

## Malaysia's Teochew Metal Rod Puppetry: The Forgotten Art

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### Abstract

One of the dying performing arts in Malaysia is the Teochew Metal Rod Puppetry, a form of Chinese puppetry. Popular in Malaysia and Singapore in the past decades, puppetry art is the next victim of contemporary entertainment. Unfortunately, there is very little performance group who still perform the ancient art and attempt to preserve it. This study addresses the reasons behind the decline in popularity among Malaysian Chinese particularly the younger generation. The experimental study approach has been applied to test the hypotheses. Students from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman Sungai Long Campus were invited to experience the dying art form through a Teochew puppetry workshop conducted by the Kim Giak Low Choon Troupe. The primary finding shows that there are prominent factors that contribute to the loss of identity of the youth towards the art form such as detachment of the art form with the current entertainment and the hard time in understanding the context of the performance. The results also showed the implementation of the new technology to help rejuvenate the performing art and make it relevant to the younger generation. Technology integration into traditional performing art with the purpose of rejuvenation helps to give traditional art a new sense of breath without affecting its original form. To keep traditional performing arts such as Teochew Metal Rod Puppetry in Malaysia relevant, a proactive action from government, and performers need to be taken to let it stay in our Chinese community so that our future generation can enjoy it.

**Keywords:** *Teochew Metal Rod Puppetry, Malaysia Chinese Culture, Cultural Rejuvenation.*

### Introduction

Malaysia's Teochew Rod Metal Puppetry is a unique and vibrant traditional performance art that blends intricate storytelling, music, and skillful puppetry. Originating from the Teochew-speaking Chinese community, this form of shadow puppetry has evolved over centuries, with its distinct style characterized using metal rods to manipulate puppets made from tea bark that is crafted into puppet shape. The puppets are expertly made, frequently portraying historical and mythological figures, and are brought to life by a skilled puppeteer. A group of actors usually consists of a group of 6 to 10 performers who manipulate the puppets in these performances, which tell tales derived from Chinese famous folklore, legends, and classical literature. Animating the figures, producing smooth movements, and giving characters life all depend on the puppeteer's ability to accurately controlling the rods. Traditional musical instruments like cymbals, drums, and gongs accompany the puppetry, adding emotion and rhythm to the live performance.

In addition, as serving a form of entertainment, Teochew Rod Metal Puppetry is a representation of the rich cultural practices of China and helps to preserve the traditions and heritage especially the Teochew community. However, the art is struggling to survive in the modern era due to numerous challenges and low demand within the Chinese community. Most of the Teochew's Rod Metal Puppetry is only performed during Chinese deities' celebration or festival shows. This made the art itself has low exposure towards the younger generation and slowly fading away from the Chinese community in Malaysia.

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## Literature Review

### Historical Context

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) is whence Teochew Rod Puppetry's origins can be found in the larger Chinese opera tradition. In contrast to the Javanese and Malay Wayang Kulit, which use string manipulation, the Teochew variation is unique in that it uses metal rods to control the puppets. Following their migration to Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, the Teochew people adopted puppetry, according to historical accounts like "Chinese Theatre in Southeast Asia" by Zhang (2021) [11]. According to academics, Teochew puppetry came to Malaysia in the 18th and 19th centuries along with the wave of Chinese immigrants, particularly the Teochew, who came from the Chaoshan region of China.

Chia (2019) [2] claims that early Teochew puppetry performances were closely related to religious rituals, frequently occurring during festivals and temple ceremonies. In tales intended to teach moral lessons or clarify cosmological ideas, the puppets themselves frequently portrayed gods, heroes, and historical personalities.



**Fig. 1.** A group of performers handling the Teochew Rod Puppetry

### Puppetry Techniques

Scholars like Tan (2015) [8] have thoroughly examined the technical aspects of Teochew Rod Puppetry. The puppetry technique itself is among this art form's most noteworthy features. Teochew puppets are controlled by thin metal rods attached to their limbs, as opposed to shadow puppetry, which is controlled by strings or sticks. The puppet's movements, including walking, fighting, and gesturing, are controlled by these rods. Tan (2015) highlights the need for the puppeteer to be precise in manipulating the rods so that the characters' emotions and actions are reflected in the realistic shadows on the screen.

Apart from that, the puppets are exquisitely carved and painted and have intricate costumes usually inspired by Chinese opera clothing. Since they reflect the cultural values and beliefs of the Teochew people, these artistic features have symbolic as well as aesthetic appeal. Campbell (2016) [1] emphasises the significance of these visual elements, noting that the colours and designs of the puppets' attire symbolise virtues such as courage, loyalty, and righteousness.



**Fig. 2.** Example Of Chinese Rod Puppetry in Different Characters

### Cultural Significance and Rejuvenation

Teochew Rod Puppetry is a significant cultural expression that provides insight into the historical roots and collective identity of the Teochew community. Especially within diaspora populations, it functions as a mechanism for cultural preservation. Chua (2019) [4] mentioned in her research on Southeast Asian cultural preservation that traditional arts, such as Teochew puppetry, are vital for maintaining the connection between generations and their Chinese origin. The performances serve dual purposes of entertainment and instruction, imparting moral precepts, historical narratives, and cultural values.

Puppetry also is very important for religious and social activities. Traditionally observed to respect ancestors or during events like the Ching Ming Festival, performances were a vital part of temple procedures. Lee (2014) [5] claimed that these events were both artistic and spiritual activities as well as means of communal cooperation. However, the demand for Chinese Puppetry has getting lower as time pass as it faces a lot of competition to the newer form of entertainment such as 'Getai' with performer performing to trendy songs. Teochew Rod Puppetry faces many challenges in contemporary art in Malaysia, especially in relation to its applicability to younger audiences. Traditional art forms have declined because of the dominance of modern entertainment mediums like digital media and television. According to research by Chia, Chia & Campbell (2019) [3], the number of trained puppeteers and performances has declined as a result of the growing gap between young people and their cultural heritage.

Still, there have been efforts to bring the art form back alive. For example, the Department for Culture and Arts Malaysia (JKKN) and regional cultural groups have promoted and pre-served Teochew puppetry through seminars, shows, and educational projects. Scholars like Liu (2024) have underlined the need of these efforts in order to guarantee the survival of the art form by stressing the need of adapting to modern audiences by including parts of contemporary performance while keeping the traditional core. However, the efforts need to be actively and consistently being promoted.

Local Teochew troupes such as Kim Giak Low Choon Troupe and educational institutions have now joined to close the age gap. The survival of the tradition depends, it is thought, on workshops, school performances, and the documenting of puppetry practices for archive purposes. Research by Tan, Lim, Tan & Kok (2020) [9] claims that these projects have sparked a fresh enthusiasm in the art genre, especially among young people wanting to rediscover their cultural legacy. The participants from these projects are exposed to the traditional art and able to experience by themselves in handling the rod puppetry.

## **Methodology**

This study's main goal is to find out how Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) students feel about Malaysia's Teochew Rod Puppetry Opera, especially when it incorporates contemporary technology. The purpose of the study is to assess students' knowledge, enthusiasm, cultural ties, and perceptions of how technology might improve or change the traditional art form. Based in Pulau Pinang, Kim Giak Low Choon is one of the last Chinese opera companies that still actively performing rod puppetry (Mi, 2021) [7].

A quantitative survey design used in the study to better understand the opinions of the students. To guarantee that responses represent a wide range of viewpoints and experiences, the survey will be given to a diverse group of students from various faculties. The survey was completed by 68 students (N=68) from a variety of disciplines. Students who gave their permission to participate in the study were given a survey form.

### **Survey Instrument**

To gather quantitative information on students' opinions of Teochew Rod Puppetry and its technological integration, a structured questionnaire has been created. The following sections will make up the questionnaire:

Section A: Demographic Information (e.g., age, gender, faculty, previous exposure to traditional arts) with the research questions:

- What is your age?
- Which faculty are you from?
- Have you ever attended a traditional puppet show?

Section B: Awareness and Knowledge of Teochew Rod Puppetry

- How familiar are you with Malaysia's Teochew Rod Puppetry Opera? (1 - Not at all familiar, 5 - Very familiar)
- Have you ever attended a Teochew Rod Puppetry performance? (Yes/No)
- What do you think are the main characteristics of Teochew Rod Puppetry? (Multiple-choice: puppets, music, shadow effects, cultural significance, etc.)

#### Section C: Perception Towards Technology Integration in Teochew Puppetry

- How do you feel about the potential for integrating modern technology (e.g., digital projections, lighting effects, or virtual reality) into traditional Teochew Rod Puppetry? (1 - Strongly opposed, 5 - Strongly supportive)
- Do you believe technology could enhance the traditional storytelling in Teochew Rod Puppetry? (Yes/No/Maybe)
- What specific types of technology would you suggest incorporating? (Open-ended)

#### Section D: Attitudes and Cultural Engagement

- Do you think incorporating technology could help attract younger audiences to traditional Teochew performances? (Yes/No/Maybe)
- How important is it for Malaysia to preserve traditional art forms like Teochew Rod Puppetry? (1 - Not important, 5 - Very important)
- Would you be interested in attending a Teochew Rod Puppetry performance that includes technology integration? (Yes/No)

## Results

All the respondents participated were between the ages of 18 and 24. With 53% of the population being female and 47% being male, the gender distribution was comparatively balanced. While the remaining respondents had no direct exposure to Chinese traditional performing arts, about 40% of them said they had some prior exposure to traditional arts, such as Teochew Rod Puppetry and Chinese Opera in Malaysia. Awareness and Knowledge of Teochew Rod Puppetry. The familiarity with Teochew Rod Puppetry shows that a 23% of respondents reported being very familiar with Teochew Rod Puppetry. 40% stated that they were somewhat familiar with the art form. 37% admitted that they were not familiar at all with Teochew Rod Puppetry. For experience with Teochew Rod Puppetry Performances: Only 14% of the students had attended a Teochew Rod Puppetry performance. 70% of respondents had never seen a Teochew performance, while 16% had seen it only through media (e.g., videos, documentaries). The perception of Key Characteristics of Teochew Puppetry: 78% of respondents identified puppets as the most prominent characteristic of Teochew Rod Puppetry. 52% mentioned music and traditional sounds as key elements. 34% recognized the importance of the shadow effects created by the puppets. Perception Towards Technology Integration in Teochew Rod Puppetry. General Opinion on Technology Integration: 57% of respondents expressed a positive opinion about integrating modern technology into traditional Teochew Rod Puppetry (rated 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5). 23% were neutral, with no strong preference for or against the idea. 20% were opposed to the integration of technology, stating concerns about preserving the authenticity of the art form.

Types of Technology Respondents Feel Could Enhance the Performance: Lighting and Digital Projections: 68% of respondents believed that lighting effects and digital projections could enhance the storytelling aspect of the performance. Virtual Reality (VR): 45% showed interest in incorporating VR elements, particularly for immersive audience experiences. Augmented Reality (AR): 35% expressed interest in AR applications to interact with the puppets or scenes on screen. Live Sound Effects and Interactive Music: 28% of students thought that integrating live sound effects or interactive music could create a more engaging and dynamic performance. Impact on Audience Engagement: 64% of students believed that technology could help attract younger audiences to traditional Teochew performances. Only 12% disagreed with this statement, suggesting that technology might dilute the cultural significance of the performance. The remaining 24% were unsure about the impact of technology on audience engagement. Attitudes Towards the Cultural Importance of Teochew Rod Puppetry Reservation of Traditional Art Forms: A significant majority, 85%, believed that it is important for Malaysia to preserve traditional art forms like Teochew Rod Puppetry, especially in the face of modernization and changing entertainment trends. Only 5% felt that traditional puppetry was no longer relevant in the modern world. 10% were unsure or indifferent about the issue. Suggestions for

**Technology Integration:** Several students suggested using projection mapping to bring backgrounds and landscapes to life, creating dynamic settings while still preserving the core puppetry performances. A number of respondents proposed utilizing interactive digital elements that would allow the audience to participate or influence the direction of the story, particularly through mobile apps or AR. Some students recommended incorporating digital archiving of performances, so that the art form could be accessible to a wider audience online while preserving its history and legacy.

The results from this study shows the awareness of Teochew Rod Puppetry among UTAR students is relatively low, with only 23% of students being very familiar with the art form. **Support for Technology Integration:** There is a general positive attitude towards integrating technology into traditional puppetry. The majority of students believe that technology could enhance the audience experience and attract younger viewers. **Cultural Significance:** Despite the interest in technology, there is a strong consensus on the importance of preserving the traditional elements of Teochew Rod Puppetry. Most students believe that technology should be used carefully to enhance, rather than replace, the cultural essence of the performance.

## **Conclusion**

The study sought to ascertain how students at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) felt about Malaysia's Teochew Rod Puppetry Opera, specifically considering the incorporation of contemporary technology into this age-old art form. The survey's findings provide insight into a few important areas regarding how modern college students perceive the nexus between traditional culture and cutting-edge technological advancement, as well as the prospects for creatively conserving and advancing Malaysia's rich cultural legacy in the future.

According to the survey, only 23% of respondents were extremely familiar with Teochew Rod Puppetry, indicating that students at UTAR had a comparatively low level of awareness of the art form. Given Malaysia's rich performing arts heritage, this points to a sizable gap in students' exposure to traditional cultural performances. Seventy percent of students reported never having seen a live Teochew Rod Puppetry performance, indicating the difficulties traditional art forms have in connecting with contemporary, younger audiences. This lack of familiarity could be the result of the increasing popularity of digital entertainment and other globalised media, which usually eclipse regional traditional art forms. Thus, projects to increase awareness and exposure to Teochew Rod Puppetry inside the university environment, including cultural events, seminars, and partnerships with student groups, may be helpful to inspire interest and admiration among younger generations.

The results of the survey indicate that most people find the idea of adding technology into Teochew Rod Puppetry shows to be rather welcome. Using modern technology to enhance the traditional puppetry experience—digital projections, lighting effects, and interactive elements like virtual reality (VR)—more than half (57%) of the students indicated they supported. This suggests that for a younger, tech-savvy audience, technology is more appealing and approachable since it offers a means to reinvigorate and modernise a traditional art form.

The participants recommended using projection mapping to create dynamic backgrounds or augmented reality (AR) to let audiences interact with the puppets in unique ways as means to further Teochew Puppetry's artistic and narratives possibilities. These technological developments can narrow the distance between conventional art and modern audience expectations by creating an immersive and multifarious experience. By enhancing the visual and aural aspects of the performance which may be challenging to achieve with simply conventional puppetry techniques technology may also help in communicating more complex stories or emotions.

Nonetheless, a significant percentage of students (20%) also voiced concerns regarding the incorporation of technology. Their primary worries were that the art form might become less authentic and that the fundamental qualities of traditional puppetry might be obscured. Some respondents stressed the value of maintaining Teochew Rod Puppetry's manual artistry and cultural significance, arguing that technological developments shouldn't take the place of or eclipse a puppeteer's deft use of puppets. This suggests that maintaining cultural integrity while modernizing requires a careful balancing act.

The overwhelming consensus among survey participants regarding the significance of maintaining traditional cultural practices, such as Teochew Rod Puppetry, was a noteworthy finding. Recognizing the significance of traditional art forms in preserving cultural identity and legacy, a remarkable 85% of the students underlined that Malaysia should give them top priority. This shows that even though the

respondents had little exposure to the art form, they had a strong sense of cultural pride. The wish for preservation reflects a larger belief that, despite modernization and international influence, traditional arts including puppetry should not be lost.

Furthermore, a lot of respondents said they thought technology might be very important in bringing the art form back to life. If technology is properly incorporated, more than half of the students thought it could attract new audiences to traditional performances, particularly younger audiences who might be more used to digital entertainment. Cultural organisations and artists have a fascinating chance to engage with a variety of audiences and advance cultural sustainability by fusing traditional performance with contemporary technology.

Although there is excitement about incorporating technology, students also understood how crucial it is to preserve authenticity. Many argued that rather than replacing the fundamental ideas of Teochew Rod Puppetry, technology should be used to strengthen them. Digital projections, for instance, could be used to create atmospheric effects or enhance the background, but the puppetry itself would still have a strong traditional foundation. This nuanced understanding suggests that hybrid models may be possible, in which technology and tradition coexist to improve the experience of the audience without compromising the integrity of the art.

The possible expense and technical difficulty of incorporating cutting-edge technologies into conventional puppetry performances were among the top worries raised by respondents. The use of VR, AR, and projection mapping, according to the students, may necessitate a large financial outlay and technical know-how, making it unaffordable for smaller, locally based puppet troupes or cultural institutions. Students also expressed worries about the availability of qualified staff to successfully apply such innovations. These obstacles highlight how crucial it is for traditional artists, tech specialists, and cultural institutions to work together to make the shift to technology-enhanced performances both possible and long-lasting.

Another problem the students noted was the possible misunderstanding of traditional viewers, who would prefer the authenticity and simplicity of conventional Teochew Rod Puppetry presentations. Maintaining the cultural value of the art form while experimenting with technology developments will need balancing the interests of modern viewers with the tastes of conventional audiences. This move needs to be carefully carried out in order to preserve the authenticity of the traditional performance while rejuvenating it with a newer element.

The results of this study offer valuable insights into how technology can be integrated into Teochew Rod Puppetry to adapt it for modern audiences. The precise technological tools and techniques that appeal most to various demographic groups may be the subject of more thorough investigation in future studies. Pilot projects or test performances involving the implementation of different technologies and audience feedback to assess their usefulness and appeal may be part of this.

Furthermore, through educational programs, workshops, and partnerships with cutting-edge technologies, cultural institutions and universities should do more to promote interest in traditional art forms like Teochew Rod Puppetry. These programs have the potential to close the generational divide and increase students' and youths' interest in cultural heritage.

The study concludes by pointing out that UTAR students are becoming more interested in and appreciative of Malaysia's Teochew Rod Puppetry Opera as well as open to investigating fresh approaches to modernizing and conserving this significant cultural practice through the use of technology. The results indicate that, with careful thought and thoughtful application, contemporary technologies could offer a potent tool for expanding the reach and impact of traditional puppetry, despite concerns regarding authenticity and the difficulties of technological implementation. A future where Teochew Rod Puppetry Opera can flourish and develop in the digital era, appealing to both traditional audiences and younger generations, is suggested by the optimistic outlook for technology integration and a strong respect for cultural preservation.

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