



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

# **Ko-tai: A New Form of Chinese Urban Street Theatre in Malaysia**

Tan Sooi Beng

**KO-TAI: A NEW FORM OF  
CHINESE URBAN STREET THEATRE  
IN MALAYSIA**

**by**

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**Research Notes and Discussions Paper No. 40  
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES  
1984**

Published by  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Pasir Panjang  
Singapore 0511

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ISSN 0129-8828

ISBN 9971-902-67-2

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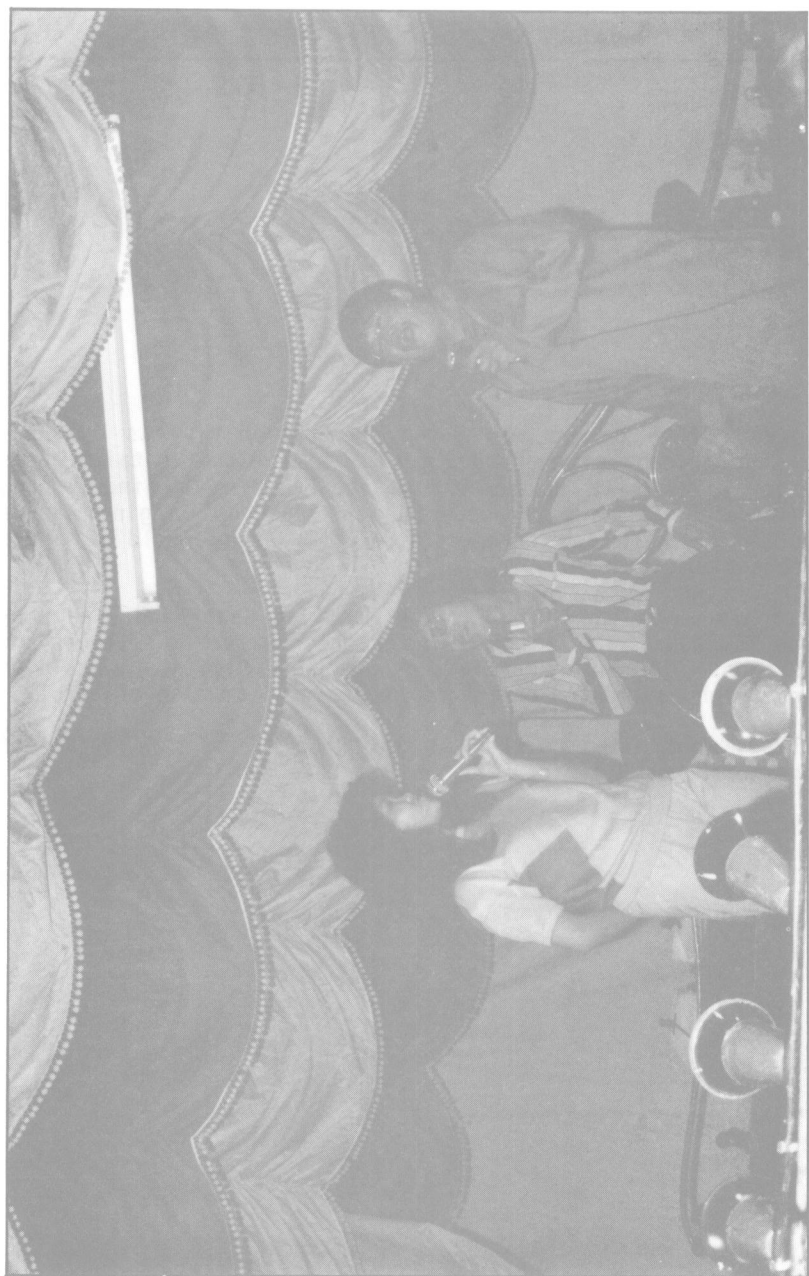
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped me in the preparation of this book. I owe a special debt of gratitude to members of the **ko-tai** troupes of Penang, especially the members of the Lau Ping Singing Troupe, the Harmonics Singing Troupe, and the Rainbow Singing Troupe without whose help and co-operation, this study would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank Loh Kok Wah, Tan Chee Beng, Tan Liok Ee, Koh Tsu Koon, and Cecilia Lim for their valuable comments and suggestions. To David McAllester and Mark Slobin of Wesleyan University who commented on the first draft, I am also grateful.

Finally, I would like to thank Jessie Khoo of the Land Office of Penang (Northeast District) for her patience and help.

Tan Sooi Beng



**A ko-tai skit:** A father (dressed in traditional long gown) scolding his son and daughter-in-law (wearing modern Western pants and shirt).

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## INTRODUCTION

As gods in the Chinese religious pantheon can choose to be benevolent as well as malevolent and are believed to possess power over human health, fertility, and fortune, they must be ritually propitiated.<sup>1</sup> To worship the gods, incense is burnt daily at shrines and temples. In addition, the gods' birthdays are regarded as special events. On these occasions, regular devotees of the particular deity bring offerings, joss-sticks and incense to the temple premises. The larger than usual crowd draws hawkers to the vicinity. Sometimes, street theatres in the form of opera and puppet shows are also performed to entertain and to thank the deities for favours granted.<sup>2</sup> All these -- the crowd, the hawkers and the entertainment -- create the atmosphere of a festival.

More recently, modern stage shows called **ko-tai** (literally translated as "song stage") have played a part in religious festivals as well. These stage shows, featuring Chinese and Western popular songs (accompanied by electric-guitar bands) and comic sketches, are usually performed for two or three days after the traditional operas have been staged. There is thus a mix of traditional and modern theatres in religious festivals today.

Although various preliminary studies of the traditional opera and puppet theatre in Malaysia are available,<sup>3</sup> no investigations have been conducted on the **ko-tai** which can be found in the streets of Penang throughout the year and which attracts large audiences. A study of the **ko-tai** is thus pertinent.

In this paper, I shall discuss the nature and content of the **ko-tai** and attempt to explain its popularity in Penang. The findings are based on attendance of some 100 **ko-tai** shows, 200 comic sketches, and interviews with proprietors, managers, performers, and audiences of different **ko-tai** troupes in Penang

over a period of three years (1979-81).<sup>4</sup> The comic sketches and songs performed were also taped for analysis.

Penang was chosen as the place of field-work simply because here, more so than elsewhere in the Malaysian peninsula, the **ko-tai** appears to be thriving. This is mainly a result of the large Chinese population<sup>5</sup> in the state. Being one of the few areas in the peninsula with a Chinese majority, Penang not only has a ready audience for the **ko-tai** but perhaps more importantly, has urban Chinese businessmen who are prepared to finance such shows. In addition, the **ko-tai** in its present form evolved in Penang (as we shall discuss later). All these reasons make Penang a suitable focus for our investigation.

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#### NOTES

- 1 For more in-depth discussion of Chinese religion, see C.K. Yang, **Religion in Chinese Society** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); and J.A. Elliott, **Chinese Spirit Medium Cults in Singapore** (Singapore: Donald Moore Books, 1955).
- 2 There are several differences between opera entertainment in such a context and more "formal" opera entertainment in concert halls. Firstly, one has to buy tickets to watch the more "formal" operas performed in concert halls whereas street operas are "sponsored" and are therefore free and open to all. Secondly, the former is usually patronized by the educated middle and upper classes, while street operas are frequented by the lower class. Thirdly, as the word "formal" implies, the audience in the concert hall are usually more careful about attire, and do not eat or make noise during opera performances. On the other hand, the atmosphere in the streets is a more "relaxed" one as people dress casually, move in and out, eat and talk to one another as they please.
- 3 See Koh Yan Poh, "The Last Puppet Theatres of All", **Straits Times Annual** (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 1961); Ly Singko, "Chinese Drama in Malaya", **France-Asie** (Winter 1965-66), pp. 157-71; William Newell, "Malayan Opera", **Orient West** 6, no. 9 (Tokyo, September 1961); Ow Cheng Lian, "The Teochew Opera Troupes: A Study of the Business and Social Organisation of Opera Players" (M.A. thesis, Department of Social Studies, University of Malaya, Singapore, 1958); Arnold Perris, "Chinese Wayang: The Survival of Chinese Opera in the Streets of Singapore", **Ethnomusicology** (May 1978).
- 4 A section of this paper is taken from the author's unpublished thesis, "The **Phor Tor** Festival, Penang, 1979" (M.A. thesis, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Ct. 06457, 1980), chap. 9. Since the preliminary round of



research in 1979, the author has collected more data on the topic during 1980-81.

- 5 The population of Penang was listed as 775,000 in the 1970 census. Of this figure, 56.3 per cent were Chinese, 30.6 per cent were Malays, 11.6 per cent were Indians, and the rest were Europeans, Eurasians, Arabs, Bengalis, and others. Since the *ko-tai* is an urban-based theatre, most of the field-work was conducted in Georgetown (the capital of Penang). Here, 69.7 per cent were Chinese, while 15.4 per cent were Malays, 13.1 per cent Indians, and the rest Europeans, Eurasians, Arabs, Bengalis, and others. See R. Chander, ed., *Laporan Am Banci Penduduk Malaysia 1970* [General Report of the Population Census of Malaysia] (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 1977).

According to the figures of the 1980 population census which have yet to be released officially, the population of Penang is now 911,586, of which about 60 per cent are Chinese and 30 per cent are Malays. The breakdown by race in Penang Island (476,041) is: Malays -- 24 per cent, Chinese -- 68 per cent, Indians -- 5 per cent, and others -- 3 per cent. See *Star*, 22 December 1981.

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## THE KO-TAI: ORIGINS, SETTING, AND ORGANIZATION

### Origins of the Ko-tai

The history of the **ko-tai** in Malaysia goes back to the pre- and post-World War II periods. In those days, the **ko-tai** consisted of all-night performances of popular songs on stage. To provide variety, sometimes more serious Chinese plays such as **Jia**, adapted from Ba Qin's novel **Family**, and **Lei Yu**, adapted from Cao Yu's novel **The Thunderstorm**, were performed but these were interspersed with popular songs.<sup>1</sup> The troupes which performed these plays were usually imported from China and Hong Kong while local singers were hired to sing. By and large, these stage shows were held in amusement parks in big towns such as Penang, Ipoh, and Kuala Lumpur. Its purpose was essentially entertainment and the **ko-tai** troupes were usually run by amusement-park owners such as the Shaw Brothers Company Limited.

Since its inception, the **ko-tai** has always been part of modern entertainment. In the pre- and post-World War II periods, it appealed to the younger set and was an alternative to traditional entertainment like the Chinese opera which was also performed in amusement parks. Songs by famous Chinese stars based in Shanghai, such as Zhou Xuen and Bai Guang, which were considered popular at that time (but which are "classics" today) were sung. Performers were clad in the fashionable **cheong sam**, **samfoo** or even Western attire: pants and shirt for the men, blouse and skirt for the women. Such attire was completely different from the traditional Chinese costumes worn in the operas.

By about the late 1960s, the amusement parks in Penang had closed down as business was not lucrative. They could not compete with the other types of entertainment accessible then and now: films, television, nightclubs, and so forth. The **ko-tai** singers at the amusement parks were retrenched and had to turn to

other ways of earning a living. However, one of these singers called Lau Ping, who had been performing for Shaw Brothers in the amusement parks since the 1940s, subsequently launched a **ko-tai** troupe of his own in Penang in 1970.

This enterprising individual succeeded in giving the **ko-tai** a new lease of life. Firstly, the new form of **ko-tai** under Lau Ping now included comic sketches in its programme, a development -- as we shall later discuss -- that was to make the **ko-tai** even more attractive to the Penang Chinese audience, especially the young.

The second move was even more brilliant in that by declaring its purpose to be one of "entertaining the gods",<sup>2</sup> Lau Ping's troupe now linked the modern theatre form to religious festivals for the first time. At a time when such festivities were receiving diminishing support from the younger generation, probably because of their inability to relate to even the entertainment aspects of these festivities, namely, the Chinese opera and puppet shows,<sup>3</sup> Lau Ping's **ko-tai** troupe was quite readily accepted into the religious festivity programmes. The result was overwhelming. Not only was the **ko-tai** given a new lease of life but so were the religious festivities. Large crowds, particularly the young began to be attracted to such festivities again surely, though not exclusively,<sup>4</sup> because of the introduction of the **ko-tai** into these celebrations. Since then, for about a decade now, many other **ko-tai** troupes have sprung up,<sup>5</sup> and like Lau Ping's, they also perform for the "entertainment of the gods".

### Setting of the Ko-tai

The **ko-tai** today is an open-air show usually performed at night, on stages set up in big fields or along the streets in the heart of the city if there are no open spaces available. It should be pointed out that the **ko-tai** is performed on the same stage as that previously used for the opera performances two or three nights before. These stages are make-shift ones which can be assembled in a few hours. They are rather crude constructions made of rough planks of wood with attap roofing, with the stage raised several feet above the ground and open on all sides. Large pieces of cloth cover the three sides but these can be folded up to allow air to flow in on a hot night. The performing area is the side of the stage that is not covered with cloth. A cloth screen is used to separate the back of the stage where the performers prepare for their act.

The stages are set up directly opposite the temple or altar of the particular deity whose feast is being celebrated. The audience gathers in the open space between the stage and the temple. No chairs are provided and the audience has to stand throughout the performance. Those who live nearby usually bring their own chairs while others whose houses are just alongside the stage might even watch the **ko-tai** from their homes, at times sitting by their door-steps. Some children even climb onto the stage on all sides to follow the performance. The atmosphere then is one of much informality. Spectators often pass comments and moral judgments on the characters portrayed, laugh at a joke, imitate the sounds or musical motions on stage (like "oohs" and "aahs"), praise the beauty of the actresses or express their disgust with expletives like **cheh**, and so on. Besides the chattering, laughing, shouting, and even fighting,<sup>6</sup> there is much moving in and out of the open space as well. Indeed, people come and go as they please.

Moreover, hawker stalls selling food and drinks usually line the sides of the stage and along the roads nearby. Some people begin their evening of festivity by eating at these stalls. Others, after watching the show for some time, wander off to have drinks and snacks at the stalls. Patronizing the hawker stalls is also an occasion to rest their weary legs by sitting on the stools provided by the hawkers.

Hence, going to a **ko-tai** performance is a very relaxed affair. For many, it is a family outing. A visit to the **ko-tai** may mean first praying at the temple, then having dinner at the hawker stalls, chatting with friends and, when the **ko-tai** begins, watching the show until such time as the kids have to go to bed. People come not just to watch the **ko-tai**, but also to take part in the festivities, to socialize with the community, as well as to pray to the gods.

Finally, it needs to be clarified that a large part of the audience is made up of teenagers and young people up to their early thirties, although the very young and very old are also included. Equally clear to the keen observer is that the audience certainly does not belong to the very rich or even the upper-middle class. By and large, they range from the lower to lower-middle class. Not surprisingly, the themes of the sketches, as we shall soon discuss, are largely about the young and the poor.

## The Mechanics of Organization

**Ko-tai** troupes are privately owned.<sup>7</sup> The owner is usually the troupe's financier who puts forth the capital for the purchase and the maintenance of musical instruments (guitars, drums, organs, etc.), the sound system (microphones and amplifiers), stage props,<sup>8</sup> curtains, and lighting equipment.

Under the employ of the owner is the manager<sup>9</sup> who handles the day-to-day management of the troupe. He takes charge of the 10-30 singers, musicians, and comedians, hires and fires the performers and responds to their complaints. The manager also deals with the contract arrangements, decides where and when the troupe will perform and takes care of the finances of the troupe. He is the one who receives the fee of \$700-\$800 from the organizers after each night's performance and pays the performers and workers accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

Performers who sing are paid about \$12 a night while those who sing as well as act in the comic sketches get \$20-\$30 per night. Band players receive \$15-\$20 a night depending on the instruments they play. Because of their scarcity, those who perform wind and brass instruments, such as saxophone, trumpet, and clarinet, are likely to be paid more than those who play electric guitars and drums. Members of the troupe who take care of transportation are paid \$22-\$24. The remainder then goes to the owner who pays the manager \$30-\$60, depending on whether he performs as well.

Even though religious festivals occur quite regularly, the performers cannot live on their **ko-tai** earnings alone. In Penang, the best month in terms of earnings for the **ko-tai** is the seventh lunar month (the **Phor Tor** Festival month) when there are several **ko-tai** performances every night in different parts of Penang.<sup>11</sup> **Ko-tai** performances are also held frequently during the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh months. In contrast, the first six months in the lunar calendar are the worst for the **ko-tai** troupes, when hardly any performances are staged.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the **ko-tai** is not a source of gainful employment.

Consequently, many of the performers have regular jobs which they depend on as their mainstay: women performers are usually seamstresses, even factory workers, while the men are usually drivers, factory workers, hawkers, trishaw pedlars, carpenters, painters, or small-time businessmen.<sup>13</sup> When asked why they perform with the troupe if they cannot live on the performances alone, members of the Harmonics and the Lau Ping troupe answered, "We do it for enjoyment and as a hobby. The job is not a lucrative one."

As there are no contractual agreements for the performers and they are paid nightly, it is not surprising that performers are not committed to any one particular troupe. Singers move from troupe to troupe depending on what the rates of payment are and whether they are free on the particular night of the performance. Often, the **ko-tai** singers will not travel with the troupes to the outlying towns even when the pay is attractive because they are primarily committed to their regular jobs. For example, many seamstresses will not sing during the two months before Chinese New Year because "that is the time when they have to meet the rush for new clothes".<sup>14</sup> Thus, troupes have to find new singers every time they are called to perform. Only a couple of comedians and certain members of the band are constant performers within any **ko-tai** troupe.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Interview with Lau Ping, the owner of and performer in the Lau Ping Singing Troupe, on 19 June 1981.
- 2 Interview with Lau Ping, 19 June 1981. At the age of 50, Lau Ping still performs with his own **ko-tai** troupe as a singer, dancer, and comedian. For him, however, **ko-tai** has become a sideline because there is too much competition from other troupes today. He runs a sign-making shop and earns a living mainly from this business.
- 3 Understandably, the younger Malaysian-born Chinese of today who have had very little contact with China find it extremely difficult to identify with the Chinese opera stories which depict the lives and deeds of the kings, queens, generals, and scholars of ancient China. Many cannot even understand the refined language used.
- 4 See Tan Sool Beng, "The **Phor Tor** Festival, Penang, 1979", chap. 3 and Conclusion, for a discussion of other reasons why religious festivities, in particular the **Phor Tor** Festival or Hungry Ghost Festival which occurs throughout the lunar seventh month (during this month, the hungry ghosts are "released from incarceration and are roaming the earth") are being celebrated with such zeal today. Firstly, hawkers and other businessmen who have done well feel the need to thank the gods as well as to pray for better business in the forthcoming years. Secondly, religious festivals have become symbols of ethnicity in multi-ethnic Malaysia. Increasingly, more Chinese Malaysians are clinging to traditional symbols because they feel threatened by official cultural policies which are perceived as assimilationist.

- 5 Apart from the Lau Ping Singing Troupe, the other major troupes that perform in Penang today include the Tak Tik Hoay Choon Singing Troupe, the Harmonics Singing Troupe, Choon Chee Wah Singing Troupe, Shangrila Singing Troupe, Rainbow Singing Troupe, Blossom Lumut Singing Troupe, Rising Sun Electric Guitar Troupe, Beaustar Singing Troupe, Sound of Music Singing Troupe, Mayflower Singing Troupe, Ban Gay Singing Troupe, Gayling Singing and Dancing Troupe, De Swallows Singing Troupe, Sin Mah Singing Troupe, Pek Mah Singing Troupe, Fong Ping Singing Troupe, Sun Hooi Singing Troupe, and Wai Sun Sing Singing Troupe.

The **ko-tai** troupes are sometimes invited to perform in the neighbouring states of Kedah and northern Perak during religious festivals. In Singapore, **ko-tai** troupes also exist but they only perform during the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar, during the **Phor Tor** Festival.

- 6 To avoid such occurrences, community leaders in charge of organizing the festivities usually bribe the gang leaders or invite them to their festival dinners so that they will not cause trouble during the performances. The disco dancing and "hot" music of the **ko-tai** draw members of street gangs and provide the atmosphere for fights (Interview with Lau Ping and members of **ko-tai** audiences). On the other hand, it is believed that operas are traditionally liked by the deities and are to be revered. It would be "improper" to fight during opera performances.
- 7 **Ko-tai** troupes are not attached to or supported by Chinese associations although **ko-tai** performers may come from a particular association and may use association halls for practices.
- 8 To reduce costs and the problem of transportation, few props are used. There is usually one table at the back of the stage for the performers to put on their make-up and get ready for the performance, and portable stools for them to sit on. Rather than utilize props, the actors usually pretend that they are in possession of the necessary items -- for example, telephones, furniture, etc. Hence, the troupes are very mobile especially since the construction of the make-shift stage is taken care of by the organizers who hire the troupe.
- 9 At times, the owner himself manages the troupe. The manager also performs in most **ko-tai** troupes.
- 10 Monies quoted here are in the Malaysian currency. At the time of research, M\$1 = US\$0.4.
- 11 During the **Phor Tor** Festival, the **ko-tai** and opera shows are staged to entertain the **Phor-Tor-Kong** who takes care of the ghosts. Devotees believe that by appeasing the **Phor-Tor-Kong** with such entertainment and with offerings, he will protect them from the harm of these ghosts.
- 12 See Appendix 2 for a calendar of **ko-tai** performances on Penang island for 1980.

- 13 See, for example, Appendix 3, for a list of occupations of the members of the Rainbow Singing Troupe in August 1981.
- 14 Interview with Lau Ping, 19 June 1981. The Chinese New Year festivities stretch from the first to the fifteenth day of the first month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Traditionally, this is the busiest and most eventful time of the year for the Chinese. The festival starts on the eve of the New Year with the traditional family reunion dinner. The first two days are spent visiting relatives and giving **ang paws** (red packets containing money) to youngsters. During the remaining days many other dinners with relatives and friends are organized.



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CONTENT OF THE KO-TAI

**Ko-tai** performances usually start at 8 p.m. and end before midnight.<sup>1</sup> The four-hour performances are normally divided into four parts: 1) popular songs; 2) comic sketch; 3) instrumental interlude by the band, and popular songs; 4) comic sketch II. Although each show has the same format, different songs and skits are presented each night.

After a brief discussion of the nature of the songs rendered, I shall analyse in detail the content of the comic sketches performed. Such uneven treatment is justified in view of the fact that for the audience, the comic sketches are the highlights of the evening. Their popularity, I shall argue, is directly related to their content which by and large focuses on issues relevant to the lower-class Chinese audience. In this regard, the **ko-tai** is not just a colourful variety show.

### Popular Songs

Popular songs are presented by a succession of female and male singers dressed in Western clothes and accompanied by electric-guitar bands. The repertoire usually includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien songs made popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong and which are available on cassette tapes, records or even played over the state radio in Malaysia. Occasionally, American and English top hits are also presented, while local Chinese, Malay, and Indian songs are increasingly sung. These songs deal with themes which attract the younger generation. For example, some songs such as the one below remind those in the audience who have come from the rural areas, of life in the village: