

# Chinese Street Opera in Singapore

FRANCIS REID at a *Wayang*

The high rise apartment blocks of Singapore are as functional as elsewhere in the world. Yet they lack much of the bleakness that seems to be an inevitable feature of today's low-cost high-saturation housing. The reason is environmental rather than architectural: in Singapore, vegetation grows luxuriously but under strict control. So the approaches to housing estates and the communal areas between their blocks have little of that suggestion of urban blight which is a feature of so many cities where the climate is cooler and the landscape owes more to concrete than to horticulture.

Consequently the rectangle enclosed by apartments makes a good space for the residents to celebrate the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts. During the seventh month of the lunar year, the souls of the dead are released from purgatory to roam the earth. These hungry ghosts are appeased by offerings of food and entertainment. This entertainment is operatic and the banquets are consumed by the opera's sponsors.

The word 'Wayang' is Malay for shadow and, although originally confined to shadow plays, has come to be applied to many forms of staged performance. To Singaporeans of Chinese descent, Wayang has become synonymous with Chinese street opera. During the Feast of the Hungry Moons, many communities hire a street opera company to appease the ghosts and the performance is free to anyone who wishes to attend.

Hailing a taxi with a hopeful *Wayang?*, I found myself in a courtyard contained by rising apartments. It was the 'half' and preparations were moving towards the

climax of curtain time. One end of the space was given over to tables, already laid out and partly occupied. Crates of beverages stood ready and the ladies were engaged in energetic cooking on a grand scale. The inviting smells from the gigantic frying woks mingled with those from the burning joss sticks to add to a special oriental aroma

to the ambience of this 'opera house'. At the other end of the space a stage had been erected. A temporary platform supported on stilts and trestles with flys of lashed timbers encased in tarpaulins and plastic sheeting. But presenting to the audience an elaborate proscenium whose ornate painting conveyed distinct resonances of the facade



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