

From Singapore to the World: Development in the Singapore Chinese Music Scene: An Overview

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National Library Board, Singapore

Music has always played a crucial role in the lives of the Singapore people. From immigrants seeking to keep in touch with one's ethnic roots to citizens who sought national identity and pride through singing one's own songs and subsequently successfully exporting talent overseas, the study of the development of Chinese music in Singapore demonstrates how far she has come as a nation.

Introduction

Migrants tend to believe that their journey away from home is temporary. They would soon go back to their hometown where their friends and family are and where life is familiar. So emotionally, they are still very much attached to where they are originally from.

The Chinese immigrants who landed in Singapore in search of a better living back in the 19th century were no different. Even though they are thousands of miles away from home, they seek ways of staying connected to their culture back in China. In many instances, that culture followed them south, to their new ports of disembarkation. Chinese opera, puppetry shows, *nanyin*, Chinese orchestra music, etc comforted these lonely souls in a strange land. Later, with the advent of the talkies, these same migrants looked for the familiar sights and sounds in the moving pictures.

But music was more than just emotional reassurance. It became a creative outlet for these people to express their thoughts and feelings. They vented their frustrations and unhappiness to the issues of the day. There were songs written that spoke of anti-colonial and anti-Japanese sentiments during the 1940s and 1950s. They were strong statements about the injustice that the people have witnessed or suffered.

Much later, their offspring, born and bred in Singapore, also wrote songs. But they were no longer about the land that their grandparents or parents had left behind in search of better fortunes. The musical pieces were instead heartfelt expressions about life here that resonated with the rest of the nation. They also departed in style from the songs which their predecessors had listened to or sung in their times.

It signalled the emergence of a growing consciousness in the younger generation - that their place is here and it is here that they would make a better life for themselves. They have finally found their voice. When their music careers took off, making some of them household names in the region, if not the world over, their works are sung by famous stars and ardent fans, some of whom are from China. Life has indeed come full circle. For a people who did not expect to stay, they instead found a place to call home.

In the Streets

The early Chinese society of Singapore was largely an immigrant one where making a living was the main preoccupation and amusements were few and far between. The more organised, large-scale forms of entertainment were primarily religious events. Chinese operas and puppet shows were staged for the entertainment of the deities and mortals alike. These festive celebrations served religious, social, ethnic as well as moral functions, where values were reproduced and reinforced. Wayangs and theatres were so much a vogue of the times that local streets were nicknamed after them. The Cantonese-speaking sector still refers to Smith Street as “hei yun gai” (theatre street).

Chinese opera troupes in the Cantonese, Teochew and Hokkien dialects were brought into Singapore from Southern China by temples, clans and community groups in the second half of the 19th century to celebrate special occasions, like the “Month of the Hungry Ghosts”, where it is believed that departed souls must be pacified and the gods satisfied with food offerings and entertainment. Performances were staged in theatres and also on make-shift stages in the streets. Teahouses also offered song performances by opera actors called “qing chang” (清唱). The Great Southern Hotel’s restaurant was one such venue. Beijing opera artiste Phan Wait Hong (潘月紅) sang here when she first arrived in Singapore in 1928.

Going to the movies gradually replaced the street opera and other similar musical activities as the Chinese community’s favourite form of entertainment in the 1930s. The popularity of the street opera in Singapore was dealt a severe blow by the movie business. Opera movies from China shown in the 1950s and 1960s featured well established stars in China that packed the cinemas for months. They provided Singapore opera fans with new ideas of storytelling, elegantly written lyrics, heightened dramatic tensions, composition and instrumentation that paralleled the development of the plot and portrayal of characters with strong musical elements. This is in contrast to the loose structure of traditional street opera. Local groups were inspired to emulate the high standards. This contributed to a revival of the popularity of local street operas. However, the Chinese opera boom created by the opera movies came to an abrupt end with the Cultural Revolution.

For the next ten years, traditional Chinese operas were banned in China. Although filmed versions of the revolutionary “model operas” (yangbanxi) were produced, the political content made it impossible to be shown in Singapore. However, filling the gap was the filming of local opera group performances by the local television station, Radio & Television of Singapore. The making of these programmes greatly encouraged the street and amateur opera groups.

Theatre guilds and temples which used to engage Chinese opera troupes for their religious functions started switching to the *getai* for the same festivities. The failure of the young generation to understand the histories and legends behind the performances as well as the increasing disconnect with the languages used also contributed to the decline of these traditional art forms.

The Chinese Opera Institute (COI) was established in 1995 with the support of the National Arts Council to rejuvenate the learning of this art form. It is a training and research centre responsible

for the promotion of all aspects of Chinese opera. Creating contemporary Chinese opera is one of its key missions. A milestone in this direction is *Heroes: The Story of Lim Bo Seng* (《林谋盛》), which premiered in 2000. It demonstrated that it is possible to develop Chinese opera with a distinct Singapore identity by drawing on local history. The COI's works and performances have won acclaim in many overseas festivals.

In the Clubs

Early last century, clan associations, musicians or interested individuals began forming their own musical groups to satisfy the cultural and recreational needs of their members. Many of these amateur musical groups often initiated fundraising events in aid of wars and calamities in China, and constructed hospitals and schools for the Chinese community in Singapore. One well-known fundraising event was the China Relief Fund (南洋华侨筹赈祖国难民总会) spearheaded by prominent businessman, community leader and philanthropist Tan Kah Kee (陈嘉庚) in 1938 in support of China in the Second Sino-Japanese War. The precursor to the current *nanyin* proponent, Siong Leng Musical Association (湘灵音乐社), established in 1901, responded to relief efforts by organising fundraising concerts.

There were also musical organisations, like the Tong Luo Choral Group (铜锣合唱团), established in the pre-war period by music lovers, specifically for the purpose of supporting the war effort. In 1939, a group of prominent Chinese individuals, including a local war hero, Lim Bo Seng (林谋盛), formed the extant Ping Sheh (平社)(Singapore Amateur Beijing Opera Society) principally to raise funds for anti-Japanese campaigns in China through performances in the various amusement parks.

Such performances also served to educate the general public about the war situation in China and to generate ethnic consciousness among overseas Chinese. The event allowed different dialect groups and clan associations to transcend regional and dialect differences to work together towards the same objective. Many of these groups were viewed by the Japanese as undermining its authority and disbanded.

Anti-Japanese songs were written by local musicians to express their determination to fight as well as their feelings after they were defeated. Songs like *Ode to Malaya* (《马来亚颂》), *Singapore River* (《新加坡河》), etc were also records of the atrocities suffered under the Japanese. One of the most prolific songwriter was Ye Li Tian (叶立天). These songs continued to inspire the people long after the Japanese surrendered.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a keen interest by the community in the learning and promotion of Chinese orchestra music. Many amateur groups were set up as a result. Many of the pioneers from this period like Lian Rong Shi (连荣史), Zhang Bing Zhao (张炳照), Yang Hao Ran (杨浩然), etc would continue to keep the torch burning by teaching in their own music schools or private orchestra groups in the later years. Others like Lee Yuk Chuan (李煜传), the creator of Singapore's first Mandarin opera *Lady Lingzhi* (《灵芝姑娘》), performed in 1973, is currently the Honourary Chairman of the Association of Composers and still making significant contributions to the local music scene.

In 1965, the newly independent Singapore formed the National Theatre Trust Board which was entrusted with the responsibility for the development of art and cultural policies. The semi-professional National Theatre Club Chinese Orchestra, the first outside of China, was established in 1967. National song-writing competitions were also organised. And from 1967 onwards, a number of Chinese orchestra musicians were engaged by Chinese restaurants to provide entertainment for the diners, offering the musicians a means of making a living through music and the possibility of turning professional.

Many Chinese instrumental compositions like *Epic of Malaya* (《马来亚史诗》), *The Unyielding Pineapples* (《不屈的黄梨园》), *Dance of the Coconut Trees* (《椰林舞曲》), *The Fisherman's Song* (《渔家之歌》), *Singapore River* (《新加坡河》), *Memories of Homeland* (《故乡的回忆》) and *Waves* (《波涛》) were written in the 1960s and 1970s by local talents active in the Chinese orchestra music scene. Other Chinese orchestras were also established since the 1970s and continued to be active in promoting Chinese instrumental music. They include City Chinese Orchestra (狮城华乐团), Hsinghai Art Association (星海艺术研究会), National Theatre Club (国家剧场俱乐部), etc.

The Chinese orchestra performing unit of the People's Association, set up in 1974 by absorbing members from the National Theatre Club Chinese Orchestra, was inaugurated as The Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) in 1996 under the patronage of the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. A youth wing orchestra was set up in 2003 to nurture young music talents into professional musicians. Touted for its high performance standards, the SCO commissions new works regularly and organised its first composition competition in 2006 that focused on incorporating music elements from Southeast Asia. The National Arts Council has, since 1998, organised the biennial National Chinese Music Competition (全国华乐比赛) which provides opportunities for young musicians to perform in a competitive situation before a panel of international judges.

Immigrants from China also contributed to the development of Chinese orchestra music since the 1980s through active participation in the various orchestra groups, including the SCO, as well as through teaching. Most of them are graduates from Chinese music institutes. Hence, they are able to elevate the standards of local Chinese orchestra music in a very short time.

However, the general opinion is that although local orchestra groups have reached a high performance standard, there is a need to develop a sound that is different from groups in the region and which is uniquely Singaporean.

In the Parks

Amusement parks introduced a new concept of entertainment to Singapore in the 1920s and 1930s by offering a fascinating array of entertainment genres and forms under one roof. They included dialect-specific operas, movies, dance and music halls, storytelling, magic shows, restaurants, etc. The once ethnically segregated Singapore society was brought together inside these parks.

The *gewutuan* (song and dance troupe) performances in the amusement parks, brought into Singapore in the early 1930s, was a variety show which included music performances, dances,

drama, etc. However, there were not too many singing programs yet. Explained veteran entertainer Bai Yan, “Microphones and amplifiers were still not popular at that time. It was not easy to find a well-trained vocalist who can sing in a big auditorium without a microphone.”

The entertainment business was thriving in swinging Shanghai in the 1930s and 40s. The golden age of Shanghai music suggests the beginnings of Chinese popular music in modern times. Through gramophone recordings, radio broadcasts, films and public performances in the amusement parks, these *shidaiqu* (时代曲, pop songs), captured the imagination of the migrant Chinese population in Southeast Asia who were hungry for a piece of the action back home.

Singers like Zhou Xuan (周璇), Li Xiang Lan (李香兰), Bai Guang (白光), Yao Li (姚莉), Zhao Dan (赵丹), Gong Qiu Xia (龚秋霞), etc were big stars. Even till today, the older generation are still hooked on the rich and ornate sounds of that era which were a reflection of the times. Music in Shanghai back then was heavily influenced by Western jazz and pop music. It was the trend then to pen Chinese lyrics to be sung along to these western melodies. The lyrics are graceful and expressive, a demonstration of the composers’ profound knowledge of literature.

The *gewutuan* was gradually replaced by *getai* (song stage) in the 1940s during the years of Japanese occupation. Many famous entertainers of the era had their big break in the business at the *getai*. Singaporean songbird S K Poon (潘秀琼), Bai Yan (白言), actress and singer Zhuang Xue Fang (庄雪芳), etc had ample opportunities to build on their skills since the *getai* requires performers who are very versatile. They not only had to sing and dance, but to perform in skits and dramas as well. The contact and rapport with the audience is immediate and direct. This is also where they had the chance to work closely with veteran performers from China, and learn from them.

Getai reached its heyday in the 1950s, buoyed by the Korean War and the consequent increase in the demand for rubber. In this golden era of the *getai*, there were at least ten *getais* operating in the amusement parks. With its growing popularity came demand for songs to be composed for its performers. One of the songs from that era that still commanded a great following today is *Midnight Kisses* (《午夜香吻》), written by Seong Koon Low Won (上官流云), one of the leading local talents who made it big in the region as a songwriter, singer and movie star.

The appearance of radio and then television put an end to the amusement parks. But even till today, the *getai* remains the quintessential training ground for budding local entertainers since Singapore has very limited performance avenues.

On the War Front

Life as it was known in Singapore came to a halt with the Japanese military takeover of Singapore on 16 February 1942. Japanese hostility towards the Singapore Chinese was carried over from the local Chinese support shown towards China in the Sino-Japanese War. Many Chinese were massacred during the *Sook Ching* (肃清), the systematic extermination of perceived hostile elements among the Chinese community in Singapore by the Japanese military.

The Japanese, however, were not against the local people carrying on with their religious rituals. According to Fu Xiang Chun (符祥春), Qiong opera *suona* horn master, the puppetry troupe he belonged to in the 1940s was awarded a permit by the Japanese regime and thus could stage regular performances during religious festivals.

Later, the Japanese regime, in an attempt to maintain a façade of peace and stability, engaged former Chinese opera performers as paid staff of the Propaganda Department. They would put up opera performances at the amusement parks for ticket buyers.

Deprived during the war of traditional entertainment like Chinese opera, their popularity grew during the post-war period. This laid the ground for more people to become interested in Chinese opera as well as Chinese orchestra music. More began learning how to play an instrument or to sing opera. Given the conditions then, the only avenue for such learning is via the opera musicians. It was a very informal arrangement. Most of the training was imparted orally, usually using scores written in the *gongche* notation (工尺谱), a form of music notation commonly used in Chinese traditional music. As music scores were hard to come by, music recordings were often manually transcribed which provided very good training.

Many artistes of the times had their initial training in Chinese opera. For example, well-known artistes Seong Koon Low Won and Henry Fu (舒云) used to be actors in a Hokkien opera troupe. Singer Sakura Teng (樱花) learned Qiong opera while Rita Chao (凌云), another popular singer from the 1960s, was probably influenced in some way by her grandmother, Madam Chao, who was the leader of a local Beijing opera troupe.

With the declaration by Mao Zedong of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the colonial government banned the import of Chinese literary and cultural material into Singapore. There was renewed fervour among local writers on creating works that reflect the unique local conditions and flavour.

Along with the rising demand for self-government, prompted in part by the disillusionment with the British government who was no longer seen as indefatigable as a result of their defeat by the Japanese, was a new generation of songwriters that emerged in the 1950s with anti-colonial songs that spoke of the people's frustrations and emotions. This movement went hand in hand with the "anti-yellow culture" campaign which saw the active promotion of wholesome cultural activities as part of the effort of eradicating "degenerate forms of culture that weakened the individual, led to lavish spending and corrupted public morals". Cultural groups like choral groups, harmonica teams, Chinese orchestras, drama and dance classes were set up and enthusiastically supported by the community. "Anti-yellow culture" songs were written to promote the cause.

Rubber Plantation, Our Mother (《胶林，我们的母亲》) written by Boh Chit Hee (莫泽熙) in 1956, became a song that moved a generation and was a staple for cultural groups in the 1950s and 1960s. It had urged the people of Malaya to persist in their fight against injustice. Songs in dialects were also written in order to widen its reach among the general populace. One widely sang Hokkien song was *The Awakening* (《大家要觉悟》). However, most of the anti-colonial songs written in this period were deemed too radical. They were considered too sensitive or

inappropriate and hence were not widely circulated. Cultural groups and alumni associations were also disbanded one after another by 1970. Confronted with such unfavourable conditions, this wave of militant songwriting was soon subdued.

In the Cinemas

The Chinese movie audience back in those early days, especially those in Singapore and Malaysia, often went to the movies expecting to listen to an abundance of songs since they were looking for an all enveloping form of entertainment that pleases dramatically and musically. It is even said that it was a widely acknowledged stipulation that Mandarin films in those days must include at least one song (or the more the merrier). Proof that the Singapore audience loves to sing also lies in the observation that they would often sing along with the actors onscreen, as witnessed at screenings for *The Love Eterne* (《梁山伯与祝英台》).

Major composer for MP & GI (Cathay Organisation) film music, Kei Shang-tong (蔡湘棠), who worked on many film productions in the 1950s and 1960s including *Mambo Girl* (《曼波女郎》) revealed, “The major markets of Mandarin films and records were Singapore and Malaysia. The Chinese in those areas loved singing; they would see every film with songs and would buy the records. That was the trend at the time.” He even postulated that the audience’s preference for traditional *huangmeidiao* (黄梅调, a form of Chinese folk opera), which reminded them of Chinese opera, over westernised pop songs had contributed to the vast difference in fortunes between Shaw Brothers Studio (which focused on *huangmeidiao* films) and Cathay Organisation (dominated by dramas set in contemporary times).

The popularity of film musicals provided local singers opportunities outside of their profession. They were either backup singers for the actors onscreen, examples include S K Poon for leading actress Yeh Feng (叶枫) in *The Wayward Husband* (《桃花运》)(1959) or they would be part of the cast. Examples being Poon, who later starred in *Who Is Not Romantic! (Part 2)* (《哪个不多情续集》) in 1962.

Zhuang Xue Fang (庄雪芳), the “Songbird of Southeast Asia” (南洋歌后) and “Amoy Movie Queen”, also acted in more than 30 Hokkien films produced by Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan film companies specifically for the Hokkien speaking market. The films include *The Wandering Songstress* (《天涯歌女》) etc. She also produced a number of films under the banner of her own production company like *Romance at Lung Shan Temple* (《龙山寺之恋》). The theme song, *Success* (《出人头地》), showcased in *Romance*, was a hit and remains one of Zhuang’s signature song.

Other *getai* artistes who also acted in Hokkien films include Yang Pei Yun (杨佩云), Seong Koon Low Won (上官流云), Guan Xin Yi (关新艺), See Lay (徐莱), etc.

Singapore-made films are also very good showcases of musical talents. The soundtrack of *The Two Sides of the Bridge* (《桥的两岸》), a film made in 1976, was composed by Ye Rui Ping

(叶瑞平), who also conducted the Chinese orchestra accompaniment to the performance of *The Treacherous Journey* (《苦难的航程》), a 45-minute play by the Theatre Practice in the 1970s.

The story of *getai* performers in Singapore inspired Singapore director Royston Tan (陈子谦) to write and produce the movie *881*, which became a box-office hit in 2007. The soundtrack album, made up of songs popularised by *getai* singers or composed specifically for the film, was also a bestseller.

On the Air

Radio broadcasting was introduced into Singapore in 1936 while the private Rediffusion started broadcasting in 1949. Modern Mandarin songs and traditional operas were the most popular programs for the Chinese community then. Amateur musical groups of different dialects, one example being the Siong Leng Musical Association, were invited to perform in the studio. Foong Choon Hon, one of the Caldecott Hill radio old-timers recalled, “To perform in the studio was really something. The musical groups of the clan associations treated it as a big event.”

Rediffusion became very popular with the Chinese community, who enjoyed tuning in day and night to the delightful and colourful programmes. Radio and Rediffusion cemented relationships as groups of friends or neighbours would gather round a receiver set at a certain time for a particular programme like Lee Dai Soh’s storytelling or to listen to the same songs playing on the air.

Radio was also a more efficient medium for spreading the popularity of songs and with that, the fame and fortunes of their performers. The recording industry was flourishing, its prosperity brought about by the twin product lines of records of famous overseas artistes as well as local original compositions or adapted songs made popular by *getai* singers. There were mainly 78 rpm vinyl records in the 1950s. After 1959, 45 rpm and 33 rpm records gradually replaced the 78 rpm, which could only hold four songs. The more established record companies then were Pathe (百代), Ba Le Feng (巴乐风), Horse Brand (马标), etc.

With widespread support, the industry had more resources to devote to the nurturing of local recording artistes. The big names of the 1960s and 1970s were Wong Ching Yian (黄清元), Chin Whai (秦淮), Lin Zhu Jun (林竹君), etc, who had unique voices which helped them carve successful careers spanning the whole region.

There were also collaborations between the English and Mandarin music artistes. For example, The Quests backed EMI artiste Lam Leng (南玲) on her EPs which included Mandarin numbers, one of which was *Solid Gold Rickshaw*, a duet with Fu Suyin aka Henry Fu (舒云), known as Singapore’s “King of Song”. The band also backed Sakura Teng (樱花), a popular multilingual female singer, on her EMI EP *Puppet On a String*. Released in 1967, it contained a few Mandarin numbers. Rita Chao (凌云) would also work with The Quests and later, The Surfers.

In 1983, a Chinese radio programme *New Voices, New Songs* (《歌韵新声》) was launched to provide a platform for the presentation of local song compositions. Many of the *xinyao* songs and

groups were first introduced to the general public via this programme. *Chance Meeting* (《邂逅》), a composition by Eric Moo and his singing group, Underground Express (地下铁), became one of the first songs to make it to the music charts purely based on its exposure on the programme even before the song was released commercially.

The programme lasted eight years, with close to a thousand local songs getting an airing. It was one of the crucial avenues that nurtured a generation of young people who later moved on to a bigger music platform.

In the Revolutionary Tide

When the Cultural Revolution came around, some among the Chinese community were greatly influenced by the movement. They viewed themselves as the down-trodden in the society and were inspired to fight for their rights like the Mainland Chinese did.

Products, carrying teachings of communist leaders like Mao Zedong and Lin Biao, flooded in. One could find quotations printed on food cans, pencils and matchboxes. Retired journalist Han Tan Juan recalled, “When Chinese ships arrived at the Singapore harbour, they would broadcast revolutionary songs through amplifiers. We could hear it ashore...The Bank of China in Singapore was the publicity station for Mao Zedong’s ideology. They would broadcast Chinese revolutionary songs all day.” In the end, the Singapore government banned these songs.

From 1966 to 1970, there was a trend of duplicating Cultural Revolution practices wholesale in Singapore. “Quotations from Mao” were published in journals. Songs of this period were full of revolutionary zeal. In the kindergartens run by the Barisan Sosialis, kids were taught Chinese revolutionary dances.

Professor Koh Tai Ann, senior associate at the Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the Nanyang Technological University, recalled, “As a young girl, I had followed my mother to picnics organised by unionists where they sang revolutionary songs and entertained themselves with Chinese folk dances which they had earlier learned and practised on union premises.”

Sim Wong Hoo, CEO and Chairman of Creative Technology, also acknowledged, in his eulogy to Chinese theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun, that he had reluctantly assumed the “revolutionary” pose (left leg forward, both hands fisted, right arm bent to the chest, left arm swung to the back) in a school performance in the 1970s.

Kuo Pao Kun himself would express his discontent with the socio-political turmoil in China and Singapore through his plays. His daughter, theatre director Kuo Jian Hong explained, “There was discrimination, racial tension – there were all these things that were prime material for artistic creation.” The elder Kuo’s works were so critical that some were banned from the stage. *The Struggle* (《挣扎》), banned in 1969, was about the social turmoil that resulted from rapid urbanisation and capitalism.

Performances with strong “revolutionary” flavour were staged at the Victoria Theatre. When the performances became too radical and thus unlikely to be given the government permit to go

ahead, the cultural groups moved ‘underground’, into private spaces like the premises of Barisan Sosialis and leftist groups.

Musicals that were modelled after the “model plays” (*yangbanxi*) were created. Examples include *Song of Malaya* (《歌唱马来亚》), etc. They are mainly about the conflicts between workers and capitalists. The cultural groups attempted to portray “local issues” through these dramas, musicals, and song and dance performances. The growing force and increasingly political nature of these groups culminated in the 1976 massive leftist purge, where hundreds, including Kuo Pao Kun, were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. The movement soon died down.

The communist propaganda painted a very attractive picture of China. When the Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, people began to realise that things were not as rosy as they had thought. Those driven by revolutionary fervour back then became disillusioned and ideologically lost in the 1980s, some even till today.

Han Tan Juan explained, “From the 1980s onwards, we went through about ten years of readjustment. If you can understand this, you would be able to understand the play *Little White Sailing Boat* (《小白船》) written by Kuo Pao Kun. He was writing about this kind of sentiment. It could create such stirring effects at that time because it was a true reflection of intellectuals like us who felt lost in the 1980s.”

Instead of looking to outside sources for inspiration and guidance, the Chinese community started looking inwards. This would lay the ground for local songwriters and their compositions to take seed and flourish.

In the Living Rooms

The first television broadcast took place in 1963. Being an expensive technology which not many in the population could initially afford, watching television was a largely communal activity when families, peers and neighbours were entertained by a shared television set.

Being the national broadcasting station, the then Radio & Television of Singapore (RTS) assumed a crucial role in the promotion of local arts and culture. In 1968, RTS organised the first Music and Singing Contest. The whole contest was televised live with the finals held at the National Theatre on the eve of the Chinese New Year in 1969.

Within the first year of its establishment, the National Theatre Club Chinese Orchestra released an LP, *Springtime Melodies* (《鼓乐迎春》). The RTS-published LP was also the first for local Chinese instrumental music. A second LP, *The Great Reunion* (《大联欢》), performed by the Orchestra, was produced in 1971. RTS also produced programmes which showcased the various Chinese orchestra groups and singing talents.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong television serials were hugely popular in Southeast Asia. And along with that, the theme songs became instant hits. However, the Speak Mandarin Campaign, launched in 1979, effectively changed the direction of broadcasting. From acquiring programmes

and producing music programmes where other people's songs in dialects were sung, the then national television station, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, started producing Mandarin dubbed drama serials that reflected local flavours and lifestyle. The theme songs of these hugely popular serials, mostly locally composed, also became favourites among the viewers.

The Taiwanese music industry, faced with demands from a more educated population turned off by Hokkien songs which were hugely popular in the 1960s, began a localisation movement that saw the appearance of indigenous composers and artistes. They started writing and singing their own Mandarin compositions. Inspired by Woodstock and the folk song movement in the west, young people wanted to sing their own songs which speak of their own emotions and experiences. Sam Hui took the lead in Hong Kong. Others followed suit. It became the in-thing on campuses to sing self-written songs while strumming on the guitar. The scene is ripe for local music to truly blossom in a fresh new direction in Singapore.

From 1978 to 1981, there was a movement at the Nanyang University called *shi yue* (诗乐, music poems) that was essentially melodies added to poetry. Many songs became popular on campus. The movement died down after a final concert held in 1988, when the central figures got caught up in building their careers after graduation. Also, with the closure of Nanyang University in 1980, the nurturing ground of the university campus vanished too. All that was left was a compilation album *July Fire* (《七月流火》) released to commemorate that last concert.

This literary movement was to have a profound influence on the birth of *xinyao*, which began appearing on the local music scene at around the same time. Some of those from the *xinyao* camp had been involved in the *shi yue* movement. *Xinyao* caught on with the general public and was thus able to travel beyond the campuses where they originated since the songs had lyrics that were more colloquial and thus more accessible.

To encourage Singaporeans to write and compose their own songs, the National Trade Union Congress organised a songwriting competition in 1986. One of the winners was *Voices From the Heart* (《小人物的心声》), which became the theme song for the drama series “Neighbours” (《芝麻绿豆》). It contributed to the success of the television show. Even the then Deputy Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, admitted to being visibly moved by the song. Other local compositions were also used as theme songs for the burgeoning local television drama productions. Examples include *The Awakening* (《雾锁南洋》), *The Bond* (《天涯同命鸟》), *Kopi-O* (《咖啡乌》), *Youth 123* (《青春 123》) etc.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, “Chinese Talentime” (《斗歌竞艺》) was an extremely popular programme. It was the precursor to “Superbands” and “Singapore Idol”. It was the literal nurturing ground of local Chinese musical talent, with many of these artistes still active in the music scene, like Marcus Chin (陈建彬), Anthony Png (方钟桦), Peter Tan (陈彼得), Yue Lei (岳雷), etc. The station's variety shows would also provide opportunities for these singers to improve their craft and expand their fan base. The station even engaged S K Poon as a singing teacher. She nurtured many students, who became regular performers on the variety shows.

Xinyao (新谣) made its appearance at around this time. Youths, many of them still in school, began penning their own songs. Some of these songs, in particular those by Liang Wern Fook, trained their focus and content on the local social and political conditions. One could get a sense of the times through songs like *Ah Ben Ah Ben, Singapore Pie* (《新加坡派》), *The Three Daughters of Mr Zhang* (《老张的三个女儿》), *The Sparrow With the Twig* (《麻雀衔竹枝》), etc. Variety programmes started featuring these *xinyao* talents, further widening the reach of the local compositions and their creators.

Some of the winners of the “Chinese Talenteime” were associated with this movement. They include Billy Koh (one part of a trio of the group *sui cao san chong chang* 水草三重唱), etc. They would go on to enjoy successful music careers after graduation. Songwriters like Liang Wern Fook, Eric Moo, Billy Koh, Tan Kah Beng (陈佳明), Roy Loi Fey Huei (黎沸辉), Mu Zi (木子), etc also made a name for themselves and for Singapore music when their compositions became hits overseas sung by famous singers in Asia. Some like Billy Koh, Lee Shih Shiong (李偲菘), Lee Wei Shiong (李伟菘) and Roy Loi would go on to nurture new blood through their music companies. They would also later become judges in the new generation of singing contests produced on local television in the new millennium.

The *xinyao* movement gained great support among young people in Singapore. For almost ten years, many students and working youths also composed and sang their own songs. Taking a leaf from the Taiwanese, there sprang up restaurants and cafes in Singapore where one is entertained by singers on stage. Called *min ge can ting* (民歌餐厅, folk song restaurants), they provided many aspiring musicians and singers an avenue to express themselves, hone their craft as well as perform in front of live audiences. These entertainment outlets became unique spaces for people to relive the early *xinyao* days.

In the Theatre

With at least two English and three Mandarin musicals - *Liao Zhai Rocks* (《聊斋》), *December Rains* (《雨季》) (a restaging of this musical which was the first Mandarin one written in Singapore), and *Maha Moggallana* (《大孝目犍连》) - hitting the stage this year, it looks like 2010 is the year of the musicals for local theatre.

Musicals, according to Kuo Jian Hong, director of *Liao Zhai Rocks*, can bring in audiences who would not ordinarily choose to watch a Chinese play. They also draw in artistes from the music and English theatre scene who would otherwise stay away from Chinese theatre.

“For a lot of people who don’t speak Mandarin any more, the only time they speak Mandarin is when they are singing karaoke. So songs are this thin thread that connects a lot of people to Chinese culture,” Kuo said.

Musicals have always done well in the local theatre context, with sold out shows since the 1990s. Examples include *I Have a Date With Spring* (《我和春天有个约会》), the first run of *December Rains* and *If There’re Seasons* (《天冷就回来》).

According to Goh Boon Teck, director of both *December Rains* and *Maha Moggallana*, the resurgence of Mandarin musicals is an indication that the local theatre scene has matured and he can find enough professional talents to run a successful show.

Musicals require actors with not only acting skills but singing and dancing ability as well. For Mandarin musicals, directors need actors who can speak fluent Mandarin too. Kuo Jian Hong feels that the Chinese musical trend is helped by the cross-pollination of English and Mandarin theatre performers. It is also helped by the many cross-overs from the local Mandarin music scene, which expands the talent pool. For example, songwriting duo Eric Ng (黄韵仁) and Xiao Han (小寒) are the music directors of *Liao Zhai Rocks!*. The musical's two leads are Ric Liu, a member of the now-defunct pop trio, Dreamz FM, and Joanna Dong, a Singaporean jazz singer. The various arts schools have also nurtured many talents.

The talent pool is indeed growing. Kuo revealed, "When we did *Lao Jiu the Musical* (《老九》) in 2005, we couldn't find 16 brothers-in-law and sisters. Now I can easily cast 32."

On the World Stage

Singapore has a significant presence in the music industry of the region, with a reputation for producing talented songwriters, lyricists and record producers who worked on the music albums of big names like Jacky Cheung (张学友), Joey Yung (容祖儿), Leon Lai (黎明), Aska Yang (杨宗纬), Karen Mok (莫文蔚), Ah Mei (张惠妹), etc. These young and highly sought after talents include Eric Ng (黄韵仁), Xiao Han (小寒), Tan Hanjin (陈奂仁), Goh Kheng Long (吴庆隆), Lee Shih Shiong (李偲菘), Lee Wei Shiong (李伟菘), etc.

Local singers continued to make their mark in the regional music scene. Kit Chan (陈洁仪), Mavis Hee (许美静), Tanya Chua (蔡健雅), Stefanie Sun (孙燕姿), A-do (阿杜), Joi Chua (蔡淳佳), JJ Lin (林俊杰), BY2 and Jocie Kok (郭美美) became stars in their own right in the region with a high profile presence in the Taiwan and China music markets, which dominate the Chinese music scene in the new millennium. Most of them write their own songs too besides being performers with a unique voice.

This new generation of singer-songwriters, unlike their predecessors who are mostly from the Chinese stream and wrote and sang songs mainly in Chinese, are equally comfortable speaking and working in the English and Chinese languages. Although they are well-known Mando-pop singers, some of them have shown linguistic versatility, writing and performing in English, Cantonese and other languages.

Kit Chan, for example, has had great success in Hong Kong as well, acting in Cantonese musicals there since the mid-1990s, in shows like *Snow.Wolf.Lake* (《雪狼湖》)(starring with Jacky Cheung), *The Legend* (《漫步人生路》)(inspired by the life of singer Teresa Teng 邓丽君), etc. She would later go on to star in a number of musicals in Singapore and abroad.

The choice of a music-box-like structure as the Singapore Pavilion design for the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, China, signifies the significance of music's role as the ambassador of Singapore on the

world stage. With the Singapore Pavilion's theme of "Urban Symphony", music plays a key role as the medium to engage the visitors.

Singapore Pavilion's theme song, *Every Touching Moment* (《感动每一刻》), is composed by JJ Lin, produced by Billy Koh, and sung by A-do, Tanya Chua, JJ Lin and Stefanie Sun, noted as the "four popular Singaporean artistes of international calibre" by the Singapore Tourism Board who commissioned the piece. The popularity of these four well-known singers in China and the region probably contributed to why they were selected to represent/present Singapore at probably one of the most important events of the year.

Singapore has certainly come a long way. As Billy Koh once said, "It is an amazing achievement for such a tiny nation like Singapore to count music as its most significant cultural export."

Conclusion

Music has always played a crucial role in the lives of the Singapore people right from the start. From immigrants seeking to keep in touch with one's ethnic roots to citizens who sought national identity and pride through singing one's own songs and subsequently successfully exporting talent overseas, the study of the development of Chinese music in Singapore demonstrates how far she has come as a nation.

The establishment of The Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (COMPASS) to protect the copyrights of music authors, music courses at arts schools like School of the Arts (SOTA), Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music as well as the Cultural Medallion in 1979 and the Young Artist Award in 1992 to recognise contributions made to the development of local arts, including for music, cover the grounds from protection, education and commendation for music artists. These are all moves aimed at further nurturing the budding music scene. They also act as a form of recognition that the nation needs this framework in place to move forward in the creation of a mature and vibrant music scene.

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