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Construction of overseas illegal migrants' identity through folk Fujian opera consumption

Abstract: Framed around the theories of Halbwachs, Turner, Bakhtin and Wenger, and contextualized in a case study of Fujian folk opera festival, this paper examines the construction of overseas illegal migrants' identity through the consumption of folk Fujian opera. It argues that as the illegal migrants exist only as 'ghosts' within their host country and lack the opportunity to interact with their adopted community, thriving folk opera offerings from diaspora to home region, act as a key ritual commodity to provide individual diaspora with identity inclusion, and international lineage socio-economic consolidation. Furthermore, folk opera consumption, as a subculture, creates an alternative carnival world, in which the underclass justify their position as rebellious heroes, challenging the official legal social system to gain revival. This paper assists readers to understand the distinctive social and economic function of folk opera in constructing identity for overseas illegal migrants, with a focus placed on Fujian.

Key words: illegal migrants, Fujian, Chinese opera, carnival, ritual economy, identity

Research background

In 2014, a gang fight occurred in Manchester's China Town, UK. Those involved were two groups of illegal migrants from Fujian province, China and the fight was over a long-standing dispute regarding the underground drug trade. Two men received stab wounds, one died and the other was seriously injured. The injured man served a short prison sentence but, with no immigration charges, he remained in the UK. Upon his release, the very first thing that the man did was to send £10,000 back to his family in China. The money was used to hire a local opera troupe to put on a show for ten consecutive days, with invitations extended beyond the village to the entire region. Such an act puzzled many: Why would this man pay such a large sum for an opera show back in China when he was financially struggling and physically

unable to attend? What is the link between Chinese opera and family? What is the significance of Chinese opera consumption to illegal overseas migrant identity construction?

Attempts to understand Chinese overseas illegal migrants developed during the author's profession as a UK National Register Legal Interpreter between 2002 and 2014. During this period the author handled numerous cases, including The Morecambe Bay tragedy, working with the Police, Courts, Immigration, Home Office, and Refugee Centres, with clients being illegal migrants predominantly from Fujian province. Over the years the author developed an interest and a respect for the Fujianese overseas migrants, recognising their determination in surviving as the under-class within their host society. The author also became intrigued by the alternative system that assists the existence of these 'ghosts', which refers to the group which does not hold legal status in a foreign land (Broomfield 2007), enabling many to remain in the host country indefinitely. Theories on how the family, as the core Chinese socio-economic system, provides individual identity inclusion and socio-economic support are well documented; however, what is intriguing is how the concept and practice of family can be extended to, and sustained within, a non-Chinese society, despite the distance and the differing socio-economic and cultural factors present.

The position that folk opera holds in the construction of illegal migrants' identity overseas is largely overlooked by scholars. During involvement in many legal investigation trips to Fujian, the author actively sought out local opera to watch, although it is difficult to source. Folk opera performed for ritual purposes is mostly held in rural and suburban villages, with no modern marketing, such as online advertisement. As most rural peasants do not speak Mandarin Chinese in full, one may easily miss the information when locals excitedly exchange details on times and venues verbally. Fortunately for the author, generous assistance was received over the years from Dr. Yongwei Bai, the Vice Director of Fujian Provincial Arts Research Institute, and his team. Dr. Bai's expertise in Fujian opera provided subject and linguistic knowledge, which was crucial for the collection of first-hand information.

Each village opera performance is a festival on its own, attracting large crowds from near and far. These occasions stand in sharp contrast to the urban theatres struggling for audience, despite consistent party-state financial input. Bai states in conversation:

> 'Once the local opera performance is staged inside a theatre, it becomes false. The aim is to increase folk opera artistic value, but people making these policies forget, or do not know, that the essential social function of folk opera is to ritualistically bind the local communities together … On these occasions, the order of the human society is turned upside down, the human celebrates life with the deities for the very survival of the underclass. No artistic standards could replace such function' (20th July 2016).

For the completion of this paper, the author conducted a month-long field trip to Quanzhou, Fujian province, between June and July 2016, based at Fujian Provincial Arts Research Institute. During this period, I accessed the literature resources in the Research Institute and local libraries and was accompanied to bookstores that specialize in the history of Fujian and Fujian opera. Around twelve local opera viewings were arranged by Dr. Bai across Quanzhou's rural and suburban villages and interviews were conducted with around forty people, including private opera troupe managers - many having family businesses passed on to them - artists, from both urban official troupes and private folk troupes, village leaders, and audience. They form the empirical base of this research.

The vertical family

Ritual economy as family bond in the East Asian coastal region

Family and lineage have long been recognized as the main social and economic unit supporting overseas diaspora, and well-established research materials examine how such structure support overseas emigrants, many focus on illegal migrants (Zhao 2013, Pai 2012, Christiansen 2005, Pieke 2004, Cartier 2002, Yeung 2000, Woon 1984, Watson 1982, Baker 1979, Freedman 1966). In *Chinatown, Europe* (2005), Christiansen states: '(Chinese) illegal

immigrants coming in, there is not one who has begged for food, not one hustling in the streets. The Chinese coming here are relatives, tied by old bonds, kinsfolk summoned by kinsfolk, friends summoned by friends. On arrival, his food and accommodation are taken care of' (153). Pai (2012) follows the victims of the Morecambe Bay tragedy in the UK, tracing their stories back home in Fujian, China, unfolding the economic and social tie that binds the dire fate of both illegal migrants overseas and their family members at home. Zhao in *Financing Illegal Migration: Chinese underground banks and human smuggling in New York city* (2013) further states that: 'at least 95% of Fujianese walking in Chinatown in New York are smuggled from China … despite their dire living conditions abroad, money has been sent home in maximized quantity and, the first and most extravagant sum is spent on ritual activities' (2013: 83-85)'.

'Money to be sent home' is not unusual, after all, it is the family back home, instead of the city, that account for a migrant's socio-economic success (Guang 2005: 499). What is important in Zhao's description is that 'the first and the most extravagant sum is spent on ritual activities', which acts as a unique tie that binds the home family members and the overseas illegal migrants. Ritual activities cover a wide range of activities including gifts, banquets, ceremonies and festivals. Such activities assist to lubricate and consolidate the family and friends' relationships (Yang 2008, Kong 2000). Mayfair Mei-hui Yang in *Ritual Economy and Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics* emphasizes that ritual economy is not only 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics' but the basis of the economic miracle of the 'Four Asian Tigers' (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea) (2008: 233). Scholars also identify that the rigorous ritual activities, as a vibrant economy that developed in coastal regions, were never achieved in the northern and the interior regions of China (Yang 2008, Kong 2000, Watson 1982).

For a total population of just over 30 million, Fujian has twenty different types of regional opera forms providing an average of 50,000 opera performances every year (Bai and Li 2010: 2). In Quanzhou city alone, there are over 50 professional and countless amateur

opera troupes performing across the city and rural countryside; there are around 700 opera performances staged across 500 villages annually. Such vibrant opera performativity is rare in the northern and interior regions of China and acts as a key economic feature of the region. The main funding for opera festivals is obtained from overseas diasporas, many being illegal migrants (private communication, 7th July 2016). Yet, no research has examined how traditional opera has been acting as a key ritual activity, contributing to family and lineage social and economic structure and illegal migrants overseas identity construction. The aim of this paper is to fill the gap.

This paper argues that as illegal migrants exist as 'ghosts' - the underclass with invisible status in their host countries, as they cannot participate in any activity/community event where identification is likely to be required; unable to register with doctors or hospitals, unable to seek assistance from police, unable to vote etc. - the ritual activities play a key socio-economic function at three levels: Firstly to provide individual family identity inclusion, secondly to consolidate a global lineage socio-economic structure, and thirdly, to create a carnival world as a way for the illegal migrants to challenge official domains, gaining temporary renewal and revival. Such opera ritual functions developed through history against the unique coastal geographic, which is applicable to coastal regions in east Asia, and exemplified in the case of Fujian.

Fujian, alternative socio-economic structure in historical context

The concept of Chinese family exists in both horizontal and vertical lines. Horizontally, it extends to the number of male descendants until it becomes a lineage (*zu*). When different lineages all worship the same ancestors and deities, this group is referred to as a clan (*zong*) (He 2011, Xiao 2004). Vertically, family extends to deities and spirits. In the ancient days, when a family member died, he or she would be placed within the ancestral hall for 49 days; only when the flesh begins to fall from the body will the person be buried at the clan burial ground. From then on, ritual ceremonies will be conducted for the family to remember the

deceased, who becomes the protector of the family members. The ancestral hall that hosts the family deities is the most important site for generating and regulating such a unique feeling and constructs a collective family identity (He 2011, Faure 2007, Yu 2005, Xiao 2004, Liu 1997).

Whilst Confucian doctrine has tolerated a spirit based vertical family structure, it never gained full official approval as 'how could one serve deities when one has not served existing family members properly' (quoted in Ebrey 2014: 25, Xu 2013). However, distinctive coastal geo-economic conditions meant that the Fujianese had little choice but to challenge the orthodox and rely on the vertical family for survival.

Fujian locates in south-eastern China where it is surrounded by mountains, apart from the eastern side which opens to the sea. Agricultural space has historically been extremely limited with total farmable land constituting just over 1.5 percent of the Fujian region (Sun 1962: 451). Such a geographical background forced the Fujianese to be adventurous and entrepreneurial, historically taking an outward look towards the sea for their livelihood. Orthodox Confucius doctrines such as 'when parents are alive, one will not travel afar' and the importance of academic achievements for gaining individual and family social status were challenged; the well-known Fujianese proverbs are 'fear not no education, one could do business; fear not no (business) experience, one could learn to invest and make profit' (Pang 2011: 5). With China's conventional social stratus being categorized into four professions, with scholar-officials at the top, followed by the farmers and artisans, with business men at the bottom, such statements directly challenge the accepted social norms, a determination being placed not just upon survival but the desire to thrive.

Fujian's maritime status rose and fell in China's short-lived exploration development. The invention of the compass in the Song dynasty (960-1279) saw the initial rise of the Fujian maritime status, when sailing beyond the immediate Eastern Sea region became possible. China's maritime power rose globally in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when Admiral Zheng He set off on his seven voyages around the world; and Quanzhou, a city of Fujian, was the

major sailing port (Zhuang 2012: 27; Yang 2012: 42). Visitors of Quanzhou continue to be impressed by the city's display of world architecture, from Muslim mosques, Christian churches, and Daoist temples, evidencing Quanzhou as the gateway of China to the world and home of the Maritime superpower, a position which China once held. Unfortunately, with rising piracy, the Ming dynasty made a strategic decision, towards the second half of its ruling period, diverting away from further maritime development. The Qing dynasty (1644-1911) compounded this by banning sea trade and ordering large numbers of Fujianese to migrate to inland provinces.

The implementation of the Maritime ban did not stop the local's maritime life-style but forced them to continue it underground (Pai 2012, Lee and Campbell 2007, Pang 2011, Pieke 2004, Liu 1997). With no legal support, the vertical family allows for identity inclusion, which consolidates the horizontal structure of clan connections throughout the world, supporting the migrants. Historian Bryna Goodman gives the example of his study of native place sentiment and *huiguan* (native place associations) in other cities, which sets forth the located context of identity formation 'these ties were most frequently economic as well as sentimental, for local communities assisted and sponsored individual sojourners' (Goodman 1995: 5). An alternative social economic system based on family and lineage developed to support such transnational migration.

Ritual opera as identity construction

Ritual opera as individual inclusion and lineage overseas consolidation

During my years as a UK legal interpreter, investigators frequently asked clients about the figurines placed in shrines, found in nearly all illegal Fujianese households. When asked about their function, the questioned subjects describe them as deities for protection. These deities are usually vertical family members, or someone who has done good deeds for the family and have therefore become included as a family deity. For example, one migrant questioned by

immigration officers stated that the figurine was a deity named God Wei, worshipped both at home and overseas by the entire lineage of his with the surname 'He'. The story which had been passed down through each head of the lineage was that Wei was once a doctor who saved He family members from the spread of an endemic; consequently, the He family started worshiping Doctor Wei. This figure became a family deity, worshiped in the home village family hall, with copy figurines carried by individuals across the world. In addition to family deities, there are often a number of other deity figures worshiped alongside. The most popular one amongst illegal Fujianese being Guan Gong, a general turned deity figure who serves as a symbol of protection of the weak and the underdogs and as an enhancement for matters righteous such as law and order. Copied figurines of Guan Gong are not only worshiped by individuals overseas, back in Fujian Guan Gong temples attract the highest number of prayers.

In *On The Collective Memory* (1992) Halbwachs states that family identity is not a given but rather it is socially constructed. It is during the family oriented ritual ceremonies that the process of remembering is generated and a 'unique feeling' is produced as: 'the expression of feelings is nevertheless regulated through the structure of the family' (56-57). Stories such as Dr. Wei saving the entire He family, which allowed the expansion of the lineage, is sentimental but does produce a 'unique feeling' to structure the individual identity of a family. The popular figurine of Guan Gong with his reputation for protecting the weak and the underdogs and as an enhancement for matters righteous, such as law and order, provides further 'unique feeling' for the illegal migrants and their associated home family members to believe in an ability to survive. Such 'unique feeling' is further consolidated through opera performances which are inevitably staged in front of the ancestral hall (Zou 2012, Bai and Li 2010, Kiong and Kong 2000).

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) articulates the role of folk opera in constructing family ritual ceremony, recognizing that a distinctive characteristic of folk opera is the location of its performance, which usually takes place inside the family ancestral hall. Such places serve to provide a feeling or quality of commonality where each member looks and is

looked upon as being involved in an I-Thou relationship. This threshold condition thus creating a simultaneous community (97). It in turn reaffirms the construction of Chinese family, both horizontally (lineage) and vertically (deities), and such participation allows individual to confirm a collective memory of the past, and present identity within the theological or cosmological order (Cohen 1972). During Mao's era, from the 1950s to the 1970s many ancestral halls were damaged and ritual practice forbidden. However, since the reform era of the 1980s, local temples and clan halls have been rebuilt and ritual practice revived across the southeast coastal regions.

To understand how overseas illegal migrants identity could be reinforced through opera performance back in front of the home ancestral hall, it is important to understand how an opera show is purchased, or offered, as a ritual product to the deities. Each opera performance is regarded as a present from one family, or a few families, to give offering to the deities. Many lineage books have clearly written requirements for the frequency of opera performances that each generation should follow – at least once a year; there are also details on the prices of opera troupes, the numbers of performers, the style of performance and content (Qiu 2013, Hu 2011). There are two main types of opera offering: Firstly, to celebrate deities' birthdays, which occupy 80% of total performance and are for the occasion of making wishes, asking for protection or thanking the gods for granting their wishes. Secondly, to celebrate a variety of events and good news for a family, such as birthdays, new born babies, acceptance by a university or a prosperous business. This is perceived as the opportunity to show gratitude to the protection the family has received from the deities. There is a further less-celebratory type of opera offering, that seeking redemption following misdemeanour. When an individual commits an act of social disorder, common punishment requires that individuals' family, as a whole are fined by offering the deities an opera performance (Qiu 2013:142). Once the funding is secured, a lineage opera committee, which consists mainly of elderly people, would decide which opera company should be invited and what performance should be staged. It is widely regarded that deities are the primary audience. These invisible

audiences are far more important than the visible audience, as it is viewed as 'a good deed done' to please the gods and goddesses who will in turn give blessing and protection to themselves and even their younger generations (Dean and Zheng 2010).

Although overseas illegal migrants are not able to physically attend the opera performance staged in their home town, they make substantial contribution to such offering (Zhao 2013, private communication 7th July 2016). For example, it is a regular occurrence for UK based illegal migrants to fund opera in their home towns in Fujian for occasions including marriage or new born babies in the UK. On the occasions of marriage, illegal migrants do not have legal status, hence marriage does not have legality in the eyes of British law. This does not seem to be a barrier. Wedding banquets will be held in a local UK restaurant, whilst back in the wedded couples home towns, opera is offered to the deities. Such marriage are legitimate in the eyes of the deities and hence legally recognized by the lineage fellows.

Returning to the episode mentioned at the beginning of this article, the lucky escaper from the Manchester gang fight admitted, in a conversation with the author, that sending money back home to fund ten consecutive days of opera performance, with invitations extended beyond the village to the entire region, was not only an offering to the deities, as gratitude for protection, but also as penitence for the trouble caused to the family deities who have to rebalance the cosmological order. After all, one individual was dead and, although not directly responsible for this fatality, he had been involved in the fighting in which the death had occurred. Malinowski argues in *Magic, Science and Religion* that the festive and public character of the ceremonies is a conspicuous feature of religion in general. Indeed, the solemn conclave of the faithful united in prayer, sacrifice, supplication, or thanksgiving is the very prototype of a religious ceremony. Religion needs the community, as a whole, so that its members may worship in common its sacred things and its divinities, and society needs religion for the maintenance of moral law and order (2014: 54). In other words, 'ancestors, not the individual or a legal entity, are symbolic representations of collective authority and rights. These rights do not come naturally but rather are created and maintained through

manipulations of politico-economic interests on the ground' (Liu 1997: 36). It is through these opera events that illegal migrants gain a clear sense of community identity which in turn consolidates the lineage's socio-economical structure globally.

Opera as carnival, the overturn of the official world, the justified under-class identity

Not only does Fujian opera consumption provide individual family identity and consolidate collective lineage structure, it also plays a key role in reviving and renewing the under-class through a carnival event. Bakhtin (1984) discusses how folk performance has a crucial function as carnival, which embraces ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions, … as a world of carnival, of ceaseless overrunning and excess where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled (10). The concept of defiling is derived at two levels; the occasion when deities are invited equally as human beings to watch the show together and the production of favoured content, where heroes and heroines are rebellious outcasts, forced to exist outside the accepted society by the legitimate legal social system.

Fujian opera is performed first and foremost for the deities. Advertisements for opera performances, when printed on leaflets or in local newspapers, generally state 'all gods and deities welcome' as it is regarded as a good omen to have as many gods and goddesses possible, as well as human beings, to watch an opera (Yang 2010, Ye 2004). This is the occasion when gods and humans are invited together, sitting down alongside each other to enjoy the same performance. Because the performance is an offering to deities, tickets are not sold and funding is through donation or individual sponsorship. In the world of carnival, there is no distinguishing between audience and performers, deities and humans; the awareness of the immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative. It generates an alternative cosmos world for the folks to mock the official world, to celebrate and to renew.

Fujian is a rich source of many opera forms. The most popular ritual opera performed across the region is the palm puppet (*budai muou*), for its low cost and portability: puppets are stored in cloth bags carried on the end of a bamboo pole by the puppeteer to perform within the remotest village or the most crowded city centre. However, it is Gaojia opera or Gaojiaxi that is reserved for the most special occasion and remains the most expensive opera for ritual celebration (Bai and Li 2010). Gaojiaxi derived from peasant's self-entertainment and formed as a full stage performance during the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Its artistic styles focus on marshal fighting and carnival parade, with stories drawn mainly from the classic literature *Water Margin,* based on famous rebels of the Song dynasty (960-1279). In these stories the rebels are portrayed as honest citizens who have been forced by the corrupt government and legal system to take the law into their own hands and are received as heroes by the common people. The lead role is often taken by a clown character to ensure a buzzing festival atmosphere. Gaojiaxi is therefore considered the most appropriate ritual performance, as the official world is mocked, and through laughter the underclass gain renewal and revival.

According to Hall and Jefferson, there are four main modes for the sub-cultural style, and they are dress, argot, music and ritual (1975: 54). In response to dominant culture, which is broadly referred to as the traditions, maps of meanings and ideologies which are patterned responses to structural conditions (Cohen 1972: 5), sub-groups have developed a range of subculture strategies to negotiate and deal with the power struggle, which is often referred to as a 'culture of survival' (MacDonald 1997: 80, Hebdige 1979). As systems of meaning and forms of life styles, subculture is developed by a group in subordinate structural positions, as a response to the ruling system of meaning, which shows their attempts to solve structural controversies generated in a wider social context (Brake 1985: 8). Such occasions are when orders are reversed, deities and humans sit side by side, watching performances together and enjoying the communal celebration as a whole. The ritual offering, in the form of folk opera, from overseas illegal migrants to their home villages, is to revive an alternative world, where

individual outcasts are judged as heroes, in the eyes of folk family members, and ultimately the deities of the cosmological world.

The case of Gaojia opera in celebration of the completion of the lineage ritual hall

On 3rd of June 2016 I was invited to view an opera performance at Xiadai village, Hui'an County, 30 minutes from Quanzhou city by car. As mentioned earlier, Quanzhou city, is where Admiral Zheng He set sail for seven around the world voyages during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when China's maritime power was at its pinnacle (Zhuang 2012: 27; Yang 2012: 42). In 2015, Quanzhou was reconnected with its historical glory when it was assigned the status of a pivot city (the starting point) of the '21st Century China's Belt and Road' geopolitical strategy. This aimed to revive Quanzhou's historical reputation as the gateway of China and once home of a Maritime superpower, as evidence of China's long-standing global superiority. The city has large numbers of low skilled rural peasants and, as with many cities within Fujian province, a high volume of the population have travelled overseas to situate as illegal migrants across the world (Pai 2012, Pang 2011, Kwong 1997).

The occasion was to celebrate the completion of a ritual hall of the 'Zhu' lineage in Xiadai village. It is a typical Fujianese village, where young men and women have mostly left to seek work in urban cities or abroad, with only the elderly and children remaining. According to the head of the Zhu lineage, there are 45 Zhu families in the village, more are scattered all over the world. Thanks to the money sent home from people working away, especially the ones working abroad, mostly illegally, the village living standards have risen. Whilst many families now have five story houses, the rebuilding of ancestral halls has been a popular and important undertaking across the region, for a grand ancestral hall is not only the lineage symbol of status, but also an important act of constructing a sense of collective memory and individual sense of community belonging.

As the completion of an ancestral hall is regarded as a most important occasion, the celebration will last for a full week, with different opera companies performing throughout

day and night. On the first day, the Zhu family invited the Quanzhou State Gaojiaxi Opera Company, the best Gaojia opera company in Fujian, to perform at the opening ceremony. A fee of 7,000 yuan[1] for a two-hour evening performance was paid which, compared to an average 2,000 yuan for a puppet show, was a high price. Interviews with the head of the village and family members revealed that funding for both the ancestral hall rebuild and the opera performance was collected from each family of the Zhu lineage. As always, generous contributions were made by all families, in particularly from the households with family members working illegally abroad.

An open stage was erected directly in front of the newly constructed ancestral hall, which has wooden ceilings and stone walls. Intricate carvings depicting Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist stories cover the building from top to bottom, with interior and exterior walls coated in gold. According to the head of the lineage, the ancestral hall took over two years to complete and cost around 500,000 yuan. The ceremony started with firecrackers, which cost in excess of 10,000 yuan for that night alone. The purpose of the firecrackers was to draw the attention of deities as well as humans, to invite them to join the celebration. The show started with the Taoist Eight Immortal (*baxian*) characters walking onto the stage, each of whom gave a blessing before stepping off the stage one by one and heading to the newly constructed ancestral hall. Once inside the hall, each of the Eight Immortals bowed and offered incense sticks to family ancestors and deities, asking for their blessing and protection for the entire lineage. After the immortal characters had returned to the stage, fireworks were once again set off. The evening performance had formally commenced.

The performance that the Quanzhou State Gaojiaxi Company chose for the family was *Fight with Hua Family* (*Danao Huafu*), a famous marshal comedy play based on one section of literature from the *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan*). The story depicts Brother Hua, of an aristocratic family, bullying local commoners and forcing young girls to become concubines.

[1] 2016 conversion rate is 1pound to around 15 yuan.

The protagonist, scholar Zhang, who practiced marshal fighting, entered the Hua family home to rescue one girl, only to fall into a trap set by Brother Hua. Whilst trying to escape, Zhang ran accidently into Brother Hua's younger sister's boudoir and the two fell in love. The story ends with Zhang killing Brother Hua and taking Hua's sister to join a local bandit gang in Liang Mountain (*Liangshan*), hence becoming a member of the famous Chinese Liang Mountain Heroes (*Liangshan Haohan*). The story has long been the favourite show of the local peasants, for in stories such as this, they find that illegal acts may be justified as heroic and the temporarily reversed world grants the underclass the right to rebel, to renew and revive.

Such performance also ensures a buzzing carnival atmosphere. Throughout the night, there are exciting marshal battles on stage and the excellent clown acting of Brother Hua as the lead role, interacting with the audience, fooling around with other actors and speaking obscene words to cause endless rounds of laughter. Strong percussion music, amplified through the loudspeakers, was at deafening levels to ensure that the potential guests from afar were drawn to the occasion. The show had a huge audience as well as many food stalls and franchised vendors selling flashing lights, balloons and toys which had the children running and screaming for joy. Fujian folk opera plays the ritual and carnival role in one, where audience and performers are not fully distinguished; the process of the performance constructs and consolidates a collective memory, a mode of sub-group response to the dominant culture as a form of power negotiation, for the underclass to temporarily exist as heroes. The consumption of folk opera becomes a carnival event of renewal and revival.

At around 10:30pm a long row of fireworks was laid out on one side of the stage which, when set off, played for nearly half an hour with beautiful patterns illuminating the sky accompanied by deafening sounds. No one could hear anything from the stage and no one seemed too bothered about this as all attention was focused towards the spectacular fireworks. By 11:00pm the show closed with a full festival atmosphere in the air and smiles on everyone's faces. The celebration of the completion of the Zhu family ritual hall served as a carnival event, where the world of spirits and deities were summoned to consolidate a

collective memory and construct individual identities both home and abroad.

Reflection and Conclusion

I would like to end this paper by reminding readers of the aforementioned literature work on New York, illegal migrants (Zhao 2013), in which the author states that 'despite their (Fujianese illegal migrants) dire living conditions abroad, money has been sent home in maximized quantity. The first and the most extravagant sum is spent on ritual activities'. The author then continues: 'once the migrants' status' are legalized, funding for ritual activity sent back home is reduced and even stopped' (85). In Wenger's *Communities of Practice Theory* (1998), the author argues that social engagement rather than location is important because an individual's self-consciousness never exists in isolation but always in relationship to the 'other' or 'others' who serve to validate its existence (quoted in Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 51). Individual identity could only be constructed through a congregation of people endowed with shared experiences. Whilst illegal migrants are unable to construct their identity in their host countries, through appropriate congregations where identification is likely to be required, such ritual activity will continue to be practiced, a process evoking a unique feeling to generate individual belonging. However, it seems that once legalized status is achieved, through whatever means, the formulation of identity within the host country provides new belonging to individuals. Ritual activities therefore provide a crucial link mainly for illegal migrants' identity construction and inclusion.

In Chinese modern history, ritual and associated folk opera have been referred to as the weight around the neck of China's modernization. Famous scriptwriter Chen Renjian in the 1950s criticized traditional Chinese opera as being 'filled with ritual activities, deities, spirits … all these traditions kept us from moving forward (towards modernity) in large strides. We must break these traditions' (quoted in Yang 2010: 11). Throughout Mao Zedong's era traditional opera was reformed and ancestral halls demolished across China. However,

traditional opera did not die and ancestral halls did not disappear. Since the reform era of the 1980s, large sums of money donated by family lineage members has consistently gone into the rebuilding and repairing of local temples and clan halls, with the main source of funding being sent back from overseas across the southeast coastal regions, especially Fujian province.

To this day, critics continue to comment upon folk opera as being of a 'low artistic standard (Chen 2007, Su 2009) with audiences associated with a low-class, less educated crowd, who watch folk opera because they are reminiscent of the past … (and) have no idea about what is performed on the stage, who is performing and how' (Su 2009: 96). What has been missed is the social function of folk opera, where the ritual ceremonies it accompanies are the events through which 'we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated' (Halbwachs 1992: 24). In this context, this paper contributes to our understanding of how folk opera, as a key ritual activity, forms international bridges to construct and maintain the identity of the illegal overseas migrants whilst consolidating a global socio-economic lineage structure. Such opera consumption provides the carnival spirit which allows the survival and renewal of the 'ghosts'.

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