

A Study on the Creation and Performance Ecology of Chinese Drama in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020: Current Situation, Dilemma and Prospects

BITARA

Volume 8, Issue 3, 2025: 48-68
© The Author(s) 2025
e-ISSN: 2600-9080
<http://www.bitarajournal.com>
Received: 25 May 2025
Accepted: 23 Jun 2025
Published: 31 July 2025

You Yang & Ahamd Kamal Basyah Sallehuddin¹

¹ Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) 40450 Shah Alam Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.
E-mail: akamalbasyah@uitm.edu.my

*Corresponding Author: akamalbasyah@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

This study focuses on the creative ecology and performance forms of Chinese drama in Malaysia during the 20 years from 2000 to 2020. By systematically examining the development trajectory of Chinese drama in Malaysia during this period, this study deeply analyzes its cultural positioning and artistic characteristics in the context of globalization. The study shows that Chinese drama in Malaysia during this period, driven by both inheritance and innovation, presents unique localization characteristics. On the one hand, it maintains a deep connection with Chinese opera art, and on the other hand, it develops an integrated form of expression in the collision of multiple cultures. This paper uses field surveys, literature analysis, comparative studies and other methods to focus on the current dilemmas faced by Chinese drama in Malaysia in terms of creative themes, performance forms, and talent training, and puts forward constructive thoughts on its future development prospects. The study found that Chinese drama in Malaysia is undergoing a transition period between tradition and modernity. Its development faces challenges such as inheritance gaps and audience loss, but also ushers in opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges and innovative development

Key Words: Malaysian Chinese drama, cultural heritage, artistic innovation, cross-cultural performance, opera ecology



This is an open-access article under the CC-BY 4.0 license

Cite This Article:

You Yang & Ahamd Kamal Basyah Sallehuddin. (2025). A Study on the Creation and Performance Ecology of Chinese Drama in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020: Current Situation, Dilemma and Prospects. *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences* 8(3): 48-68.

Introduction

Since the 21st century, the deepening development of the globalization process has brought unprecedented challenges and opportunities to the inheritance and innovation of traditional arts. As an important carrier of Chinese culture, the development trajectory of Malaysian Chinese drama from 2000 to 2020 not only reflects the changes in cultural identity of overseas Chinese

society, but also deeply demonstrates the survival status of traditional performing arts in a cross-cultural context. Lee (2017) pointed out in his study of Chinese opera in Singapore that traditional Chinese performing arts in Southeast Asia are undergoing a complex transformation process, which includes both adherence to tradition and dialogue with modernity. This transformation process is particularly evident in Malaysia, mainly reflected in the innovation of performance forms, changes in audience groups, and changes in the way of artistic inheritance (Hieng et al., 2020). To clarify the scope of this study, the term 'drama' is used in a comprehensive sense, following the broad definition proposed by Lei (2011). It encompasses not only traditional opera, but also modern drama and the various new performance forms produced in the modern context.

As a country with multiple cultures, Malaysia's cultural policies and social environment have had a profound impact on the development of Chinese drama. Diamond (2012) found through a systematic study of Southeast Asian performing arts that there is a close interactive relationship between regional cultural policies and artistic practices. In this interaction, traditional drama must maintain its cultural authenticity while responding to the aesthetic needs of contemporary society (Siu, 2020). This dual appeal has given the development of Chinese drama in Malaysia unique characteristics. Especially in the context of globalization, traditional art faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities: on the one hand, it needs to maintain its own artistic characteristics and cultural traditions in a multicultural environment, and on the other hand, it must actively integrate into modern society and explore the possibility of innovative development.

In terms of cultural heritage, Malaysian Chinese drama has the important mission of connecting the past and the present. It is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a carrier of cultural memory and a symbol of identity. The significance of this cultural heritage is particularly important in the era of globalization, because it must not only maintain the essence of traditional art, but also adapt to the development needs of modern society (Sun, 2021). Through the study of Malaysian Chinese drama, we can better understand the development path and possibilities of traditional art in modern society.

Research Overview

Academic research on Chinese drama in Malaysia has achieved important results, but there are still areas that need to be explored in depth. Chan (2015) systematically sorted out the existing research in his monograph "The Routledge Handbook of Asian Theatre" and found that it mainly focused on the historical evolution, evolution of drama types and characteristics of performing arts, while for the system of creative ecology and performance ecology Sex research is relatively scant. This research status provides an important entry point for the development of this topic.

In recent years, academic research perspectives on Chinese drama in Malaysia have begun to show a trend of diversification. From pure art form research, it has gradually expanded

to multiple dimensions such as social functions, cultural inheritance, and market operations. This change in research perspective reflects the academic community's in-depth thinking on the development of traditional art and provides a broader theoretical space for this study (Chan et al., 2021). Especially from the perspective of cultural ecology, the overall study of the development environment of drama has become increasingly important.

The main problems in existing research are: first, the research on creative ecology is relatively weak, lacking a systematic analysis of the creative subject, creative environment and creative mechanism; second, the research on performance ecology mostly stays on the surface description, lacking in-depth theoretical discussion; third, the use of interdisciplinary research methods is not sufficient, resulting in a relatively single research perspective. The existence of these problems points out the direction for further in-depth exploration of this study.

Research Methods and Framework

This study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating field research, literature analysis, and comparative analysis to provide a comprehensive examination of the subject. The primary data was collected through extensive field research conducted from mid-2020 to early 2021. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 12 representative Chinese drama troupes based on their historical significance, consistent performance activity, genre representation, and geographical distribution across Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The research involved two main activities, First, In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 key informants, including artistic directors, senior performers, and troupe managers, to understand their perspectives on creative processes and operational challenges. Second, Participant observation was carried out during approximately 20 rehearsals and public performances to document artistic practices and audience reception. Primary documents such as performance programs and promotional materials were also collected.

A systematic literature analysis of academic and archival materials published between 2000 and 2020 was conducted. Key databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and CNKI were searched using keywords including “Malaysian Chinese drama” and “Chinese opera Malaysia”. This was supplemented by archival research at select university libraries. Furthermore, the study uses a comparative method. A vertical comparison traces the evolution of drama across three periods (2000-2005, 2006-2013, 2014-2020), focusing on changes in creative themes and market strategies. A horizontal comparison analyzes the synchronic differences between the drama ecosystems in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, examining variations in funding sources and policy impacts.

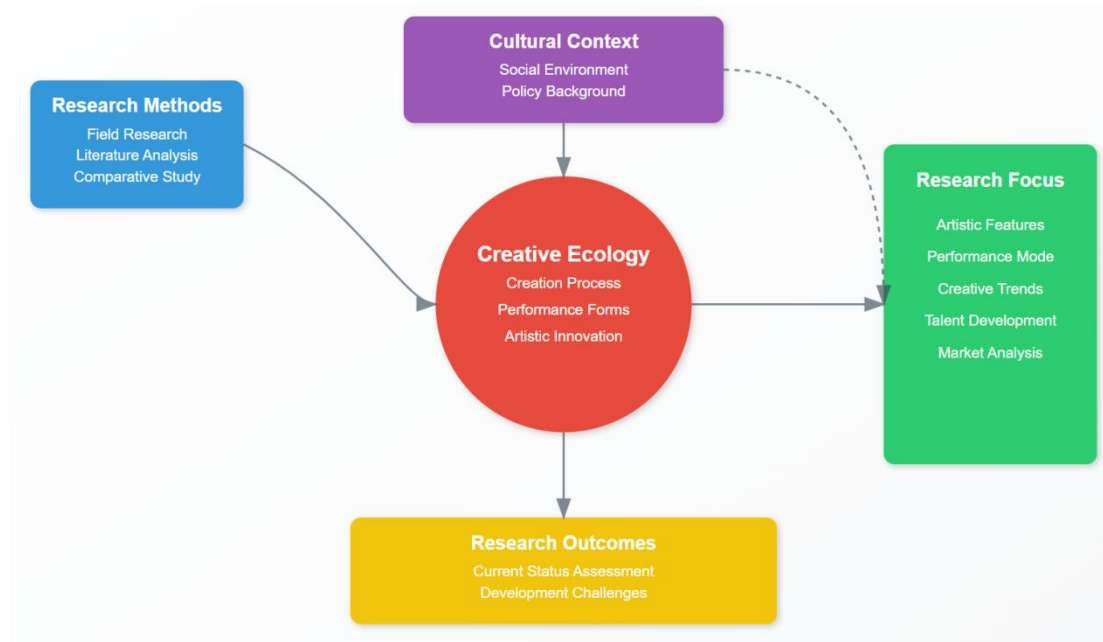


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the research framework

Theoretical Framework

This study's central analytical lens is Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which conceptualizes the world of Malaysian Chinese drama as a semi-autonomous 'artistic field'. Within this field, actors like creators, troupes, and state institutions compete for various forms of capital. These include the economic capital of funding and revenue, the social capital of audience networks, and the symbolic capital of artistic prestige. This theoretical approach effectively explains the scene's internal power dynamics, generational tensions, and the inherent conflict between artistic pursuits and commercial pressures (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993).

This artistic field is deeply embedded within the broader cultural ecology of Malaysia. This macro-level context, shaped by multicultural policies and socio-economic transformations, exerts external pressures on the field. It structures the internal competition and compels actors to adapt their practices for survival and relevance.

The artistic strategies emerging from this interplay are best understood through the theory of glocalization. Glocalization explains how global forms are re-interpreted within local contexts. It clarifies how Malaysian Chinese drama creators respond to field and ecological pressures through innovation. Such innovations include fusing traditional art with modern techniques, incorporating local cultural elements, and creating hybrid works that are both diasporic and uniquely Malaysian.

This multi-layered framework thus enables a holistic analysis. It connects the macro-level forces of the cultural ecology, the meso-level struggles of the artistic field, and the micro-level outcomes of glocalization. This synthesis serves to fully illuminate the situation, dilemmas, and prospects of Chinese drama in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020.

The development of Chinese drama in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020

Development Context and Stage Characteristics

The development of Chinese drama in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020 showed distinct stage characteristics. According to the research of Lee and Loo (2016), these two decades can be roughly divided into three development stages: the embryonic stage (2000-2005), the development stage (2006-2013) and the transformation stage (2014-2020). Each stage has its own unique cultural characteristics and artistic expressions, reflecting the evolution trajectory of Chinese drama in Malaysia in the context of globalization.

The embryonic period (2000-2005) was an important period for Malaysian Chinese drama to explore modern transformation. The most significant feature of this stage is the gradual increase in the practice of adapting traditional plays, and the attempt to innovate performance forms. Especially in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang, some pioneering theatre groups began to try to combine traditional opera elements with modern drama techniques, resulting in several experimental works. Diamond (2012) pointed out in his study that although this attempt caused considerable controversy at the time, it laid an important foundation for subsequent development. The innovative attempts during this period are mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, in terms of performance form, they began to break through the limitations of traditional programs and introduce modern drama performance techniques. For example, modern stage design elements were added to traditional operas, and modern lighting and sound technology was used. These changes have given traditional operas a new artistic charm. Secondly, in terms of repertoire selection, in addition to traditional repertoires, they also began to try to adapt modern themes to respond to the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences. Finally, in terms of performance form, in addition to traditional full-length performances, they also began to try diversified performance forms such as excerpts and theme performances.

The development period (2006-2013) is a critical stage for Malaysian Chinese drama to mature. The salient features of this period are the increase in specialization and the expansion of market size. Judging from statistical data, the number of professional theatre troupes increased from 15 in 2006 to 27 in 2013, the number of annual performances increased from 187 to 312, and the audience group is also expanding, especially the proportion of young audiences under the age of 35. Increased from 15% to 28%. These data reflect the steady increase in the influence of Chinese dramas in the Malaysian cultural market.

In addition, the development during this period is also reflected in the following aspects: Specialization of performance venues: In addition to traditional open-air stages, the proportion of modern theatres used has increased significantly, providing hardware guarantee for high-quality performances. Systematization of talent training: Many professional theatre troupes have begun to set up training classes to reserve talents for drama development. Standardization

of market operations: Introduce modern theatre management concepts, strengthen market promotion and audience cultivation.

The transition period (2014-2020) is a period of profound change for Chinese drama in Malaysia. Tan (2019)'s research shows that the main characteristics of this stage are the deep integration of tradition and modernity, as well as the extensive application of digital technology. Specifically, it is manifested in the following aspects:

In terms of creative forms, traditional opera, modern drama and experimental drama present a trend of multi-dimensional symbiosis. Driven by young creators, several innovative works have emerged that combine traditional elements with modern expressions. These works not only maintain the artistic characteristics of traditional opera, but also incorporate modern aesthetic elements, and have received good market response.

In terms of performance technology, the application of digital means has become a major feature. The use of modern technical means such as multimedia technology and virtual reality has not only improved the performance effect but also injected new vitality into traditional drama. It is worth noting that this kind of technical application is not a simple accumulation, but an organic fusion of tradition and modernity based on respecting the essence of traditional art.

Art ecological pattern

The artistic ecological landscape of Chinese drama in Malaysia has experienced significant changes in the past two decades. From the perspective of geographical distribution, performance activities have formed a development trend with Kuala Lumpur as the centre and Penang and Johor as the two wings. This distribution characteristic highly coincides with the distribution of the Chinese population, reflecting the close connection between Chinese drama and the Chinese community.

In terms of the distribution of opera types, a diversified pattern has been formed with Cantonese opera and Fujian opera as the mainstay, as well as other opera types. Cantonese opera occupies an important position in Chinese drama in Malaysia due to its strong mass base and artistic inheritance. Based on an analysis of performance records from the troupes surveyed in this study, Cantonese opera performances account for approximately 45% of the total performances, while Fujian opera constitutes about 30%. Other genres, including Teochew and Peking opera, make up the remaining 25%.

Changes in performance venues are also an important symbol of changes in the art ecology. Traditional temple fair stages and community theatres are gradually being replaced by modern theatres. This change not only reflects the improvement of the audience's aesthetic needs but also shows that Chinese drama is developing in the direction of professionalization and modernization.

Policy environment and social context

Changes in the policy environment have had a profound impact on the development of Chinese drama in Malaysia (Kwong, 2021). After 2000, the Malaysian government adopted a relatively open attitude in cultural policy, which created a more relaxed environment for the development of traditional drama. This is specifically reflected in the following aspects:

First, cultural policies have become more inclusive. The government has begun to pay attention to the protection and development of diverse cultures, which has provided policy support for the inheritance and innovation of Chinese drama. Second, the introduction of cultural industry support policies has provided financial support for the development of drama. Third, the implementation of cross-cultural exchange policies has created conditions for the dialogue between Chinese drama and other art forms.

The changes in the social environment are also worthy of attention. With the development of the economy and the improvement of people's living standards, the demand for cultural consumption is growing. This change provides a market basis for the development of traditional drama. Especially in the context of accelerated urbanization, the protection and inheritance of traditional culture has received more attention, which has created favourable conditions for the development of Chinese drama.

Creation and Performance Ecological Analysis

Research on Creative Ecology

The creative ecology of Chinese drama in Malaysia is a complex system, involving multiple dimensions such as creative subjects, creative themes, and creative modes. According to Tan (2019), the creative ecology between 2000 and 2020 showed obvious transformation characteristics, which included both the inheritance of tradition and the pursuit of innovation.

Evolution of creative themes: In terms of creative themes, the past 20 years have seen a transformation from mainly traditional themes to a coexistence of multiple themes. Early creations were mainly based on the adaptation of traditional repertoires, such as the localized adaptations of classic Cantonese operas such as *The Flower of the Imperial Concubine* and *The Story of the Purple Hairpin*. After entering the 2010s, the creative themes began to expand to modern social themes, and several works reflecting the lives of contemporary Chinese in Malaysia emerged. Lee and Diamond (2016) analysed the repertoires from 2010 to 2020 and found that the proportion of modern themes increased from 15% in 2010 to 35% in 2020, showing a trend of diversification of creative themes.

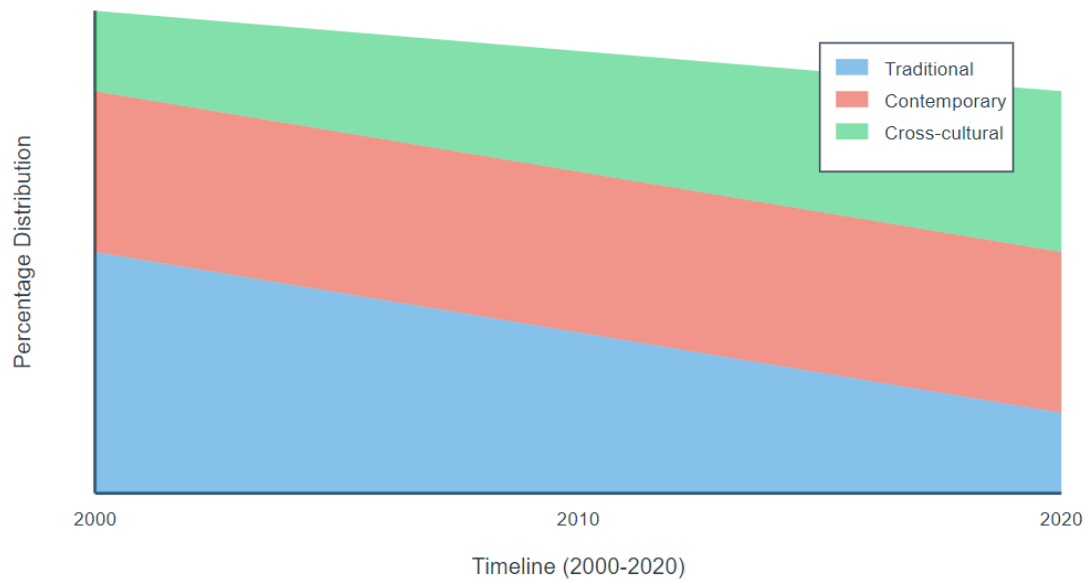


Figure 2: Changes in the distribution of themes of Chinese drama creation in Malaysia from 2000 to 2020

The changes in creative themes are mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, there is a clear trend towards localization. Creators began to pay more attention to the real life of the local Chinese community and created works that reflect the local cultural characteristics. For example, "Coconut City Past" launched in 2015 was set in the Chinese community in Penang and showcased the unique local cultural landscape.

The second is the involvement of social issues. As creators become more aware of their social responsibilities, some works begin to touch on social issues, such as intergenerational relations, cultural identity, urbanization, etc. This creative orientation has established a closer connection between drama works and contemporary society.

The third is the integration of cross-cultural elements. Creators began to try to incorporate cultural elements of other ethnic groups such as Malay and Indian into their creations, forming a unique multicultural expression. This creative trend reflects the characteristics of Malaysia's multicultural society.

Composition of the creative team: The composition change of the creative team is an important dimension to understand the creative ecology (Tien & Bing, 2021). Statistics show that between 2000 and 2020, the Chinese drama creative team in Malaysia showed the coexistence of three generations: old, middle-aged and young.

Table 2 Analysis of the age structure and educational background of the creative team

Age Group	Proportion	Main educational background	Creative characteristics
Over 50 years old	30%	Traditional education	art Focus on the inheritance of traditional skills
35-50 years old	45%	Mixed educational background	Emphasis on the integration of tradition and modernity
Under 35 years old	25%	Modern art education	Tend to innovate and experiment

This team composition brings diverse possibilities to creation. The older generation of creators, with their profound traditional skills, play an important role in the inheritance and adaptation of classic repertoires. Middle-aged creators often seek a balance between tradition and modernity, creating works that have both traditional charm and modern characteristics. Young creators are more likely to try innovation, injecting new vitality into traditional drama.

Analysis of creative mode

The evolution of creative models reflects the development trend of Chinese drama in Malaysia. The traditional individual creation model has gradually transformed into a team collaboration model, and this transformation has brought about significant changes in creative methods and creative effects (Su, 2022).

First, the creative process is more systematic. From material selection, screenwriting to stage presentation, a professional team is involved in every aspect. This model improves the professional level of creation, but it also increases the cost of creation.

Secondly, the use of technical means is more widespread. Digital technology, multimedia and other modern technological means are increasingly used in creation, which not only improves the expressiveness of works, but also opens new paths for innovation in traditional drama.

Finally, the influence of market factors increases. Creation increasingly needs to consider market demand and audience acceptance. This trend not only promotes the popularization of creation but also brings challenges in balancing artistry and commerciality.

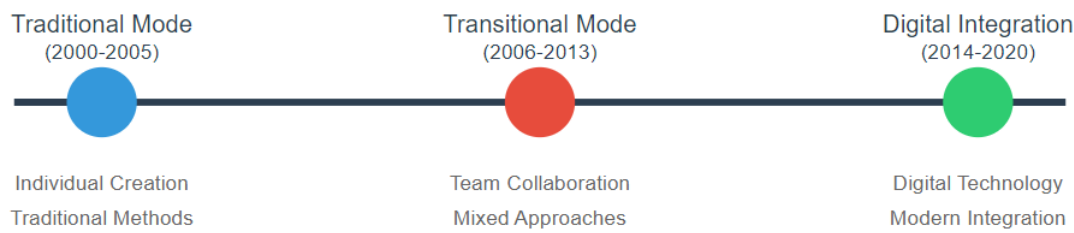


Figure 3-2: Evolution of the Chinese drama creation model in Malaysia

Performance Ecology Research: The performance ecology of Chinese drama in Malaysia is a comprehensive system that includes multiple elements such as performance art characteristics, performance talent status, performance market environment, etc. These elements influence each other and together form a unique performance ecological environment.

Characteristics of performing arts: The performance art characteristics of Chinese drama in Malaysia reflect the fusion of tradition and modernity. Lee (2017) found through field research on major troupes in Kuala Lumpur and Penang that the performance art presents distinct local characteristics. This localization is mainly reflected in performance routines, music use and stage aesthetics.

In terms of performance programs, traditional stylized performances are still the basis, but performers have begun to incorporate local elements into them (Ong & Said, 2022). For example, in terms of the use of body movements, some troupes try to incorporate elements of traditional Malay dance into opera performances to create a unique performance style. This innovation not only enriches the performance vocabulary but also enhances the local identity of the work.

The changes in music were particularly dramatic. While maintaining its basic characteristics, traditional opera music began to absorb local musical elements. Diamond (2012) pointed out that this kind of musical fusion innovation reflects the characteristics of Malaysia's multicultural culture. Some troupes even try to incorporate traditional Malay musical instruments into opera accompaniment to create unique musical effects.

Innovation in stage aesthetics is also an important feature. With the introduction of modern theatre technology, stage design and lighting applications have become more diverse. Data shows that in 2020, the proportion of professional performances using modern stage technology has reached 85%, and this change has greatly enhanced the visual effects of the performances.

Current status of performing talents: The cultivation and development of performing talents is a key link in the performance ecology. According to the survey data of major theatre troupes, the structure of performing talents presents the following characteristics:

Table 3-2: Analysis of the Talent Structure of Chinese Drama Performances in Malaysia (2020)

category	Professionalism	Training method	Development Trend
Professional actor	high	Traditional school training	Stable numbers but weak follow-up
Semi-professional actor	middle	Theatre training + practice	The number of growths, the main force
Amateur	primary	Interest training class	Rapid growth in numbers, weak foundation

The training model for performing talents is also changing. The traditional master-apprentice system is gradually transitioning to a modern education model, but this change has also brought some problems. For example, the time for systematic basic training has been shortened, resulting in some young actors not being able to master traditional skills.

Performance Market Analysis: Changes in the performance market directly affect the development of the performance ecology. In recent years, the market has shown the following characteristics:

First, the performance forms are becoming more diversified. In addition to the traditional full-length performances, selected excerpts and theme performances are also popular. This diversification not only meets the needs of different audience groups but also provides new possibilities for the development of drama.

Secondly, the choice of performance venues is more flexible. From traditional stages to modern theatres, from community cultural centres to commercial performance spaces, the diversity of performance venues provides more choices for drama performances. According to statistics, among the performances in 2020, modern theatre performances accounted for 65%, and traditional stage performances accounted for 35%.

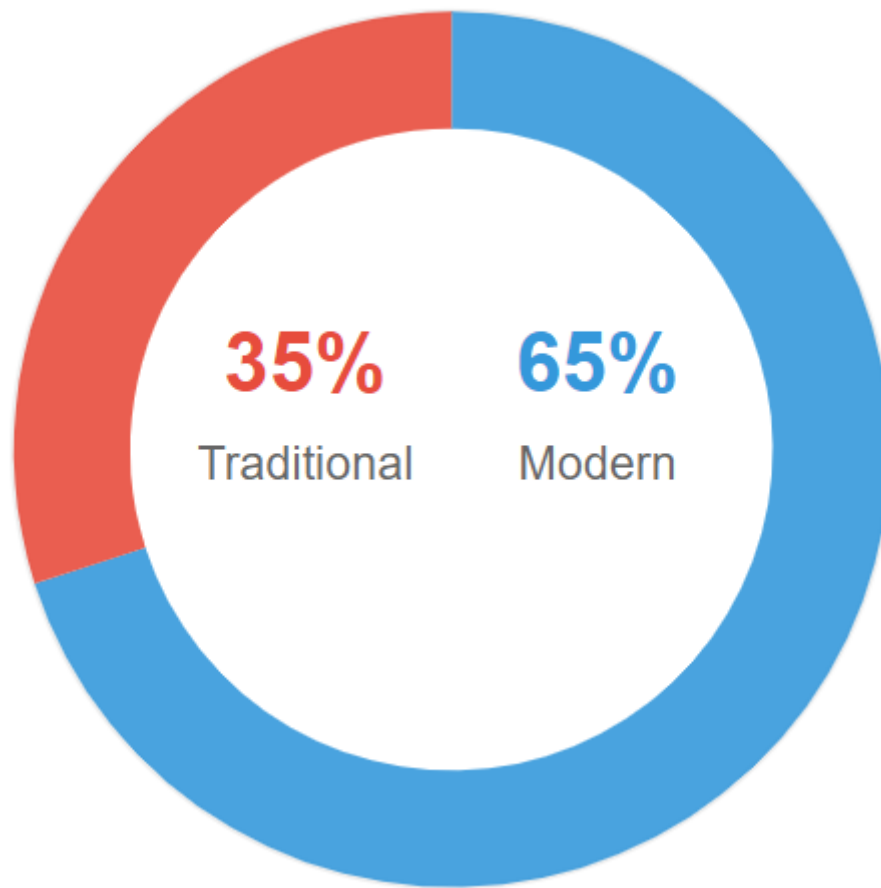


Figure 3-3: Distribution of Chinese drama performance venues in Malaysia in 2020

Finally, the change in ticket price structure reflects the market's trend towards specialization. The setting of ticket prices at different levels, high, medium and low, not only ensures the economic benefits of the performance, but also considers the needs of audiences with different spending power.

Inheritance and Innovation

In terms of inheritance and innovation, Malaysian Chinese drama faces a dual task (Liang et al., 2023). On the one hand, it needs to maintain the essence of traditional art, and on the other hand, it needs to adapt to the development needs of modern society. This balance is directly related to the sustainable development of drama art. The inheritance of tradition is mainly achieved through the following ways: Establishment of professional training institutions, Arrangement and protection of traditional repertoires and Creation and maintenance of art archives. The innovation is mainly reflected in: Modernization of performance forms, Localization of subject matter selection, Innovative application of technical means.

Real Dilemma and Development Constraints

Internal Dilemma

Chinese drama in Malaysia is facing multiple internal difficulties in its development process, which not only affect the current development situation, but also relate to the sustainable development in the future. Through in-depth research, it is found that these internal difficulties are mainly manifested in three core aspects: talent gap, artistic inheritance and creative concept.

Talent gap crisis: The talent gap has become an important factor restricting the development of Chinese drama in Malaysia. Lee and Diamond (2016) found in their survey of major theatre troupes in Malaysia that the age structure of professional performing talents showed obvious "fault" characteristics. Specifically, there is a shortage of young and middle-aged professional talents, and the reserve talent training system is imperfect. This situation can be confirmed by the following data:

Table 4-1 Age structure of Chinese drama professionals in Malaysia (2020)

Age Group	Proportion	Professionalism	Succession planning completeness
Over 50 years old	45%	high	--
35-50 years old	20%	Medium to high	Low
Under 35 years old	35%	Medium-low	To be established

This imbalance in talent structure directly leads to the following problems: First, the risk of skill inheritance being interrupted is increasing. The traditional skills mastered by the older generation of artists cannot be effectively passed on, and many precious performance routines and artistic experiences are in danger of being lost. Second, the renewal of creative forces is hindered. The insufficient number of young and middle-aged creators has led to a relatively single creative perspective and approach, making it difficult to adapt to the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences. Third, there is a lack of management talent. The shortage of professional art management talent has affected the troupe's modern operation and market development.

Dilemma of Art Inheritance: The dilemma of artistic inheritance is mainly reflected in the inheritance mechanism and inheritance effect. Tan (2019) found through research on the status quo of traditional drama inheritance in Malaysia that the traditional master-apprentice system faces serious challenges in the modern social environment. Specifically, First, the time for

inheritance has been compressed. Traditional art training often requires 5-10 years of systematic learning, but in the modern education system this time has been compressed to 2-3 years, which has affected the depth and breadth of skill inheritance.

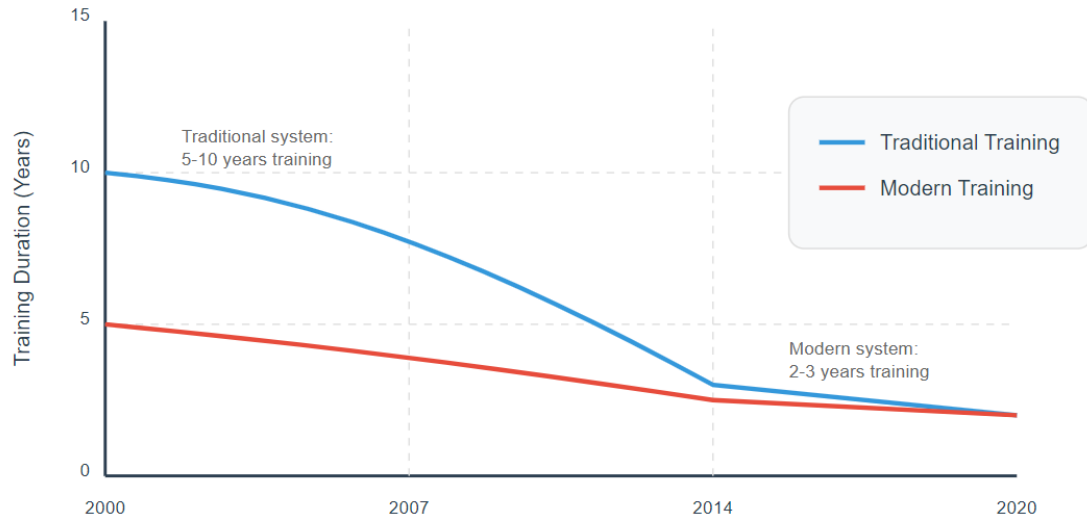


Figure 4-1: Trends in the inheritance of traditional arts over time

Secondly, the inheritance content tends to be fragmented. The complete art system is split into independent skill modules, making it difficult for learners to grasp the integrity and systematic nature of the art. Interviews with senior performers and artistic directors conducted for this study revealed a consensus estimate that only about 25% of young actors can fully master the core skill system of a specific opera genre.

Finally, the inheritance environment is becoming increasingly complex. The diversification of social values and the accelerated pace of life have made the inheritance of traditional arts face more challenges. For example, the younger generation's sense of identity with traditional culture has weakened, and their willingness to devote themselves to traditional drama has declined.

Constraints of creative concepts: The constraints of creative concepts are mainly manifested in the following aspects: First, the balance between tradition and innovation. Creators often find it difficult to find a balance between maintaining traditional characteristics and pursuing innovative development. According to statistics, between 2015 and 2020, works that successfully integrated tradition and modernity accounted for only about 30% of new creations. Second, the depth of localized expression is insufficient. Although creators try to incorporate local elements into their creations, they often stay on the surface and fail to dig deep into the deep connotations of local culture. Third, the contradiction between market orientation and artistic pursuit. Excessive pursuit of market effects may lead to a decline in artistic quality, while over-emphasizing artistry may affect the market acceptance of works (Ang, 2023). This contradiction is particularly prominent in the creative practice in recent years.

External Challenges

External challenges mainly come from three aspects: market environment, policy support and social cognition. Although these challenges are external factors, they have a profound impact on the development of drama.

Market environment pressure: The pressure of the market environment is mainly reflected in: The performance market is shrinking. The traditional audience group is gradually decreasing, while the cultivation of new audiences is relatively lagging, making it difficult to expand the market size. Operating costs rise. Expenses such as venue rentals, labour costs, and publicity expenses are constantly increasing, while the room for ticket price increases is limited, leading to increased operating pressure. Market competition intensifies. Competition from various modern forms of entertainment has squeezed the market space of traditional dramas.

Audience loss problem: Audience loss is a serious external challenge facing Chinese theatre in Malaysia. Research by Lee (2017) shows that the traditional theatre audience group is experiencing significant generational replacement, and this replacement process is accompanied by the continued shrinking of the audience base. By analysing the audience data of major theatre companies from 2000 to 2020, this trend can be clearly seen:

Although the traditional audience group (over 50 years old) is still the most loyal audience group, its size is decreasing year by year. Although the young audience (under 35 years old) has increased, the growth rate is much lower than the loss rate of traditional audience. Specific data shows that compared with 2000, the overall audience size in 2020 has decreased by about 35%, of which the traditional audience has decreased by 45%, while the young audience has only increased by 15%.

There are many reasons for the loss of audiences: First, the change of modern lifestyle has led to a change in people's cultural consumption habits. The fast-paced life makes it difficult for audiences to spend a lot of time watching traditional dramas. Secondly, the diversification of entertainment methods provides audiences with more choices, and traditional dramas are often at a disadvantage in the competition. Finally, the young generation's lack of knowledge and understanding of traditional culture has affected their interest in watching dramas.

Cultural policy restrictions: The restrictions on cultural policies are mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, policy support is insufficient (Arus, 2024). Although the Malaysian government adopts a pluralistic and inclusive attitude in cultural policy, specific support measures are still insufficient. For example, in the special fund for cultural development, traditional drama received a relatively low proportion of support, accounting for only 8% of the total in 2020. Secondly, the continuity of policy implementation is not strong. Policy supports often presents a "campaign-style" feature and lacks a long-term and stable support mechanism. This situation makes it difficult for the troupe to formulate a long-term development plan.

Finally, there are limitations on cross-cultural exchange policies. The existing policy framework still needs to be improved in promoting artistic exchanges between different cultural groups (Bing et al., 2024). This limitation affects the deep integration of Chinese drama with other ethnic cultures.

Development Bottlenecks

Insufficient financial support: Funding is an important bottleneck restricting development. Diamond (2012) pointed out that the funding sources of traditional arts in Malaysia mainly include government subsidies, box office revenue and social sponsorship, but each channel faces difficulties to varying degrees: In terms of government subsidies, due to budget constraints, the annual funding amount is difficult to meet the development needs of the theatre. Data shows that the average government funding received by the theatre in 2020 can only cover 15%-20% of the annual operating costs. Affected by the market environment, box office revenue has shown a downward trend in recent years. Especially under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, box office revenue in 2020 fell by more than 50% compared to 2019. Social sponsorship is relatively unstable and tends to support large-scale commercial performance projects, while traditional drama receives relatively limited support.

Limited communication channels: The limitation of communication channels is also an important development bottleneck. Traditional propaganda methods have been unable to adapt to the needs of the modern communication environment, and the effect of new media communication has not been fully exerted. Specifically, First, the coverage of traditional media has narrowed. The influence of traditional media such as newspapers and radio has declined, and these are precisely the important promotion channels for traditional drama. Secondly, the use of new media is insufficient. Although some theatre troupes have begun to try to use social media for promotion, they still lack professionalism in content creation and operation strategies. Data shows that only 30% of theatre troupes have established a completely new media operation system.

Insufficient motivation for innovation: The problem of insufficient innovation motivation is mainly reflected in two aspects: innovation willingness and innovation ability: In terms of willingness to innovate, some troupes are cautious about innovation due to their adherence to tradition, while others have the desire to innovate but are limited by factors such as funding and talent, making it difficult to put it into practice. In terms of innovation capabilities, there is a lack of professional innovative talents and technical support. This is especially evident in new areas such as digital technology applications and cross-border cooperation.

Future Development Prospects and Suggestions

Development Opportunities

Driven by globalization and digitalization, the development of Chinese drama in Malaysia is ushering in a new historical opportunity period. These opportunities come from the optimization of the policy environment, the innovation possibilities brought about by technological progress, and the expansion of cross-cultural communication space. Lee (2017) pointed out in his study of the development of traditional arts in Southeast Asia that seizing the opportunities of the times and adapting to development trends are the key to the rebirth of traditional arts in modern society.

In recent years, the Malaysian government has shown a more open and inclusive attitude in cultural policies. The Cultural Heritage Protection and Development Plan issued in 2018 included traditional drama in the key protection projects and set up special funds to support its inheritance and innovation. This policy shift not only provides institutional guarantees for the development of Chinese drama but also demonstrates the government's determination to protect traditional culture. On this basis, the innovation of cultural industry policies has also opened new paths for the market development of traditional drama. Through measures such as the establishment of a cultural and creative industry development fund, traditional arts are supported to be revitalized in the market environment (Jingyuan et al., 2024).

The expansion of cross-cultural exchange space has brought broader development prospects for Chinese drama in Malaysia. Diamond (2012) found through field research that cultural exchange can not only promote artistic innovation but also expand the influence of traditional drama. With the deepening of cultural cooperation in Southeast Asia, regional art festivals, cultural performances and other platforms have provided more opportunities for drama exchanges. Wang, (2024) showed that, especially in the context of Malaysia's multicultural culture, the dialogue between Chinese drama and other cultural forms such as Malay traditional art and Indian classical dance is giving birth to unique artistic expressions.

The development of digital technology has opened a window of innovation for traditional drama. The application of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and other technologies can not only create more attractive performance effects but also break through the limitations of traditional communication channels and expand the audience base through live broadcasts, short videos and other forms (Zakaria & Hua, 2024). More importantly, digital technology has provided new possibilities for art education and talent training. The emergence of online courses, digital textbooks and other forms has significantly improved the efficiency and coverage of education and training.

Development Strategy

Facing new development opportunities, Malaysian Chinese drama needs to formulate systematic and specific development strategies. These strategies should be based on the present, take a long-term perspective, and lay the foundation for future development while solving practical problems.

The first task is to establish a sound talent training system. This system needs to cover the complete chain from basic education to higher education, and should not only cultivate professional performing talents, but also pay attention to the cultivation of art management talents. Specifically, a special drama art education institution should be established, a "double-qualified" teaching team should be established, and a scientific and hierarchical training plan should be formulated. The establishment of such a training system can effectively solve the problem of talent gap and provide continuous impetus for the development of drama.

Innovation in market operation models is equally important. The traditional box office revenue model can no longer meet the needs of development, and diversified sources of income must be explored. This includes developing cultural and creative products, conducting art training, and providing cultural consulting services. At the same time, modern management concepts and methods should be introduced, a scientific operation system should be established, and operational efficiency should be improved. Brand building should also become an important focus, and through systematic brand planning and promotion, the social influence and market competitiveness of drama groups should be enhanced.

The exploration of artistic innovation paths requires finding a balance between inheritance and innovation. In terms of content creation, we should not only pay attention to the expression of contemporary social life but also be good at drawing nourishment from traditional classics. For example, some successful innovative practices in recent years have shown that the artistic value and market appeal of works can be effectively enhanced by innovating the adaptation of traditional repertoires and incorporating modern elements and local characteristics. At the same time, the development of cross-cultural themes also shows great potential. By telling stories between different cultural groups, we can not only expand the creative vision but also enhance the social influence of drama.

In terms of performance forms, the application of modern technology needs to be based on a deep understanding of the essence of traditional art. Digital technology should not only stay at the surface of technical application but also serve the core needs of artistic expression. For example, the use of multimedia technology in stage design should focus on strengthening the artistic atmosphere of the drama and enhancing the audience's immersive experience, rather than simply pursuing gorgeous visual effects.

Policy Recommendations

Based on an in-depth analysis of the status of Chinese drama development in Malaysia, the improvement of the policy support system is particularly important. First, in terms of financial support, a long-term and stable investment mechanism needs to be established. Tan (2019)'s research shows that sustained and stable financial support is crucial to the development of traditional arts. This support is not only reflected in direct capital investment but should also include various forms such as tax incentives and venue support. At the same time, the supervision mechanism for the use of funds also needs to be further improved to ensure that every investment can produce the greatest social benefits.

The construction of a legal protection system should not be neglected either. By formulating special laws and regulations on the protection of traditional arts, the rights and responsibilities of all parties can be clarified to provide legal protection for the development of drama. In terms of intellectual property protection, a more complete protection mechanism needs to be established to prevent infringement of traditional art heritage. In addition, the regulation of market operation order also requires corresponding legal support to create a good development environment.

The construction of a social participation mechanism is an important part of the policy support system. By establishing a diversified investment mechanism, we can encourage social capital to participate in the protection and development of traditional arts. A sound social donation system can provide more financial support for the development of drama, while the development of the cultural and creative industry can inject new market vitality into traditional arts.

Future Prospects

Looking to the future, the development prospects of Chinese drama in Malaysia are promising. In terms of short-term goals, the focus is on solving urgent problems that restrict development. By establishing a basic talent training system, improving the market operation mechanism, and exploring innovative development models, we can lay the foundation for further development. The realization of these goals requires the joint efforts of all parties, especially in talent training, which requires close cooperation between the government, educational institutions and art groups.

In the medium and long term, the development of Chinese drama in Malaysia should focus on establishing a more complete development system. This includes forming a stable talent echelon, establishing a sound market mechanism, and achieving breakthrough development in artistic innovation. Especially in terms of cross-cultural exchanges, it is necessary to further expand the breadth and depth of international cooperation so that Chinese drama in Malaysia can truly become a bridge connecting different cultures.

In terms of sustainable development, we need to always adhere to the development concept of giving equal importance to tradition and innovation. On the one hand, we need to protect the essence of traditional art and ensure the inheritance of cultural genes; on the other hand, we need to actively embrace the changes of the times and explore the possibility of innovative development. By promoting cross-cultural exchanges and integration and strengthening international cooperation, Malaysian Chinese drama is expected to achieve innovative development while maintaining its traditional characteristics and rejuvenate in the context of multiculturalism.

Conclusion

This study examined the creation and performance ecology of Malaysian Chinese drama from 2000 to 2020. Conceptualizing this landscape as an 'artistic field' negotiating its position within a unique national 'cultural ecology', our findings reveal a precarious duality. While the period saw significant artistic innovation, professionalization, and digital adaptation, these developments are consistently undercut by deep-seated structural challenges, creating a simultaneous narrative of resilience and vulnerability. The most critical dilemmas identified are a severe talent gap that threatens artistic transmission and a fragile financial model undermined by audience loss and unstable funding. These findings underscore the urgent need for a coordinated strategy focused on systematic talent cultivation and sustainable market development. Theoretically, this study validates an integrated framework for analyzing how a diasporic art form navigates the dialectic of heritage and modernity. While this qualitative study provides depth, its focus was primarily on key urban centers. Future research could build upon these findings through quantitative audience surveys or broader comparative studies. Ultimately, the story of Malaysian Chinese drama in the 21st century is one of creative adaptation. Its continued drive for innovation, despite significant constraints, offers a hopeful vision for its continuity and rejuvenation in a multicultural society.

Reference

- Ang, K. Y. (2023). Rejuvenating Chinese opera through the integration of technology: A qualitative study on Malaysian Chinese youth acceptance (Doctoral dissertation, UTAR).
- Arus, B. B. M. (2024). Exploring the Integration of Chinese Cultural Elements in Opera Stage Architectural Design: A Conceptual Analysis in the Context of Urbanization in Henan, China. *Journal of Digitainability, Realism & Mastery* (DREAM), 3(09), 51-60.
- Chan, P. V., Nagaraj, S., & Freeman, K. S. (2021). Cultural Impact of Chinese Drama towards Malaysian and Chinese Audiences. *International Journal of Social Science Research*, 3(3), 1-10.

- Diamond, C. (2012). *Communities of Imagination: Contemporary Southeast Asian Theatres*. University of Hawaii Press. DOI: 10.21313/hawaii/9780824835842.001.0001
- Hieng, B. K., Hwa, S. P., & Chee, B. C. (2020). Examining the portrayal of Chinese characters in Malaysian contemporary films using textual analysis: Two case studies. *Asian Journal of Arts, Culture and Tourism*, 2(2), 19-32.
- Jingyuan, X., Stark, A., Yusuff, N. A., Yin, J. T. Y., & Wei, Y. (2024). Ethnographic Observation of Cross-Cultural Education of Chinese Students in Malaysia: A Comprehensive Review. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC)*, 9(54): 99-106.
- Johnson, R., & Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Kwong, A. T. M. (2021). Heritage Tourism Ecosystem for Intangible Living Heritage of Traditional Performing Arts At George Town World Heritage Site (Doctoral dissertation).
- Lee, T. S. (2017). Chinese Street Opera Performance and the Shaping of Cultural Aesthetics in Contemporary Singapore. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 34(1), 207-227. DOI: 10.1353/atj.2017.0011
- Liang, B., Hashim, H., & Ahmad, A. L. (2023). The dynamic role of visual arts in Malaysian Chinese films: A study of cultural representation and knowledge transfer within film culture. *Arts Educa*, 37. 1-20.
- Ong, T. W. S., & Said, S. B. (2022). Selective language maintenance in multilingual Malaysia. In *Research Anthology on Bilingual and Multilingual Education* (pp. 558-579). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Siu, G. (2020). Musicalbody: A Study of Malaysian 24 Festive Drums, with Specific Reference to Pan-Asian Performance Theory (Doctoral dissertation, University of Lincoln).
- Su, Y. (2022). The Influence of Ancient Chinese Cultural Classics in Southeast Asia. In *A Study on the Influence of Ancient Chinese Cultural Classics Abroad in the Twentieth Century* (pp. 37-58). Singapore: Springer Singapore.
- Sun, W. H. (2021). The theatre of purgation and the theatre of cultivation: a comparative study of theatre and culture from a Chinese perspective. *TDR*, 65(2), 8-28.
- Tan, S. B. (2019). Performing Arts in Malaysian Chinese Cultural Space. *Asian Music*, 50(2), 3-32. DOI: 10.1353/amu.2019.0013
- Tien, N. I., & Bing, N. C. (2021). Soft Power, Confucius Institute and China's Cultural Diplomacy in Malaysia. *Kajian Malaysia: Journal of Malaysian Studies*, 39(1): 1-15.
- WANG, C. YEAR. From China to Malaysia: Understanding the Cultural and Economic Dynamics of Imported Chinese Films.
- Zakaria, Z., & Hua, A. K. (2024). Exploring the Cultural Tourism of Malaysia: A Comprehensive Review. *Sustainable Environmental Insight*, 1(2), 96-107.