

Be part of the life of a Hokkien immigrant

Audiences at The Voyage Down South will take part in the show as fellow passengers and wedding guests

Cara Wong

In Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's *The Voyage Down South*, audiences are expected to be more than mere spectators.

When protagonist Ah Hock, a first-generation Hokkien immigrant, sails on a junk boat from China to Singapore to seek his fortune, members of the audience will become his fellow passengers as he performs offstage among them.

And later in the dance drama, they have to get up from their seats and play guests who toast at Ah Hock's wedding.

The performance is part of the ongoing 11-day Singapore Hokkien Festival, which runs till April 23 and is organised by the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan to showcase Hokkien culture.

The *Voyage Down South* takes place on April 21 and 22 at the association's premises in Sennett Road.

This is the first time the association has commissioned a local performing arts group for a full show. The biennial festival is in its sixth edition.

Mr Chong Shu Chi, 36, corporate services manager for Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre, says: "We

wanted to reflect what our forefathers had to go through, so we came up with using a Hokkien immigrant's life story, which also reflected Singapore's development."

While the story is meant to represent the common narrative of Singapore's first-generation immigrants, there will be Hokkien elements such as popular Hokkien folk dance and Hokkien songs.

One segment includes a Hokkien folk dance known as *Pai Xiong Wu* – loosely translated as the chest beating dance – where performers thump their chests rhythmically.

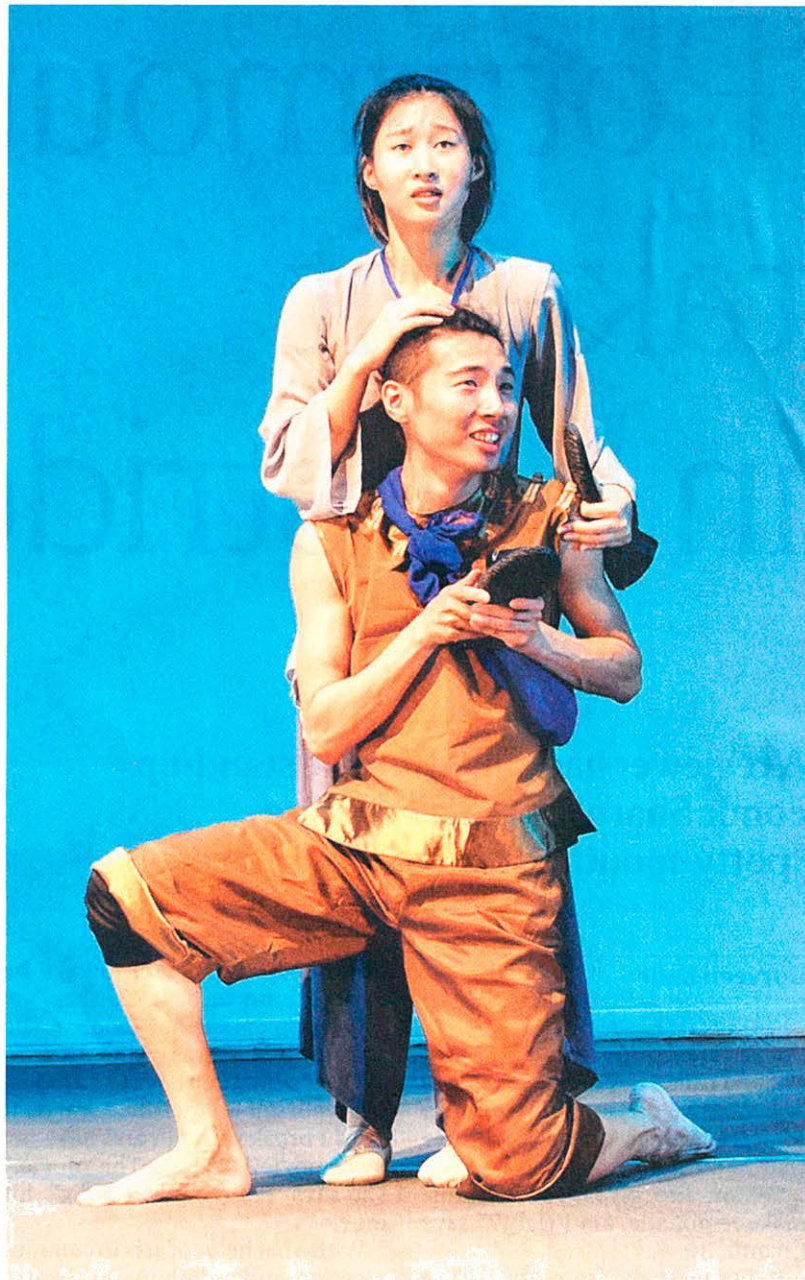
To prepare for the performance, the cast read books borrowed from the association. Lead performer Zeng Xiang, who plays Ah Hock, says learning such details helped them understand their characters better.

"I feel most emotional during the labourer scenes, it's really hard to imagine that in the past, they had to endure such hard labour to make a living," says the 25-year-old in Mandarin.

The association hopes to attract more youth with the interactive multimedia performance, says Mr Toh Lam Huat, chairman of the festival's organising committee.

This year's festival includes guided tours of the Thian Hock Keng temple, the oldest Hokkien temple here, and a wall mural display on the back wall of the temple that depicts the lives of early immigrants. Both are new to the festival.

There is also a multimedia exhibition of cultural artefacts at the association's premises that will trace the history of 30 Fujian-related clan associations. Items on display



Zeng Xiang plays Ah Hock, the Hokkien immigrant from China, while Guo Shi Ying plays his mother. PHOTO: SINGAPORE CHINESE DANCE THEATRE

include old documents of mass wedding ceremonies that used to be held by the association.

While previous editions of the festival had focused on specific aspects of the Hokkien culture, this year's theme, *Our Roots, Our Bonds*, is "targeted at getting the community together, regardless of dialect groups", says Mr Toh. It focuses on the local Chinese community's role in nation-building.

"We hope that by showcasing our culture, we can pass on our forefathers' values of tenacity and perseverance," he says.

carawong@sph.com.sg

**BOOKIT / DANCE DRAMA:
THE VOYAGE DOWN SOUTH**

WHERE: Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, 5 Sennett Road

WHEN: April 21 and 22, 7pm

ADMISSION: \$38

INFO: www.shhkdt.com.sg