

## Xinyao: Made in Singapore

Written by Jaime Koh on 22 January 2014

*Xinyao (新谣) refers to Chinese language songs composed, written and performed by young Singaporeans. Literally meaning Singapore songs (xin jia po ge yao 新加坡歌谣), xinyao started in the late 1970s and had its heyday in the 1980s. The xinyao movement propelled many local singers and singer-songwriters to popularity, several of whom successfully transitioned to the commercial sector.*

The term *xinyao* (新谣), short for *xin jia po ge yao* (新加坡歌谣) was coined in 1982 at a seminar titled *The Songs We Sing* (我们唱着的歌) organised by the *Nanyang Siang Pao*.<sup>1</sup> *Xinyao* was used to refer to the emerging trend of school students composing their own songs, often only accompanied by guitars. This trend was believed to be influenced by the Taiwanese folk song movement, *minyao* (民谣) which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Some sources trace the origins of *xinyao* to the late 1970s when Nanyang University students began putting poems they wrote to musical compositions. The genre, known as *shi yue* (poem music 诗乐), was said to be the beginning of local musical works that would be regarded as *xinyao*.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

### 1980s – the heyday

*Xinyao* took off in local secondary schools and junior colleges in the 1980s. College students took to composing songs that reflected their lives in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> *Xinyao* groups were also formed to take part in singing competitions that were popular at the time. One of the earliest *xinyao* groups formed was The Underground Train (地下铁小组). Soon, the *xinyao* movement spread to community centres where many *xinyao* groups were formed.<sup>7 8</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, there were numerous concerts, competitions, and album launches that propelled the *xinyao* movement into the public consciousness.<sup>9</sup> The *xinyao movement* was given a boost with the broadcast of a local radio show *New Voices*

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<sup>1</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, pp. 25-26. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>2</sup> 南洋学生主催 弹弹新谣·谈谈新谣 (1982, September 11). *南洋商报*, p. 41. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>3</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, pp.

<sup>4</sup> 南洋学生主催 弹弹新谣·谈谈新谣. 1982, September 13). *南洋商报*, p. 33. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>5</sup> 彳亍, No. 1. (1995), p. 1. Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

<sup>6</sup> Foo, J. (1989, August 6). In search of the Singapore song. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>7</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 29. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>8</sup> 走入新谣的日记, (1995) 彳亍, No. 1, p. 4 Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

<sup>9</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, pp. 45-54. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

(歌韵新声). The weekly half-hour show featured local *xinyao* groups and their musical compositions.<sup>10</sup>

The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) annual Talentime singing competition (斗歌竞艺) brought further attention to emerging singer-songwriters who were to become prominent singers in Singapore's pop scene. Later, SBC also used the *xinyao* compositions as theme songs for their television dramas.<sup>11</sup>

The movement was given added credibility when the first *xinyao* album – *Tomorrow 21* (明天21) – was released in 1984. This album included many of the songs presented at the first major *xinyao* concert in 1983.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, two more compilation albums of *xinyao* tunes were released that year.<sup>13</sup> In addition, many *xinyao* groups and individual singers also released albums.<sup>14</sup>

### The voices and forces

In the movement's early days, many of the *xinyao* groups organised their own competitions and sing-alongs.

Most of the pioneers of the *xinyao* movement were members of *xinyao* groups. Eric Moo (巫启贤) and Chen Jiaming (陈家明) for instance were part of The Underground Train (地下铁小组), made up of students from Jurong Junior College.<sup>15</sup> Billy Koh (许寰良) together with Winston Koh 许南盛 and Ng Guan Seng 黄元成 were members of the trio, The Straws(水草三重唱).<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> The Straws went on to form Touch Production to promote *xinyao* compositions.<sup>18</sup> Touch Production released several *xinyao* albums in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

Other pioneers of *xinyao* include Dawn Gan 颜黎明, Liang Wern Fook (梁文福), Pan Ying (潘盈), and the Li brothers, Li Si Song (李偲菘) and Li Wei Song (李伟菘), among others.

In 1986 several groups came together and formed the Young Songwriters Society

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<sup>10</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 34. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>11</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 44. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>12</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 37. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>13</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 41. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>14</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, pp. 41-43. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>15</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 26. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>16</sup> 走入新谣的日记, (1995) 彳亍, No. 1, p. 3 Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

<sup>17</sup> It's Straw's last performance tonight. (1987, April 4). *The Straits Times*, p. 33. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>18</sup> 走入新谣的日记, (1995) 彳亍, No. 1, p. 5 Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

<sup>19</sup> 走入新谣的日记, (1995) 彳亍, No. 1, p. 6 Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

(YSS) to promote *xinyao* artistes and activities.<sup>20</sup> Following its formation, the YSS organised the annual Xinyao Festival and Sing Music Awards Ceremony.<sup>21</sup> The annual Xinyao Festival became the launching pad for many local amateur singers and singer-songwriters.<sup>22</sup>

### Debates about the nature of *xinyao*

As *xinyao* became increasingly popular among the young Singaporeans in the mid to late 1980s, record companies began to pay more attention to these compositions and released many albums in this genre. Increasingly, the albums took on a more polished and professional touch compared to the amateur air of the early albums.<sup>23</sup>

By this time, several *xinyao* singers such as Eric Moo had also gained commercial success.<sup>24</sup> Many *xinyao* tunes made it to pop charts.<sup>25 26</sup>

The commercial success of *xinyao* became a subject of debate: the question was whether commercialisation was in line with the spirit of *xinyao*, and if pop music, even if composed by locals, should be considered *xinyao*.<sup>27</sup> While some critics argued that commercial tunes should not be considered *xinyao*, others argued otherwise.<sup>28</sup>

### The decline and revival of *xinyao*

Although *xinyao* songwriting competitions and concerts were still held at school level, *xinyao* was fast fading from popular consciousness by the early 1990s.<sup>29</sup> In 1990, the *Xinyao* Festival, first held in 1985, attracted just about 1,200 attendees, compared to almost 2000 a few years before.<sup>30 31</sup> That was the last year the Festival was held.<sup>32</sup>

The number of *xinyao* albums produced and sold were also on the decline.<sup>33</sup> *Xinyao* supporters blamed record companies and radio stations for preferring commercial releases from Taiwan and Hong Kong over local compositions.<sup>34</sup> Singapore's small market share was also blamed for poor sales.<sup>35 36</sup>

By the turn of the century, *xinyao* quietly made a comeback. A series of concerts, plays and films once again turned the spotlight on *xinyao*. Among the first of such activities

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<sup>20</sup>梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 56. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>21</sup>梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 56. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>22</sup> Guan, L. (1989, November 3). New artistes get a break at xinyao fest. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>23</sup> Koh, S. T. (1987, August 21). Has xinyao gone pop? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>24</sup> Koh, S. T. (1987, August 21). Has xinyao gone pop? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>25</sup> Leong, W. K. (1985, December 16). *The Straits Times*, p. 17. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>26</sup> Guan, L. B. (1988, October 21). Xinyao's still going strong. *The Straits Times*, p. 8. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>27</sup> Koh, S. T. (1987, August 21). Has xinyao gone pop? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>28</sup> Koh, S. T. (1987, August 21). Has xinyao gone pop? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

<sup>29</sup> Guan, L. B. (1992, May 24). The last strains of xinyao? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>30</sup> Guan, L. B. (1990, November 25). Is xinyao fading out? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>31</sup> 走入新谣的日记, (1995) 彳亍, No. 1, p. 3 Singapore: Intersection Publishing House.

<sup>32</sup> 梁文福 (Ed). (2014). *新谣：我们的歌在这里*, p. 55. 新加坡: 新加坡词曲版权协会.

<sup>33</sup> Guan, L. B. (1990, November 25). Is xinyao fading out? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>34</sup> Guan, L. B. (1990, November 25). Is xinyao fading out? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>35</sup> Guan, L. B. (1990, November 25). Is xinyao fading out? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>36</sup> Guan, L. B. (1992, May 24). The last strains of xinyao? *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

was the 2002 *xinyao* reunion concert featuring singers such as Liang Wern Fook, Pan Ying, The Straws, and Eric Moo.<sup>37</sup> Following the success of the concert, subsequent reunion concerts were organised. Billed as the Reunion Concert (重逢演唱会), these annual ticketed concerts featured *xinyao* veterans and Taiwanese stars. In 2003, the Xinyao Festival was revived.<sup>38</sup>

*Xinyao* again featured in other popular media. The Mandarin musical, *If there're seasons* (天冷就回来), staged in 2007, featured 30 of Liang's compositions, including many of his signature *xinyao* melodies.<sup>39 40</sup> In 2013, local movie *That Girl in Pinafore*, was billed as a tribute to *xinyao*, with many signature *xinyao* tunes used in the movie.<sup>41</sup>  
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Today, *xinyao* has become a signature feature of the 1980s. Although proponents argue that local compositions by young musicians are still part of *xinyao*, the term has come to represent a particular genre of Singaporean songs that emerged in the 1980s.<sup>43 44</sup>

### Quote

“The songs are about country and society and the changes happening around us... This is where *xinyao* is invaluable. It is something that belongs to us.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sng, S. (2002, April 1). A show to xinyao 'bout. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>38</sup> 新谣的文化诉求 (2003, June 30). *联合早报*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>39</sup> 王英敏(2007, July 26). 梁文福推出音乐剧. *新民日报*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>40</sup> 周海丽(2007, July 26) 梁文福30首经典创作串出《天冷就回来》. *联合早报*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>41</sup> Xinyao uniquely Singapore. (2013, August 1). *Straits Times*.

<sup>42</sup> That Girl in Pinafore Facebook profile, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/girlinpinafore/info>

<sup>43</sup> 吴庆康(2000, December 8). 如果没有新谣. *联合早报*. Retrieved from Factiva.

<sup>44</sup> Xinyao uniquely Singapore. (2013, August 1). *Straits Times*.

<sup>45</sup> Chan, B. (2013, August 13). Xinyao uniquely Singapore. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

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