun Long* and *Tien Heng Kang* (Hainanese), *Sin Ee Lye Heng* (Teochew), and *Sin Hoe Ping* (Henghua), exemplify persistence amid decline, with *Sin Hoe Ping* notably expanding into both string and glove forms to broaden its repertoire (Roots Singapore, 2019). Restoration efforts, like repainting faded puppets in *Jin Guat Sin* to evoke historical oil-lamp aesthetics, underscore technical adaptations, while puppet sizes have evolved from 25 to 35 cm in traditional designs to up to 40 cm in modern iterations for enhanced visibility (Chia, 2017).

Henghua string puppets, preserved by third-generation inheritor Yang Lai Hao since the 1930s, demonstrate mastery in multifaceted skills, from puppet construction to musical accompaniment, with performances often serving as Taoist offerings (*Sin Hoe Ping Puppet Show*, n.d.). Hainanese rod puppetry, though endangered due to the community's smaller size, relies on intricate rod manipulation for mythological narratives, supported by National Heritage Board workshops and oral histories from the 1980s (National Archives of Singapore, as cited in the literature). Teochew puppetry, linked to operatic traditions with erhu and gong instrumentation, features string puppets in vibrant costumes, as seen in Malaysian-Singaporean diaspora events like those documented by PUSAKA (n.d.) and Wee (2022).

These findings highlight how Singapore's civil society has spearheaded conservation of diaspora intangible heritage despite the nation's ageing population and rapid urbanisation. Institutions like the National Heritage Board and community troupes have fostered adaptive strategies, such as transitioning from ritual-bound temple performances to secular, child-friendly shows that incorporate spontaneous manipulation and modern visuals to engage younger audiences (Roots Singapore, 2019). This reflects a proactive civil society response, where intergenerational transmission is bolstered through workshops, documentation, and cross-dialect collaborations, countering threats like dialect erosion and COVID-19 disruptions (OECD, 2020). For instance, *Sin Hoe Ping*'s dual-language (Hokkien and Henghua) approach and expansion into hand puppets illustrate resilience, enabling the art

to transcend generational gaps in an ageing society where fewer youth speak dialects. Such efforts align with broader diaspora heritage frameworks, emphasising community-led revival to maintain cultural identity amid demographic shifts (Stenberg, 2015).

In contrast, Malaysia exhibits a notable gap in discourse on conserving intangible heritage like *Potehi*, attributable to its immense cultural diversity, which dilutes focus on niche traditions. While Singapore's relatively homogeneous Chinese diaspora, bolstered by state-supported initiatives facilitate more concentrated heritage preservation efforts, Malaysia's multi-ethnic landscape prioritises broader national narratives, leaving Chinese puppetry forms underexplored and reliant on persistent but isolated communities (Kuardhani, 2018). This limitation manifests in fewer scholarly studies and institutional resources compared to Singapore, where shared immigration histories could otherwise inform mutual strategies. For *Potehi* specifically, Malaysia's diverse dialect groups fragment efforts, with only niche troupes like *Ombak Potehi* in Penang sustaining practices amid competing influences from Malay *Wayang Kulit* or Indian elements. Bridging this gap requires enhanced academic and policy discourse to amplify these conservation efforts and strengthen heritage sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Singapore's conservation of Chinese puppetry exemplifies robust, collaborative efforts driven by community troupes, cultural institutions like the National Heritage Board, and ongoing initiatives such as secular performances, workshops, and outreach programs that effectively safeguard intangible heritage amid generational decline, dialect erosion, and disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. By documenting, restoring, and adapting forms including Hokkien glove and string puppets, Henghua string puppets, Hainanese rod puppets, and Teochew iron-stick puppets, these endeavors honor the rich diaspora identity of Southeast Asian Chinese communities while fostering intergenerational transmission and broader accessibility. Meanwhile, these insights underscore the need for parallel strategies in Malaysia, where *Potehi* and related traditions face greater fragmentation due to ethnic diversity, limited scholarly discourse, and reliance on niche, persistent groups like *Ombak Potehi*. Enhanced academic attention, policy support, and cross-border collaborations built upon Singapore's adaptive model could help bridge this gap, ensuring these vibrant puppet arts evolve sustainably and remain culturally resonant for future generations. The sustainability of Chinese puppetry depends not only on preserving artefacts, but also on sustaining living communities of practice through education, policy support, and intergenerational transmission.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed substantially to the conceptualisation, writing, revision, and final approval of this manuscript.

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