

An Interview with Mr Toh Lim Mok – Nam Hwa Opera Ltd

Nam Hwa Opera Ltd - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award 2020



Nam Hwa Opera

Image Credit: National Heritage Board

Culture Academy Congratulations to Nam Hwa Opera Ltd for receiving the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award! Please introduce yourself and your role in Nam Hwa Opera for our readers.

Toh Lim Mok I am Toh Lim Mok, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Directors cum President/CEO of the Management Committee, serving as a volunteer in both positions in Nam Hwa Opera Ltd, (NHO) I was invited to join NHO in 2013 when it was still a registered society, as its Organizing Chairman to celebrate its 50th anniversary. After this successful event was over, I was tasked to transform it into a private company limited by guarantee. I did more than that. I applied for it to be registered as a charity and furthermore, with Institute of Public Character (IPC) status to let our cash donors enjoy tax exemption. The new company's principal activities were to preserve, promote, rejuvenate, develop and advance the Teochew arts, culture and music as a heritage, for enjoyment and appreciation. The company was officially incorporated on 17th February 2015.

Culture Academy Tell us about Nam Hwa Opera's history and vision. What do you guys do and what sets you apart?

Toh Lim Mok	<p>NHO was founded in 1963 by avid fans of Teochew Opera. Now, 57 years' later in 2020, it has grown into one of Singapore's most prominent troupe with prolific Teochew Opera performances by varying levels of competence of its members, from as young as 3 years old to above 70 years old! NHO's mission is to preserve, develop and promote traditional Teochew Opera as an important heritage of Singapore. NHO also set up the Nam Hwa Teochew Music Ensemble to provide live music accompaniment to its performers, especially in full length opera performances for heightened sound effect and enjoyment.</p> <p>As a non-profit company, NHO is supported by the National Arts Council under the Major Company Scheme from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2023.</p> <p>NHO's greatest pride is in being awarded by National Heritage Board its inaugural "The Stewards of Singapore's Intangible Cultural Heritage Award" in 2020. This is the first time in the history of Singapore that the National Heritage Board (NHB) has recognised the efforts of individuals and organisations in preserving and promoting traditional arts and culture in Singapore.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>What role does the Yeo Khee Lim Teochew Culture Research Centre play in Teochew Opera?</p>
Toh Lim Mok	<p>Yeo Khee Lim Teochew Culture Research Centre (YKL) is a resource hub set up by NHO to research into all culture with Teochew content, such as opera, music, customs and practices, cuisine, arts, craft, calligraphy, paintings and miscellaneous others in order to preserve and promote them to the younger generations and to aid in the development of Singapore-style Teochew opera. YKL also plays an archival role. It digitalized vinyl records of all Teochew operas performed by pioneers and veterans in the Teochew opera industry from regional countries, such as China, Hong Kong and Thailand and also locally. It also has a huge stock of books, magazines, posters and publicity materials that lets one gleam into the history and practices of Teochew opera troupes in the bygone days. Browsing into one such magazine reporting on Teochew opera in Singapore will let us learn more about past practices and aid us to improve our ways to attract younger generations to be interested in Teochew arts and culture and operas.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>Nam Hwa Opera have incorporated new elements (such as martial arts) into its repertoire. What is your creative process?</p>
Toh Lim Mok	<p>In addition to using martial arts, NHO also employed LED technology to create moving sceneries in the background. The versatility and other creative elements were all planned to engage younger audience to arouse their interests in Teochew opera which has always been perceived to be old fashion and dry and to let older audience see the capability and changes that could be introduced into classical Teochew operas. The processes were never easy and required much brainstorming to see how to present the story effectively without losing Teochew opera flavor. Nevertheless, through trials and errors, we made it! We hit upon the right script, the right director, music composer and song writer, performers, etc,</p>

	and most importantly, having adequate funding to make it happened. As they say, the rest is history! This creativity has actually been widely reported overseas, especially in China and some in the Teochew opera industry there, we understand, have begun to embrace our pioneer concepts.
Culture Academy	How have overseas collaborations helped to refine, improve, and develop Nam Hwa Opera’s performances?
Toh Lim Mok	Arts that are rich in heritage did not originate from Singapore alone, especially Teochew operas which originated from China with a huge population of people of Teochew descent. Having overseas collaborations widened our scope of operations as we can then tapped upon talents in abundance. We are enriched by the knowledge and practices of overseas practitioners of the same art and such cultural exchanges is necessary for our performers to learn and understand how to improve their performing skills, singing technique, etc.
Culture Academy	The Covid-19 pandemic have push performing arts towards digitalization. What are some challenges that you’ve faced with digitalizing opera?
Toh Lim Mok	We were exploring how to strengthen our presence in social media and to widen our audience base before COVID-19. When the circuit breaker was implemented in April 2020, we took that as a point of no return to significantly raise and intensify our social media presence. We are in fact glad that COVID-19 pandemic has given us the rare opportunity to quicken our performance virtually. We were able to reach out to audience around the world simultaneously without fearing time differences, instead of being restricted to physical audience who are in turn limited by the number of seats, venues and manpower available. Digitalization allows us to archive all online performances for repeat broadcast much more easily. However, our greatest challenge is lack of tickets collection, shortage of skilled personnel and high production costs
Culture Academy	How does Nam Hwa Opera reach out to younger audiences? What are some of your challenges with reaching out to the youth?
Toh Lim Mok	In the Singapore context, the Teochew dialect is no longer spoken even within our own family. As a result, watching traditional dialect opera and understanding the story are uphill tasks. To overcome these, we included contents that have Singapore elements, telling our Singapore story. We also included Chinese and English subtitles to let our audience understand better the story that was being told and played out. We reach out to all levels of the population through public performance at community clubs and theatres. We organize holiday camps, workshops for children and anyone who is curious to demonstrate artistic skills, costume and make ups and props. We go to schools: tertiary, secondary, primary and preschool, to attract them, to build up their interests in traditional opera.

<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>How does Teochew opera help transmit traditional culture and values to younger audiences?</p>
<p>Toh Lim Mok</p>	<p>Teochew opera has close to 600 years of history in Shantou, China. For the stories to be attractive and catch the attention of its audience, they must revolve around people, the good, the bad, the wicked, the just, the hardworking, the lazy, the ambitious, the loyal or the cunning people, etc. Operas therefore subtly teach people these important values, chief of which would be loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, courtesy, justice and shame (忠孝, 仁爱, 礼仪, 廉耻).</p> <p>Operas are therefore the most effective means of transmitting these important moral values and subconsciously act as guidelines for people to behave and conduct themselves in life and society, making them better and enriched culturally.</p>
<p>Culture Academy</p>	<p>What does the term 'intangible culture' mean to you? And what are some aspects of Singapore's intangible culture that you value most?</p>
<p>Toh Lim Mok</p>	<p>Culture is a practice that carries on from generation to generation because people see its value and desire to practice it. It is about people and the way they do certain things that their forefathers have done, they do themselves and their younger generation also follow suit as they see value in doing things in that certain way. It is also intangible as it cannot be seen physically but is a state of being. As Singapore is a migrant society with multi-racial population, it is important for the Singapore Government to recognize the efforts that each community has put in to preserve and promote its own traditional practices which they desire to pass on to future generations as their cultural heritage.</p> <p>After many years of planning, hard work, and having received strong support from the Teochew community, receiving this award is a fruition, a clear indication that our Teochew opera is viewed as a desirable culture worthy of our continued efforts to preserve it as an intangible culture for future generations. The intangible culture that I value most is to appreciate that life goes on from generation to generation, that we must have the foresight, wisdom and the determination to visualize a better future that benefits from the hard work of its predecessors, to make the vision a reality and to garner like-minded people to share the same vision and achieve it!</p>