

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN THE PHOR TOR (HUNGRY GHOST) FESTIVAL IN BUKIT MERTAJAM, PENANG

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Abstract

This study explores the role of music in religious ceremonies and ritual practices during the Phor Tor (Hungry Ghost) Festival in Penang. It focuses on two main objectives: first, to analyse the role of music in the festival's religious ceremonies, and second, to explore the cultural and spiritual functions of music in the rituals. Using an ethnomusicological approach, the research involves participatory-observations, interviews, and audio-visual recordings. Data was also collected from the interviews with the Taoist priest and the Teo Chew opera troupe members who perform the rituals during the religious ceremonies. The findings reveal that music plays a vital role in facilitating communication between the human world and the spirit world. Taoist priests use chants during the rituals, while the Teo Chew opera serves both as entertainment and an offering to the spirits. Music not only supports the rituals but also strengthens the cultural traditions and promotes a sense of community. This study highlights the importance of conserving cultural heritage, especially in modern times. It also offers insights that can be incorporated into educational programmes to promote local cultural understanding and appreciation.

Keywords: Hungry Ghost Festival, Ritual Music, Taoist priest, Teo Chew Opera, Ethnomusicology

Abstrak

Kajian ini mengkaji peranan muzik dalam upacara keagamaan dan amalan ritual semasa Perayaan Phor Tor (Hantu Lapar) di Pulau Pinang. Ia menumpukan kepada dua objektif utama. Pertama, untuk menganalisis peranan muzik dalam upacara keagamaan Perayaan Phor Tor, dan kedua, untuk menerokai fungsi budaya dan spiritual oleh muzik dalam amalan-amalan ritual tersebut. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan etnomuzikologi yang melibatkan pemerhatian kajian lapangan, temu bual, dan rakaman audio-visual. Data dikumpulkan daripada paderi Taoist dan kumpulan opera Teo Chew yang membuat persembahan-

persembahan ritual tersebut. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa muzik memainkan peranan penting dalam membantu perhubungan komunikasi antara dunia realiti dan dunia makhluk halus. Paderi Taoist menggunakan bacaan doa dalam ritual, manakala opera Teo Chew berfungsi sebagai hiburan serta persembahan kepada roh. Muzik bukan sahaja menyokong amalan ritual dalam perayaan malah menguatkan perhubungan kebudayaan dan komuniti. Kajian ini mempunyai implikasi penting untuk kelestarian budaya dan tradisi, terutamanya dalam dunia moden. Ia juga boleh digunakan dalam program-program pendidikan demi memupuk pemahaman dan penghargaan terhadap kebudayaan tempatan.

Kata Kunci: Perayaan Hantu Lapar, Pulau Pinang, ritual, Pendeta Taoist, Opera Teo Chew, Etnomuzikologi

INTRODUCTION

The Phor Tor Festival, also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival, is a significant cultural and spiritual event celebrated by Chinese communities during the seventh lunar month. According to Chinese folk beliefs, as well as Taoist, and Buddhist traditions, the festival focuses on honouring ancestors and appeasing wandering spirits known as "Good Brothers" (好兄弟, *hǎo xiōng dì*), who may bring misfortune if neglected (Tan, 1988; DeBernardi, 2006).

The Phor Tor festival in Bukit Mertajam (BM), renowned for its large-scale participation, features the state of Penang's largest paper effigy of *Tai Su Yeah* (大士爷, *Dà Shì Yé*, King of Hades). Music plays an essential role in the festival's rituals, facilitating communication between the living and spiritual realms. Traditional Chinese music, chants, and instrumental ensembles establish the atmosphere, guide ceremonial activities, and ensure spiritual appeasement during the Phor Tor Festival. These elements serve both cultural and spiritual functions, enhancing the rituals and maintaining the community's connection to spiritual practices (Picard, 2017; Yan, 2023). Despite the importance of music in the Phor Tor Festival, there is limited research on its specific role and impact in the festival's rituals. Examining these aspects can deepen our understanding of the festival's cultural and spiritual significance, contributing to its conservation.

Figure 1

The hungry ghost festival: Paper effigy of Tai Su Yeah



(Source: Field Study, 2024)

The objectives of this research are: firstly, to analyse the role of music in ritual practices in the Phor Tor Festival's religious ceremonies; and secondly, to explore the cultural and spiritual functions of music in the Phor Tor Festival's ritual. The research seeks to answer the following questions: What is the role of music in the ritual practices of the Phor Tor Festival's religious ceremonies in BM? How does music contribute to the cultural and spiritual functions in the Phor Tor Festival's rituals?

Although this study focuses on BM and one festival season, it provides information for future comparative studies across different regions in Malaysia and other parts of the world where the Chinese live. As the celebration differs from place to place and over time, the study also imparts valuable data for further studies on the historical evolution of the music and the form.

This research holds significant importance for the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) by supporting cultural conservation, academic research, and comprehensive education. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights into ethnomusicology and the study of

music in ritual, enriching academic literature in these fields. Understanding the role of music in community rituals also helps develop educational programmes that promote social harmony and inclusivity, aligning with the Ministry's broader educational objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework for this research incorporates concepts from ethnomusicology and ritual theory, offering a comprehensive lens to examine the musical traditions of the Phor Tor Festival. Ethnomusicology, a field that studies the cultural, and musical dimensions of music across different societies, provides essential insights into how music influences and is influenced by the rituals and practices of the festival. This approach emphasizes the significance of music in cultural expression and social identity (Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 2015). According to Becker (2004, p. 60), the concept emphasizes that *“music not only reflects culture but also creates pathways for emotional engagement and trance-like states during religious practices.”* This highlights how music serves both as a cultural expression and as a means to evoke profound emotional and spiritual experiences in ritual contexts.

DeBernardi (2006, p. 52) accentuates the significance of immersive ethnographic methods, noting that these methods allow researchers to *“capture the nuanced interactions between ritual and community.”* DeBernardi's ethnographic approach stresses how religious rituals and popular cultural practices intertwine, providing a valuable framework for understanding the social and cultural dimensions of the Phor Tor Festival.

Ritual theory, which explores the symbolic and performative dimensions of rituals, is also essential for this research. This theory examines how rituals, including those in the Phor Tor Festival, function to reinforce cultural values, and facilitate communication with the spiritual realm. Victor Turner's concept of the “ritual process” provides a detailed framework, identifying three stages: *“separation, liminality, and reincorporation”* (Turner, 1969, p. 94). *“In the liminal phase, participants enter a transitional state, detached from societal norms, where music enhances the emotional and spiritual depth of the ritual.”*

This allows participants to engage with the ritual's symbolic meanings and connect with the spiritual realm in a heightened, transformative experience" (Turner, 1969, p.94). In the context of the Phor Tor Festival, music helps to create a spiritual atmosphere, to guide ceremonial activities, and to facilitate communication with the spirit world. Traditional Chinese music and chants are not merely performance elements but are central to the ritual's efficacy and spiritual resonance.

Furthermore, Bruno Nettl's work in ethnomusicology illuminates the importance of understanding music within its cultural contexts. Nettl argues that music should be studied not just as an art form but as a practice that reflects and shapes the beliefs and values of a community (Nettl, 2015). This perspective is particularly relevant to the Phor Tor Festival, where music plays a crucial role in the community's religious and cultural life. Nettl's focus on participant observation and immersive fieldwork aligns with the methodologies employed in this research, reinforcing the value of direct engagement with the festival's participants.

In her study of the Phor Tor Festival in Penang in the 1980s, Tan (1988), emphasizes that the festival had created a sense of *communitas* and brought the different types of Chinese who were normally divided by language, class, and religion together to pray, see shows, listen to music, and eat together publicly. Over one hundred celebrations that took place in the different streets also provided an opportunity for Chinese education and cultural activists, and politicians to raise funds for the building of Chinese schools, hospitals, and the Town Hall. They spoke about the necessity of conserving Chinese culture and education at the festival.

By integrating frameworks from ethnomusicology and the study of rituals, this research aims to provide a holistic understanding of the Phor Tor Festival's musical functions. This framework allows for a detailed analysis of how music operates within the festival's cultural and spiritual contexts, highlighting its multifaceted roles in enhancing ritual performance and preserving cultural heritage. The combination of these theoretical perspectives ensures a thorough examination of the Phor Tor Festival's music, contributing to the broader academic discourse on the interplay between music, ritual, and culture. This intersecting approach not only enhances our understanding of the

Phor Tor Festival but also contributes to the conservation and appreciation of this important cultural heritage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses methods from ethnomusicology to study the role of music in the Phor Tor Festival's rituals and performances. The primary methods include participant observation, interviews, and audio-visual recordings. This approach provides a deep understanding of how music influences the festival and contributes to its overall atmosphere and significance. Ethnomusicology, as described by Bruno Nettl, emphasizes the importance of studying music within its cultural context. This means looking at how music functions and how it relates to the cultural processes (Nettl, 2015). By using ethnomusicological methods, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Phor Tor Festival's musical traditions and their role within the festival's rituals and spiritual practices.

Population / Sample

The study focuses on individuals involved with Pertubuhan Perayaan Yu Lan Bukit Mertajam, including the Taoist priests, as well as the agent and performers of the Chinese opera troupe. These participants provided diverse perspectives on the festival's musical traditions, offering a comprehensive understanding of how music is integrated into the Phor Tor festival's rituals.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection process began with participant observation. The researchers attended the festival, observing musical performances and rituals firsthand. This immersive approach allows for a detailed understanding of how music shapes the festival's atmosphere and guides its ceremonies. Participant observation is a key method in ethnomusicology, allowing the researchers to experience the cultural and social context of music directly. By being present at the festival,

the researchers could see how music interacted with other elements of the rituals and how it influenced the participants.

Next, structured interviews were conducted with the Taoist priests, the agent and the performers of the Chinese opera troupe. These interviews gathered personal insights and experiences regarding the significance of music in the festival. The interviews were designed to capture a wide range of perspectives, from the spiritual practices of the Taoist priests to the performers' interpretations. Alan Merriam (1964), emphasizes the importance of interviews in ethnomusicological research, as they provide direct accounts from those actively involved in the musical traditions being studied.

Audio-visual recordings were made of the music and performances during the festival. These recordings provided valuable materials for analysing the musical elements and their contexts within the festival. By capturing the live sound and visual dynamics of the performances, the researcher studied how the music interacted with other ritual components. Nettl (2015) points out that audio-visual recordings are crucial in ethnomusicology for documenting and analysing music within its cultural setting. Such recordings not only enhance understanding but also provide a rich context for the study of musical practices.

Procedure of Data Analysis

Systematic data analysis was then carried out. First, interview recordings and field notes from participant observations were transcribed. This ensured that all verbal and observational data were accurately captured for analysis. Thematic analysis was then used to identify patterns and themes related to the role of music in the festival. This involved coding the transcribed data to identify recurring motifs and insights into how music contributed to the festival's spiritual and cultural significance.

Additionally, an ethnomusicological analysis was conducted. This involved examining the music's structure, the context of its performance, and its cultural significance. The researchers studied the types of instruments used, the musical styles performed, and how these elements enhanced the festival's rituals. Bruno Nettl's approach to ethnomusicology emphasizes understanding music in its broader

social and cultural contexts, which is essential for this analysis (Nettl, 2015).

Furthermore, Merriam's model of ethnomusicological research, which includes studying music as culture, guided this research. Merriam (1964), states the importance of examining music within its social and cultural context, aligning with the goals of this study. By using Merriam's model, the researcher investigated how music is a cultural practice that reflects and shapes the community's beliefs and values.

In addition, Victor Turner's insights into the social dynamics of rituals complemented this framework. Turner (1969) explored how music served to reinforce cultural values and facilitate communication within the spiritual realm, providing a richer understanding of the interplay between music and ritual within the Phor Tor Festival.

By using these methods, the research provided a comprehensive understanding of how music influences the Phor Tor Festival, contributing to its cultural and spiritual importance. This detailed approach ensures that the study offers valuable insights into the festival's musical traditions and its broader implications for cultural heritage and community identity. The integration of Bruno Nettl's and Alan Merriam's ethnomusicological methodologies ensures that the research is grounded in a well-established theoretical framework, allowing for a thorough exploration of the festival's music and its significance. Furthermore, Victor Turner's insights into the ritual process enriched the analysis, illustrating how music enhances ritual practices and reinforces community bonds within the festival.

FINDINGS

This study shows the significant role of music in the Phor Tor Festival in BM, where two distinct types of music were utilized: the chanting of Taoist priests and performances by the Chinese Teo Chew Opera Troupe. These musical genres are strategically integrated into the festival's sequence of rituals, with each serving a specific purpose. The chanting by Taoist priests primarily supports the spiritual aspects of the rituals, facilitating communication with the supernatural realm, while the Teo Chew Opera provides entertainment for both the living community and the spirits. Together, these musical forms contribute to

the festival's overall success, balancing both spiritual and cultural functions.

Role of Taoist Priests and Ritual Music in the Phor Tor Festival

According to an interview with a Taoist priest, Mr. Chan Huan Seng (曾焕圣), he explains that Taoist priests play an important role in the Phor Tor Festival as they conduct ritualistic ceremonies that facilitate communication between the community and both divine beings and wandering spirits (also known as Good Brothers). These spirits are believed to be souls who have passed away tragically and who did not receive proper ancestral offerings. The priests' use of ritual music plays a key role in creating a spiritual atmosphere, which is important for successfully communicating with these spirits. At Bukit Mertajam, the Phor Tor Festival spans 15 days, with Taoist priests conducting rituals daily. These rituals follow three main stages which are the Lighting Ceremony (开光, *Kāi guāng*) & Awakening the Spirit (启灵, *qǐ líng*), Pacifying the Spirits (安神, *ān shén*) and Offering to the Good Brothers (布施好兄弟, *bù shī hǎo xiōng dì*). Each stage is enhanced through the use of music, chants, and symbolic actions that guide both the wandering spirits and the community through the rites

Table 1
Structure and the Role of Ritual Music in the Phor Tor Festival

Ritual Stage	Description	Music's Role
The Lighting Ceremony & Awakening the Spirit	A ceremony to awaken spiritual energy, starting the festival.	Ritual instruments like copper bells and chanting invoke spiritual forces.
Pacifying the Spirits	Rituals designed to calm wandering souls and ensure peace.	Rhythmic chanting and instrumental music guide the spirits.
Offering to the Good Brothers	Daily offering of food to wandering spirits to ensure peace and prevent disruption.	Use of bells and cymbals directs spiritual focus toward offerings.

The effigy of *Tai Su Yeah*, a central figure in the Phor Tor Festival, is set up on the first day of the 7th lunar month. *Tai Su Yeah* is believed to protect and oversee the wandering souls during the festival. The Taoist priest conducts the Lighting Ceremony (开光, *kāi guāng*) to "awaken" the effigy by filling it with spiritual presence. This act transforms the effigy into a channel for divine power, allowing devotees to pray to it for blessings of peace and health. The ritual is performed with copper hand bells (铜三清铃, *tóng sān qīng líng*), cymbals (钹, *bó*), and chanting, transforming the effigy into a medium for divine blessings. The rhythmic sounds of the bells and chanting are the main elements that ensure the success of the effigy's "awakening" as per Taoist practices, where music acts as a bridge between the spiritual and human worlds.

Figure 2

The Taoist priest chants and plays the bell



(Source: Field Study, 2024)

Throughout the 15-day festival, the Taoist priests lead daily rituals, including chanting, playing ritual instruments, and distributing food offerings to calm and satisfy the wandering souls. The chanting

during these rituals is rhythmic and accompanied by instruments such as the copper bell and cymbals, which help create a calm soundscape for the ceremonies. It is also believed that the chants can help to guide the wandering spirits to find peace and to maintain the spiritual efficacy of the rituals. This ritual of pacifying the spirits is sometimes referred to as *chāo dù* (超度), meaning "to transcend or surpass," guiding the souls beyond suffering and helping them find peace in the afterlife. As Picard (2017) highlights, in Chinese ritual practices, music is recognized as being able to move devotees from the spiritual to the entertainment world.

Offerings to the Good Brothers (布施好兄弟, *bù shī hǎo xiōng dì*), include food such as roasted pig, buns (*migu*), biscuits, and *buah rambai* to symbolize abundance and ensure that these spirits are satiated. This ceremony goes beyond symbolic gestures; it embodies the Taoist belief in compassion and care for wandering spirits, ensuring that the latter are not left in hunger. The act of throwing food during this ritual is called *shī shí* (施食), which means "offering food," symbolizing the act of providing nourishment to wandering spirits. In addition to food offerings, other objects used during the rituals hold deep symbolic significance. *Buak cao* (抹草 *Desmodium Caudatum*), a plant believed to have purifying properties, is placed in a cup of water to cleanse negative energies and unseen spiritual impurities. Additionally, the priest reads from a *qiu so* (手疏, *qiū shū*), a text that lists the names of those participating in the prayers and the items being offered. The *qiu so* is read out each morning to ask for blessings of peace, health, and prosperity for the community and to guide the wandering souls toward peace.

The interactive element in rituals is the call and response between the Taoist priest and the devotees. For instance, during the prayer, the priest proclaims blessings such as peace or health, to which the devotees respond with "Okay" or "Good" (好, *hǎo*). This participation enhances the spiritual experience and reinforces the effectiveness of the rituals. The vocal involvement represents more than just joining in; it reflects a collective wish for blessings and protection.

The Taoist priests' role in the Phor Tor Festival is essential to maintain the spiritual and cultural significance of the event. Through ritual music, chanting, and symbolic acts, the priests guide both the wandering souls and the community, ensuring the festival's success in

bringing peace, health, and prosperity to the living. Music and ritual objects play significant roles in these ceremonies, not only enhancing the atmosphere but also facilitating communication with the spiritual world. This dynamic interaction between sound, ritual, and community highlights the importance of Taoist music in preserving the spiritual efficacy of the Phor Tor Festival.

Role of Chinese Teo Chew Opera in the Phor Tor Festival

The Teo Chew opera troupe's performance is one of the offerings meant to appease wandering spirits and honour deities. It serves both a religious and cultural function, blending ritualistic practices with entertainment. According to Mr. Chew Choon Chuan (周俊全), the agent for the troupe performing at the BM Phor Tor celebration, three Teo Chew opera troupes from Bangkok, Thailand, were brought in for the 15-day celebration. This decision was made due to the cost-effectiveness of Thai troupes compared to those from China.

The Teo Chew Opera serves dual purposes: it provides entertainment for the living community and is an offering to the wandering spirits. Performances of traditional Teo Chew opera are held throughout the festival, particularly in the evening, attracting large crowds from the local community. These performances are seen as a form of worship and respect toward the spirits of the deceased, who are believed to enjoy the sights and sounds of the operatic displays. The cultural significance of Teo Chew opera lies in its function as a bridge between the human and spirit worlds. The performances are often held in outdoor stages near the festival site, with the first row of seats left empty to symbolize reserved seating for the wandering spirits. The combination of live music, intricate costumes, and storytelling offers the spirits entertainment and honour.

Figure 3

The Teo Chew Opera performance: story of Sì Láng Hui Mǔ (四郎会母)



(Source: Field Study, 2024)

The inclusion of Teo Chew opera in the Phor Tor Festival is not only for entertainment; it also holds spiritual significance. It is believed that the Good Brothers find joy in these performances, and the music serves as a way to keep them entertained, thereby reducing any potential for disruption or harm. By offering music in the form of opera, the living community members show their respect for the spirits and receive protection from bad fortune.

Table 2
Structure and the Role of Teo Chew Opera Performance in the Phor Tor Festival

Performance Section	Content & Structure	Role & Significance
Opening Act	Composed of five main segments:	Represents blessings of prosperity (五福, <i>wǔ fú</i>), longevity, offspring, and honour. Each act reflects a prayer for good fortune for the community and spirits.
	1. <i>Tang Ming Huang Cleansing the Stage</i> (唐明皇净棚, <i>Táng Míng Huáng Jìng Péng</i>)	
	2. <i>Eight Immortals Celebrate Longevity</i> (八仙贺寿, <i>bā xiān hè shòu</i>)	
	3. <i>Fairy Maiden Bringing a Child</i> (仙姬送子, <i>Xiān Jī Sòng Zǐ</i>)	
	4. <i>Jumping the Official's Hat</i> (跳加冠, <i>Tiào Jiā Guān</i>)	
Main Story	5. <i>Reunion in the Capital</i> (京城会, <i>Jīng Chéng Huì</i>)	Engages both the living and the spirits through storytelling. Each performance serves to honour the spirits and offer a shared cultural experience with the audience.
	Traditional stories chosen based on requests from the community, including famous tales such as:	
	• <i>The Orphan of Zhao</i> (赵氏孤儿, <i>Zhào Shì Gū'ér</i>)	
	• <i>Three Scholars from One Family</i> (一门三进士, <i>Yī Mén Sān Jìn Shì</i>)	
	• <i>Borrowing a Sword</i> (借剑, <i>Jiè Jiàn</i>)	
	• <i>Autumn Rain in Xiaoxiang</i> (潇湘秋雨, <i>Xiāo Xiāng Qiū Yǔ</i>)	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Si Lang visits His Mother</i> (四郎会母 <i>Sì Láng Huì Mǔ</i>) 	
Closing Act	Final performance typically involves the Eight Immortals celebrating and thanking the deities. Performers thank deities and spirits for their presence and blessings. The troupe says farewell and receives blessings to perform elsewhere.	The farewell ceremony marks the end of the festival, where the opera troupe bids farewell, symbolizing the closing of the spiritual and physical connection.

Table 2 outlines the structure and role of Teo Chew opera performances during the Phor Tor Festival. The performance is divided into three main sections: (i) the opening act, featuring five segments symbolizing blessings of prosperity, longevity, offspring, and honour; (ii) the main story, where traditional tales are performed; and (iii) the closing act, in which the performers express gratitude to the deities and spirits, marking the end of the festival and the farewell of the opera troupe.

On the final day of the Phor Tor Festival, before the symbolic send-off and burning of *Tai Su Yeah*, the Teo Chew opera presents a traditional Closing Act. The final performance typically features the episode known as the Eight Immortals Celebrate Longevity (八仙贺寿, *bā xiān hè shòu*), where the Eight Immortals offer thanks to the deities for their blessings and presence throughout the festival. This final act is a symbolic gesture of gratitude, as the opera performers express their farewell to the deities and spirits, receiving blessings for their future performances elsewhere. Unlike the earlier performances on the stage, the Closing Act takes place on the ground, as the stage has been removed to make way for the procession of *Tai Su Yeah's* effigy. Performed on the floor in the middle of the *Yu Lan Square* (盂兰广场), the actors are surrounded by the community and devotees. This unique setting allows the crowd to fully participate and witness the final ritual up close. The farewell ceremony, therefore, not only marks the closing of the festival but also symbolizes the end of the spiritual and physical connection. The effigy is moved out of the square with the accompaniment of chanting and ritual music by the Taoist priest, and towards the crossroads where it will be sent off, ensuring that the

wandering souls return to the underworld and leave the community in peace.

The music ensemble used in the opera is divided into two categories: the civil ensemble and the military ensemble. The civil ensemble, also known as *Wen Chang Yue Qi* (文场乐器), is traditionally referred to as the "Dragon Section". The military ensemble or *Wu Chang Yue Qi* (武场乐器), was known as the "Tiger Section". Each section and the role of the instrument is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3
Roles of Instruments used in Wen Chang Yue Qi (civil ensemble) and Wu Chang Yue Qi (military ensemble) in the Teo Chew Opera

Ensemble	Instruments	Description and Role of the Instrument
<i>Wen Chang Yue Qi</i>	<i>Yang Qin</i> (扬琴)	A hammered dulcimer that produces light, gentle tones. It is often used for soft and melancholic melodies, suitable for emotional or reflective scenes in the opera.
	<i>Er Hu</i> (二胡)	A two-stringed bowed instrument capable of producing highly expressive and emotive sounds. It is often used to portray sorrow or melancholy performance.
	<i>Dua Gou</i> (大鼓)	The big drum, used to emphasize major dramatic actions or pivotal moments in a performance.
<i>Wu Chang Yue Qi</i>	<i>Diong Gou</i> (中鼓)	A middle-sized drum that balances the larger and smaller drums, filling in rhythmic gaps and creating a fuller sound.
	<i>Suei Gou</i>	A smaller drum that adds

(小鼓)	rhythmic texture and contrast, complementing the larger drum's rhythm.
<i>Dua Kok</i> (大木)	A wooden block idiophone, struck with two wooden sticks to accentuate transitions between scenes or dramatic points.
<i>Tiak Bang</i> (拍板)	Clappers used to accompany the beats, especially during fast-paced scenes or moments involving rapid movement or dialogue.
<i>Dua Boak</i> (大钹)	Large cymbals with a deep, resonant tone, used to create powerful and dramatic soundscapes. The size of the cymbals can vary depending on the scene's intensity.
<i>Boak Gia</i> (小钹)	Small cymbals producing sharp, crashing sounds. These are often used to highlight sudden movements or actions, contributing to the dramatic feel of military scenes.
<i>Chim Bo</i> (沉波)	A deep-sounding gong used during moments of dramatic tension. Their deep resonance portrays suspense in the performance.
<i>Kek Lo</i> (曲锣)	The drama gong, known for its wide, metallic resonance. It creates an ominous or atmospheric sound, commonly used in scenes of dramatic or theatrical actions.
<i>Lo Gia</i> (锣仔)	Smaller gong played alongside the larger gongs to create a layered, harmonious sound. These gongs add higher-pitched

tones to complement the deeper
gongs like Chim Bo and Kek Lo.

The civil ensemble primarily uses chordophones (stringed instruments) and aerophones (wind instruments). These instruments are suitable for accompanying emotional scenes, such as dialogues or moments of sadness. The instruments used include *Yang Qin* and *Er Hu*. The civil ensemble plays a significant role in creating a calm or sentimental atmosphere, complementing the opera characters' dialogues and emotional expressions.

The military ensemble consists of idiophones (percussion instruments that are struck or shaken) and membranophones (drums). These instruments play a critical role in shaping the emotional landscape of the performance, especially during dramatic scenes, such as battle sequences or tense moments. The drum set, led by the *Si gu* (司鼓, the main drummer), serves as the backbone of the military ensemble. The coordination of drums, cymbals and gongs ensures that the rhythm of the performance remains steady and synchronized with the movements and actions of the actors on stage. While the military ensemble often highlights the exciting parts of the opera, it also serves important functions. For example, it marks the start of a performance or a ritual by creating a special atmosphere with the rhythmic beating of drums and crashing of cymbals, signaling that the show is about to begin. The ensemble also announces danger or important events during the performance; the loud sounds from the drums and gongs alert the audience to pay attention. Additionally, the precise rhythm of the ensemble enhances the actors' movements and expressions, making the performance more engaging and immersive, where the music and acting work together.

Figure 4

The military ensemble with the instruments Dua Gou, Dua Kok, Suei Gou, Diong Gou, Lo Gia, Kek Lo, Chim Bo, Dua Boak



(Source: Field Study, 2024)

Figure 5

The civil ensemble with the instruments Yang Qin and Er Hu.



(Source: Field Study, 2024)

To summarise, the distinction between the civil ensemble and the military ensemble in Teo Chew opera is crucial to the overall structure of the performance. Each ensemble has its own unique set of instruments and serves different narrative and emotional purposes. The music and performance elements of the opera create a sense of ritual theatre, wherein the audience becomes part of the spiritual world, engaging both consciously and unconsciously with the spirits who are believed to be present. This blending of theatricality and spirituality reinforces the concept that the festival is a community-wide effort to engage with the metaphysical world, bringing protection and blessings to the living.

SUGGESTIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

This research has provided useful insights into the role of music in the Phor Tor Festival, but there are areas where further study could improve our understanding. Future research could compare how the Phor Tor Festival is celebrated in different regions or communities. This could help us see how the music and rituals may differ and show different cultural interpretations of the festival. Another suggestion is to explore other forms of art, like visual elements, that are used alongside music during the festival. Studying these together would give a fuller picture of how they all work to create the spiritual and cultural atmosphere of the event.

It would also be useful to look at how modernization and globalization are affecting the festival's music. As the Phor Tor Festival changes over time, studying how younger generations engage with the music could show if they are keeping the traditional styles or adapting them in new ways. This would help us understand how the traditions are passed down and what might happen to them in the future.

The findings of this study can also help with efforts to conserve cultural heritage. The information can be a guide, keeping the festival alive while encouraging more people to participate. In education, the study can be used to teach about Malaysia's rich cultural traditions, helping younger generations appreciate their heritage. Overall, this research highlights the important role of music in spiritual practices and can help promote cultural conservation and social unity.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that music plays a crucial role in the Phor Tor Festival's religious ceremonies, functioning as a key element in both ritual practices and spiritual communication. The chanting by Taoist priests facilitates spiritual communication, ensuring that wandering souls receive the necessary offerings and, in return, bestow blessings upon the devotees and the community. Meanwhile the Teo Chew opera serves as both an entertainment and a ritualistic offering to the spirits. These two musical elements create a spiritual atmosphere that ensures the success of the festival's ceremonies.

This study shows that music not only supports spiritual communication but also helps to conserve cultural traditions. The research highlights how music enhances the rituals by fostering a sense of community among participants. These findings point to the need for further exploration of how music strengthens both the religious practices and bonds among the participants. Overall, music is a vital part of the Phor Tor Festival, ensuring its spiritual success and bringing blessings to those who participate.

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