

## Musical practice of Xinyao

Although the Xinyao movement reportedly began in the early 1980s, had ceased by the 1990s and resumed in 2002, its legacy is still felt. In fact, one of the programmes of the opening celebrations of Singapore's first purpose built arts centre, Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay in 2002 was a concert called *XingPop*, a concert of Singapore Chinese pop music from "yesterday till today". In the programme booklet for the event, an article featuring composer and singer Liang Wern Fook was headlined "*Xinyao - The Catalyst that brought about Singapore Mandarin Pop*". As Liang, who has written some of the more well-loved Xinyao songs, mentioned in the article: *One can say that people became conscious of local music after Xinyao started.*<sup>1</sup> Of course, what Liang refers to as "local music" and whether or not it is true of all local music is open to discussion that this overview will address. Nevertheless, the point here is the impact that Xinyao continues to exert.

For this research though, that which is of greater interest is how Xinyao grew to become an occasion in which music became a site and practice through which a part of Singapore society constructed and recognised itself. As social and cultural geography Lily Kong notes in her study 'Making Music at the Margins? A Social and Cultural Analysis of Xinyao in Singapore', Xinyao is not only a practice that is but it in fact helped in the construction of identity among Mandarin-speaking youth and the empowerment of youth communities in its early stage of development.<sup>2</sup>

Xinyao, as a practice then also raises many interesting questions musical and cultural. Its beginnings in the 1980s acknowledge, among other things, expression in a public sphere. Public appearances not only become sites of individual hearing/s but also expressions, whether they involve individuals who act as individuals or individuals who represent a community. This manifestation in public therefore suggests a deeper level of this collective action, namely ways in which it may have been documented, initiated, nurtured and supported. Other questions arise; namely who supported this endeavour, and in what ways.

The following overview is based on articles in the local newspapers<sup>3</sup> as well as oral and e-interviews conducted with participants.<sup>4</sup> It will look at Xinyao not as a homogenous phenomenon but rather as a practice through which various cultures are evident.

## A Brief Chronology

The word itself Xinyao is in fact a shorthand, being an extraction for *xin jia po nian qin*[g]<sup>5</sup> *ren chuang zuo de ge yao* (the songs composed by Singapore youths). *Xin* comes from the word *Xin Jia Po* (Chinese for 'Singapore') and *Yao* from *ge yao* (songs). For the most basic definition of these "songs composed by Singapore youth" however, Lee Tong Soon's entry for Singapore in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* suffices: "a Mandarin vocal genre accompanied by guitars ..".<sup>6</sup>

The first reported Xinyao concert, *Sounds of Teens* was held at the Singapore Conference Hall in 1983 while another took place at Hong Lim Green in 1984 as part of Singapore's 25 years of nation-building and yet another at the Botanic Gardens in 1985. There was sufficient interest created for the then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (popularly known then as SBC, Mediacorp today) to run a radio programme called *Our Singers and Songwriters*, a half-hour programme which was aired on the then Radio 3 on Sunday evenings at 7.30 pm. In 1983, SBC introduced an amateur vocal group category in the Chinese talentime series, resulting in increased participation by a number of *Xinyao* groups. The movement received its first major act of publicity when one of the pioneer groups The Straw had to withdraw from the contest amidst allegations that they had sung professionally. In 1984, another *Xinyao* group, San Ren Dui, came out top in that section of the Talentime contest. The release in May 1984, of the 'first' Xinyao album, *21 Tomorrow*, a compilation by several groups, yielded sales of 20 000 copies; creating a heated surge of interest in print and broadcast media. Songs like *Chance Meeting* by Eric Moo and Huang Huizhen became the first *Xinyao* entry to the Singapore Chinese Billboard charts. Thomas Teo and Dawn Gan became the first *Xinyao* singers to successfully release solo recordings in October 1985 shortly followed by Eric Moo. The Chinese talentime series in 1985 also introduced a 'Local Compositions' category. The first two-night *Xinyao Festival* was held at the World Trade Centre Auditorium in 1985 with help from the Boon Lay Community Centre Readers Club. This was further boosted by the formation in May 1986 of the Young Songwriters Society, which had for its aims, the promotion of *Xinyao* artistes and activities.

By 1987, however, a forum organised by the *Shin Min Daily News* at the Royal Holiday Inn in August and chaired by a record company owner, yielded after much discussion, the view that the songwriters' creativity should not be hampered by the term Xinyao. A newspaper article dated 30 August 1987 had the caption "You could rock at this upbeat Xinyao show", with reference to the annual **Xinyao**

Festival at Kallang Theatre, which featured 'newcomers' such as strobe lights, back-up dancers, four-piece bands, performers outstanding outfits and slick presentation. Also, by the end of the 1980s, many of the songwriters took to singing their own songs, including Liang Wern Fook and Loy Fei Huei.

The early 1990s however, seemed to have been marked by ebbing of interest in the movement. *The Xinyao Festival*, according to a 1994 newspaper article, was "reduced to a school concert playing to a half-empty hall" in 1990. The *Sing Music Awards* in 1990 was scrapped because "too few *Xinyao* albums were submitted for nomination". The COMPASS press release identifies 1992 as the year the *Xinyao Festival* "ceased existence".

How this decline is viewed however is open to interpretation. By the 1990s, the Singapore Chinese pop music scene had begun to look towards the foreign market, with the emphasis on the "exporting" of Singapore Chinese pop music rather than the "importing" of Chinese pop music from the region. As such, composers had to make "adjustments to *Xinyao* so that it could relate to listeners abroad."<sup>7</sup> Here Liang has noted that although "some people may feel that it was a pity *Xinyao* failed to develop beyond a certain stage, I would say that our music had reached another stage of development."

The better part of the 1990s had been concerned with sustaining interest in *Xinyao* but mainly from public and media. In 1993, a venue for *Xinyao* enthusiasts and aspirants to sing and present their songs became possible with the opening of *The Ark Lounge* based on a well-known lounge chain in Taiwan bearing the same name (but not amounting to a franchise). Other lounges followed suit, like one called *The Fifties*. In 1994, a radio programme called *Station of Music* was launched through the joint efforts of Radio 100.3 FM and a *Xinyao* organisation called *Feeling Associates* (reportedly initiated in 1989) with a membership of 10 000 including those from Malaysia. The aim of being selective with what would be aired was to introduce "the better songs to overseas record companies. Hongkong, for example, is greatly in need of songs for its many stars."<sup>8</sup>

Apart from data about participation in *Xinyao* activities in school by the Co-Curricular Activities branch of the Ministry of Education,<sup>9</sup> not much more has been accounted for in the mixed fortunes of the *Xinyao* movement until a two-night sold-out concert at the University Cultural Centre featuring *Xinyao* and Mingge proponents; a COMPASS press-release in 2002 of a revival of the *Xinyao Festival* in mid-2003, the *Xinyao Reunion Concert* on 22 March 2003 featuring

Eric Moo and Friends and more recently, in late May this year of the launch of Liang Wern Fook's book and CD compilation.

Appearances form the most outward and immediate sensory data for perception and reception but ultimately, they beg further questions. Despite the age of fast food practices, it is difficult to imagine a teenage mandarin vocal genre accompanied by guitars appearing in large numbers without sufficient explanation.

A brief overview begins with its appearance as a general term for Mandarin ballads by young Singaporeans who made their public appearance in the early 1980s.<sup>10</sup> According to a newspaper report in 1985, it was a name *these young singers, lyricists and song-writers coined for themselves during a forum on their future three years ago largely due to the unique character they have created and the identity they have forged.*<sup>11</sup> Oral interviews suggest that it was a construction of the Mandarin print media.<sup>12</sup> It should not be surprising for us to note broadcast media interest in this phenomenon. Pang Siew Moi, producer and presenter for the SBC Mandarin Radio 3 programme, **Our singers and songwriters**, was quoted as saying: *It started in 1983 at about the time when Chinese songs written by youngsters here were beginning to gain attention.*<sup>13</sup>

This of course does not inform us when the students began. We are informed that in June 1981, Billy Koh and Ng Guan Seng became friends after knowing each other in the Chinese Orchestra of River Valley High School. As they shared a common passion for music, they often strummed and sang together when they were not having classes. When they entered Singapore Polytechnic, Koh Nam Seng joined them. The trio called themselves **The Straw** for the sake of entering "Talentime" organized by then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). The group was officially formed on 6 September in a fast food restaurant.<sup>14</sup> By the time we hear of students from junior colleges and polytechnics forming groups and performing their own 'ballads' in their schools as well as songs from broadcast media, notable names included Eric Moo's group **Di Xia Tie** and **The Straw**.

### Emergence of Xinyao

**Xinyao** is understood to refer to songs composed by Singapore youths.<sup>15</sup> The role of oral interviews, in relation to other oral interviews and written discourse, serves

more than narratives as we will show. Our initial point is the name Xinyao. Liang Wern Fook recalls *when we started writing songs, we didn't call it Xinyao. Then in 1982, while we were writing a lot of these songs and more concerts and our songs were being played over the radio, the Nanyang Siang Pao conducted a seminar on this phenomenon. Billy Koh attended this seminar. During the seminar, editors and reporters first came up with the term.*<sup>16</sup> According to a newspaper report in 1985, **Xinyao** was a name *these young singers, lyricists and song-writers coined for themselves during a forum on their future three years ago largely due to the unique character they have created and the identity they have forged.*<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps one of the most difficult moments here is to discuss the emergence of a culture that is Xinyao. If culture is a way of life, it follows that manifestations of this culture were obvious not only in the aural but oral and visual sense. We need only be reminded of Blacking's view that *culture, in the general sense of the life-style of a community, is performed and exists as an inevitable outcome of human sociability and creativity.*<sup>18</sup> The extent to which Xinyao was part of everyday discourse would be dependent on a critical mass of participants to warrant its emergence in a more specific frame. Oral accounts refer to the practice of amateur music-making but no specific reference to Xinyao by name. Oral interviews with pioneer **Xinyao** practitioners reveal a curious phrase **Xiao Yuan**. An English translation approximates the college campus. In Taiwan College Songs, the term **Xiao Yuan** holds no ambiguity. Oral interviews also indicate the presence of songs composed by Singapore youth in Polytechnics.<sup>19</sup> In her academic exercise on Singapore ballads, however, Mindy Lin was informed of the presence of CLDDS leaflets and ticketed programmes organised by literary and drama societies in a few junior colleges.<sup>20</sup> It is not surprising therefore when a senior Xinyao proponent referred quite naturally, in an oral interview, to Dawn Gan as Miss **Xiao Yuan**, clumsily put in English, the school garden belle. The alternative, campus belle is also plausible.

For a considerable number of Xinyao practitioners, oral culture featured very strongly in at the everyday experience.<sup>21</sup> Lyric sheets could be available (presumably via aural transcriptions since there is little evidence to suggest publications of them) while tunes were sung by students who were able to recall what they had listened to and disseminate it. In all this of course, there is very little mention of any recordings of these everyday experiences. Whatever songs that formed the repertoire of this experience, songs are likely to be first sung to friends at informal gatherings around the piano, with a guitar or other portable instruments, after school, or informal concerts in schools or junior colleges, ticketed or otherwise. Concerts of this nature in schools were likely to have been

organized by the Chinese Literary and Dramatic Society and records are likely to indicate that while the term xinyao had not appeared, they would have been advertised as concerts featuring students' own compositions.

With respect to choice of songs, it must be borne in mind that an everyday experience such as this would have been the fertile soil for individuals to sprout in a social practice. These are individuals who were likely to have influenced such choices although it is not inconceivable that the passive majority in this experience had a choice in accepting or rejecting songs that contributed towards a repertoire. There are two ways in which this is suggested:

Liang Wern Fok remembers *in the late 1970s, (77/78/79), there was a very important school movement—Xiao Yen Ge Shui (College Songs) Chee Yui, Chai Chee. They are all—the same phenomena (College Songs)...they appeared a little earlier, They had a very good collection of songs. these songs I came to know mainly through the radio...like Liu Chia Cheng/Chang songs. To me he was one of the composers whose songs touched me—he wrote beautifully melodious songs (Wa Chia Cai Na li?)...I think these kinds of songs are somewhere between pop songs and school garden songs.*<sup>22</sup> Lyrics to such songs might have been transcribed from the radio while the songs would be memorised, then disseminated to other schoolmates via oral transmission and transcribed for whatever instruments were available and who could play them to or with them during or after school.

From the accounts, the music was most effectively learnt and memorised aurally and disseminated orally. Koh Nam Seng *started with American folk songs because it was my own interest...through the radio there was a Chinese programme that introduced all the folk songs from all over the world...Radio influenced me a lot during the time I was young...so it introduced me to songs...and I liked to listen to pop songs...I also liked to listen to Taiwanese Campus folk songs...we enjoyed singing them because they really captured the feeling...at campus there was a kind of common...mutual sort of feeling that we shared...so we also sang that kind of songs...then later on we thought of writing our own songs...*<sup>23</sup>

Some practitioners were keen amateur 'songsmiths': *Before writing Xinyao songs, I played Classical piano...when I was in Secondary Four, I started playing some tunes, some melodies on the keyboard besides practising my Classical music...I found this discovery very self-satisfying—I was able to create very simple structured songs but to me just the simple song was enough for me to express myself...simple chords, simple structures, simple compositions...because I began writing poetry and prose earlier in secondary two, I started to put in words for my own music.*<sup>24</sup> Nam Seng's personal view was fuelled by the knowledge that his group was known for its performances of a repertoire of songs...we had a

*group...so we thought of...everytime we sang songs,[it was] American pop songs, Taiwan campus songs. Why don't we have song of ourselves, our own songs...we tried and encouraged each other...*<sup>25</sup>

While there are questions surrounding matters of choice of repertoire, there are quite clearly issues of reflexivity in relation to their choice of songs. Given that the radio emerged as a dominant medium of instruction, oral accounts referred to both English and Mandarin pop, alongside descriptions of **tong su**; roughly translated as the sound of unrefined lyrics which did not speak to them, e.g., singers belting out the tunes, amplified sounds from electric guitars and loud sounds like those from drums, saxophones and brasses.<sup>26</sup>

For Liang Wern Fook, *Xinyao is somewhere between pop songs and artistic songs. The pop factor is that it is simple and easy to listen, very approachable that is, to me, an important element of a pop song; what we call entertainment.*<sup>27</sup> For prominent representatives of this everyday culture, Shiyue and Taiwanese campus songs worked as reinforcement of their creative activities; drawing strength from knowing that contemporaries were doing the same. Moreover, the discovery that their schoolmates were composing their own songs as well indicated they were not alone in these activities...especially among SAP schools (where Mandarin was equal in emphasis to English but no longer a first language option) and Junior College connections.

An alternative reading of Xinyao's predecessors emerges from another site; that of **Shiyue** by students from Nanyang University. According to Zhang Fan, a proponent and supporter of Shiyue and Xinyao, *The link from Shi Yueh to Xinyao is, according to Billy Koh at an interview, from the musical point of view, the spirit of creativity (Nantah) which influenced the Xinyao writers. This is because they attended our concerts (Wern Fook attended our concert)...music based on poems. Our third concert was the concert that Liang Wern Fook, Billy Koh, all the young people attended at the DBS auditorum on April 17 and 18, 1981. We invited singers from Taiwan...*<sup>28</sup> Wern Fook admits to this. *I belong to the generation that listened to Shiyue...this is the first time we got to listen to our own locals...they are just like us...students..a few years older than us...still pursuing their studies..we felt it (their music) was very refreshing and different—their style of music in Shiyue...their efforts had a strong influence and impact on us. In reality, we had been writing songs on our own around this period. Hereafter, we got together and attended other schoolmates school concerts in JCs. However, with respect to the creative process, Nantah's songs are basically songs for the poetry...it is very artistic, has very good literary values. On the other hand, it causes certain*

*restriction...when you need to compose music for the audience, there are a lot of considerations and you probably need to adjust your music.*<sup>29</sup> For participants, it is likely that a range of passive response would have ranged from those who were entranced for those in the inner-circle, to the view from the outside which elicits curiosity and sometimes even envy. Tan Wei Ping, in her study on the socio-cultural perspective of Xinyao qualifies her own engagement in the Xinyao community...when I was in Secondary school and JC days, when I saw people composing their own songs, I looked up to these people who could and were doing what they enjoyed doing in life...like pursuing a dream. It is that kind of spirit that motivates people, but I know I can only be a "supporter", and not be one of them.<sup>30</sup>

Given the reaction against **tong su** sounds of music of Chinese popular culture, and very likely Chinese dialect (Cantonese and Hokkien) popular culture, anecdotal accounts suggest difficulty in emulating Taiwan campus songs, whose style was described as more *refined* and did not always fit in well with the Singapore context.<sup>31</sup> The same seems true also of shiyue where the very good literary text was not amenable to creative processes in music of popular culture.<sup>32</sup>

As praxis, Xinyao acknowledges Shiyue and Taiwan campus songs as their models for appropriation. The question of genealogy is as much matter of perspective and time as much as it is question of space occupied by broadcast and print media. Even if shiyue had been practised in Singapore earlier, Taiwan campus songs were likely to get a first hearing precisely because there were culturally mediated and made public through recorded media before shiyue. It emerges from the oral accounts that Taiwan college campus songs were aural influences but **Shiyue** lent confidence to their creative endeavour in the local frame and this is an important step.

A very obvious but little delved into aspect of this reaction to **tong su** is made a little clearer in remembered in Benjamin Ng Wai-Ming's study of Japanese popular music in Singapore:

*The 1970s saw the golden period of Taiwanese popular songs among Chinese communities in Asia. Most of these Taiwanese songs were Mandarin covers of Japanese enka (urban nostalgic and emotive songs) or kayokyoku (early Japanese pop). They were very popular among the ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Chinese Singaporeans became familiar with Japanese tunes, although few realised that their favourite Mandarin songs [were] borrowed from Japanese tunes.*<sup>33</sup>

Gaps in the knowledge are quite easily filled in here. Shiyue, Xinyao and Taiwan campus songs seem to share an aversion to music of Mandarin popular culture as Zhang Fan elaborates:

*When we organised another concert in 1981, we invited guest singers from Taiwan and Malaysia to present their own music. This was the time Taiwan was undergoing a change which reflected a more personal expression, the same time we were singing our songs. For those in Taiwan, there was a sense of awakening. Prior to that, music of this domain from Taiwan was based more or less on Japanese tunes; they had 50 years of Japanese influence. The youth, university undergraduates in Taiwan turned to writing their own material and songs; that's why they called it college campus songs.*<sup>34</sup>

In the face of an ideological rejection, it is now possible to understand the reaction against **tong su** sounds of music of Chinese popular culture (Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien dialects), and an emulation of Taiwan campus songs, whose style was described as more *refined* and fit in well with Shiyue and Xinyao practitioners in the Singapore context. Wern Fook points this out:

*before Xinyao movement, people did not respect local singers and local song composers...there was the impression these people are just doing it as entertainers, making it as a living...singing getai or making money for singing in the restaurants, night clubs.*<sup>35</sup> When songs are written and sung in a manner approximating popular culture, they invite associations rightly or wrongly. Two things emerge; confidence in the quality of music-making in Singapore and possibly for the first time on a larger scale than single performer or group, composers of Xinyao gained credibility for creative, rather than re-creative effort and found to be acceptable on an international level, albeit small scale.

### Xinyao as post-protest song culture

In terms of history, Xinyao, Shiyue and Mingge had an immediate common influence. Practitioners were heavily influenced by the music that came from composers of protest and anti-war songs of the 1960s. Zhang Fan elaborates: *In 1981 we organised another concert...this time we invited guest singers from Taiwan and Malaysia...to present their own music...For those in Taiwan, there was a sense of awakening. Prior to that, music of this domain from Taiwan was based more or less on Japanese tunes; they had 50 years of Japanese influence. The youth, university undergraduates in Taiwan turned to writing their own material and songs; that's why they called it College Songs...We were not influenced by them...we were already writing songs around 1975...April 17 and 18, 1981, we organised another concert at DBS auditorum. We invited singers from Taiwan...three of them who became the pioneers of the Taiwan local song*

*revolution...During that time they expressed themselves through songs much like the ones Bob Dylan wrote and sang.*<sup>36</sup>

Advocates of **Shiyue**, **Taiwan College campus songs** and **Xinyao** seemed to share a basic need to articulate their newly-found individual expression in song; fuelled by American folk artists like Don Maclean, Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul & Mary, to mention a few.<sup>37</sup> It attracted an age group who would empathise with, and appreciate the profundity, sophistication and subtlety of the texts in these songs. However, an entirely different and naïve view also emerges, *during my time in Singapore Polytechnic, a group of friends liked to sing pop songs—American pop songs like **Blowing in the Wind** and we liked to sing in harmony, three parts, like Peter Paul and Mary, like Bob Dylan...I loved to listen to these songs (I still listen to them) because they gave me a sense of what is alive in a song...during the 60's, there were wars, and one heard voices being raised in a song...At the time we didn't really understand it totally ...songs like **Where have all the flowers gone**...maybe it's a love song, we didn't really understand that it was about the war at that time...we just liked the music...guitar and voices that harmonise...it captured me...that is how I came to music.*<sup>38</sup>

This description put into sharp focus the nature of personal adaptation and appropriation. Almost paradoxically, music opens experience to the potentials and potentialities of life but does not necessarily prescribe, proscribe or even describe them. This point is made when practitioners reveal their attraction for the **secondary process of music** of protest-songs as the **primary** motivation for appropriating musical structures to suit their literary texts.<sup>39</sup> As with the range of social forces and processes prevalent in local and global cultures, Xinyao retains consonance with syncretic processes in contemporary cultures which co-opt music into a larger totality.

### Xinyao as Mandarin culture

That Xinyao was lived, practised and ritualised in Mandarin is too obvious to be ignored. As concerns musical and textual relationships in art song, Edward Cone tells us *A song is primarily the melodic recitation...of a poem.*<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Kramer views it further as a reading of the text;<sup>41</sup> encompassing critical and performative aspects. The act of reading involves phonetic, dramatic and semantic aspects of the poetry. *Poetry*, says Friedrich Schlegel, is '*spiritual music*'... but *every art obeys musical principles, and on the highest level itself becomes music.*<sup>42</sup> In this respect, the concept of **shuo chang** emerges here largely because it is situated in the Mandarin conversant environment.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere I have used it relation to the songs of Liang Wern Fook as a way in which music is implicated in the articulation of

his individual voice. It is likely that at the physiological and anthropological level, there will be more individual voices as composers.

**Xinyao** was described as contributing to the construction of youth identity in Singapore, even though Chinese ethnic communities account for at least 77% of the population in Singapore.<sup>44</sup> First, on a general level, to consider **Xinyao** the construction of youth identity, is tantamount to assuming **Xinyao** was known, accessible and a relevant example to other practitioners in the musical worlds of **Bhangra, Mat-Rokers, South Indian film**, as well as music of **popular Western culture, jazz**, to name a few. A community of only a hundred in a musical practice is still a valid and unique community of supporters and believers of their practice. Second, there is an assumption that Xinyao was synonymous with the entire Chinese community in Singapore. In my informal discussions with many tertiary level students and even postgraduate researchers, Xinyao and their public manifestations were not known to a significant proportion of them. Mindy Lin, in her research on Xinyao, points out that SAP schools and Junior Colleges were likely to be the nexus of Xinyao activity, since they had highly developed CLDD societies.<sup>45</sup> The simple constructions, simple chords and memorable melodic lines enabled practitioners to be most effective with the sophistication of proficiency they possessed in Mandarin. We only need reminding that popular culture was very likely to overshadow this more sophisticated Mandarin folk-pop practice, given its longer and more established praxis.

Even before Independence, English and Malay had been valorised as the dominant language of communication across a spectrum of activities ranging from commercial to mundane while Chinese dialects were the mainstay and discourse of communication and commerce in the Chinese community. It is highly unlikely that Mandarin would have been able to compete with Chinese dialects as part of everyday discourse. Mandarin may have succeeded as a main language for those who saw currency in it but English was always a more persuasive language as it guaranteed a more firm foothold in the realities of commerce, science and technology in colonial and post-colonial Singapore. Moreover, the emphasis on industrial and manufacturing science and technology as well its import (and its importance) from English-speaking worlds allowed English to gain currency over Mandarin and this was clearly a disadvantage to persons from the Mandarin conversant community.<sup>46</sup> This disadvantage, it can be said, extended even to the arts, most prominently in Music.<sup>47</sup> Liang Wern Fook spoke of the reception of music as a culture of entertainment and potentially ruinous for family values. Wern Fook however, mentioned studying western classical piano and little mention is

made of parental objection to studying music. What was the nature role and identity of classical piano that allowed Wern Fook access to music?

To what extent was Xinyao's prominence in their public settings dependent on the proliferation of Mandarin in the social and cultural fabric of the various ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore in the 1980s? For a non-Mandarin speaker, the **Speak Mandarin campaign**, initiated in 1978, created a different awareness and consciousness of Mandarin as a language, with greater impact, I suspect, on the English-speaking community in Singapore. The decided focus on the practice of Mandarin at all levels of social interaction, from the service industry even to the food vendors, it seems to me, provided for a galvanisation of social forces not previously achieved. Consider also the transformation of Radio Television Singapore into the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation – a civil service to a government-linked enterprise, which yielded for the first time a concerted and larger scale production of local drama serials in Mandarin based on Singaporean experiences; National Service and the Japanese Occupation (**The Awakening**) and very successfully, the quintessential coffee shop (**Kopi-Oh**). It is difficult to think of Xinyao's gained prominence in public settings without the concerted proliferation of Mandarin as a language of unitary consciousness.

An alternative reading would be to consider the motivation and that is the view of one Xinyao exponent:

*To me Mandarin... at that time I don't think it really had...the effect of making concrete the community (Chinese)...its all for economic purposes...it was not a focus on language...not a cultural economy...if Xinyao is considered a cultural miracle it is...because we had something to say...but if you're suggesting that this campaign helped us...at best it indirectly helped us...It's a sad thing to say from a cultural point of view.<sup>48</sup>*

Given its press reviews, its sudden rise to prominence such that it was considered music of Mandarin popular culture, that later, that a Xinyao exponent was used to promote the Speak Mandarin Campaign of the 1990s, Xinyao, at least according to its practitioners, must have emerged an opportunity for the music industry. For those who believed in the guitar and Bob Dylan, this must have been a transgression of their original ideals. Nam Seng sees it differently...*If you understand it from a business sense, its not a loss but if you view it from a cultural point of view this is just pop music...Xinyao was different it wasn't pop it wasn't commercial...I don't mind commercialisation...because it really helped to promote...but because that is the nature of commercial growth...you can't do anything about it...you just want to produce music that people love to listen...we*

*are not producing music in which I want to...if the first reason is to make money...I don't think this is wrong...but not from a cultural point of view ...if my first reason is culture, I want to know how I feel, what I want to say about the society...if one wants to make money out of this (Xinyao)...then its business.*<sup>49</sup>  
(emphasis mine based on the nuance at interview)

Xinyao did become politically implicated in Speak Mandarin Campaigns and particularly so in the 1990s. Tan Weiping makes this point in her e-interview, how in the 1990s, *the official organisation tried to use popular culture to create influence on Singaporeans. Xinyao members like Cai Li Lian was chosen to be "spokesperson" for the **Speak Mandarin Campaign** and Xinyao was included in the programme for the **Chinese Cultural Festival** etc.*<sup>50</sup> In **2000**, The Chinese Heritage Series comprised arts and cultural performances ranging from **xinyao** and hand puppetry to Chinese orchestra while in 1999, promotion of Chinese language and culture in an interactive and fun way through an outdoor series of Chinese Heritage programmes included Mandarin acappella and **xinyao**, opera, orchestra and Mandarin story-telling.<sup>51</sup> Yet in the chronology of events, the early 1990s seemed to have been marked by ebbing of interest in the movement. The **Xinyao** Festival, according to a 1994 newspaper article, was *reduced to a school concert playing to a half-empty hall* in 1990. The **Sing Music Awards** in 1990 was scrapped because *too few Xinyao albums were submitted for nomination*. The COMPASS press release identifies 1992 as the year the **Xinyao** Festival *ceased existence*. The better part of the 1990s had been concerned with sustaining interest in **Xinyao** but mainly from public and media. In 1993, a venue for **Xinyao** enthusiasts and aspirants to sing and present their songs became possible with the opening of **The Ark Lounge** based on a well-known lounge chain in Taiwan bearing the same name (but not amounting to a franchise). Other lounges followed suit, like one called **The Fifties**. In 1994, a radio programme called **Station of Music** was launched through the joint efforts of Radio 100.3 FM and a **Xinyao** organisation called **Feeling Associates** (reportedly initiated in 1989) with a membership of 10 000 including those from Malaysia. The aim of being selective with what would be aired was to introduce *the better songs to overseas record companies. Hongkong, for example, is greatly in need of songs for its many stars*<sup>52</sup>.

### Xinyao as Commercial Culture

The controversy of entertaining commercial aspirations, even as it gained prominence, is a long debated issue and evenly matched in argument. The issue had already been broached by the time of an English newspaper article dated 4 July 1985. Team leader of a production team called **Fame** Tan Swee Wan said, *we have*

*been singing for youngsters all along. But now we are growing up and we want to break out of it, our songs cannot remain simple and naïve always. Xinyao songs are not for students only. They are songs written and sung by young people who have a common interest*<sup>53</sup>. The album they helped put together was called **Fei**, translated as fly. Swee Wan said, *we adopted the name to signify that the record is our attempt to ‘fly out’ of the old image of Xinyao. We don’t want to restrict ourselves to simple compositions suitable for students only. We aim to reach out to adults and Fei is only the first step. Though we have made our songs commercial, we have not deviated from our purpose of promoting locally-produced songs. We are still creating and singing songs for art’s sake*<sup>54</sup>. Compare for instance an understanding of **Xinyao** in 1983 when *Chinese songs written by youngsters here were beginning to gain attention*.<sup>55</sup> By August 1987 at the forum there was already an identity crisis, the culmination of a debate spanning at least two years when **Xinyao** practitioners were confronted with the prospect of tapping into the recording industry of entertainment culture in Mandarin. By 1994, *the term ‘Xinyao’ no longer means the raw, folksy and school-like songs that guitar strumming students sang in the past. It has now come to encompass a varied and sometimes more sophisticated range of songs that even Taiwanese and Hongkong stars are crooning to*.<sup>56</sup>

Even when **Xinyao** practitioners probably entertained the possibility of using the machinery of popular culture to gain wider dissemination, admission to the lack of experience, (not only with the musical and technical aspects or the recording industry but also in negotiating their creative output with an industry that viewed creativity from a financially rewarding perspective), Pan Cheng Lui, the **shyiu** practitioner suggested a return to first principles, *they should have an ideal and work towards it. There’s nothing wrong with Xinyao going commercial. However, the composers should not compromise and lower standards or write to suit market demands*. He felt that the young people’s songs should reflect their feelings towards their surrounding, say, for example, the examination system. *Xinyao nowadays tend to be descriptive but that’s not enough. The lyrics should convey a message. For example, the songs of Hongkong singer, Sam Hui, are highly commercial but through them, Sam voices the feelings of workers and other classes of people. We understand what he is trying to say. Our young song composer must strive to do that kind of thing*. Mr. Pan also felt that clan associations and funds could help the young composers financially in organising concerts and cutting records to ensure quality control.<sup>57</sup>

The setting up of a commercial sphere for Xinyao inevitably impinges on the changing role of creator as polished performer with its concomitant demands. This

change in priority potentially acts as a double-edged sword. From interviews I conducted with those who sang for their friends, Xinyao in its earliest manifestation created no real boundary between good and less convincing performances. There were clearly in their ways of thinking, priorities **other** than a polished performance. They admired the Xinyao pioneers but their descriptions stop short of idolising them. The presence or absence of productive forces of creative and recreative endeavour in a community supporting **Xinyao** transpires in a newly negotiated tension between the creator as social author and his/her role and function in a musical world geared now towards a standard of excellence demanded in broadcast media of popular culture. What space is left for the aspiring Xinyao creator who just wants to be heard in concert with his/her friends?

On the other hand, what if Xinyao's primary goal in commercial endeavour was is a protection of "community identity", a recovery of its ideals and spirituality, not an exploitation of it? Purists' envision Xinyao as raw guitar-strumming youth songs and seem opposed to the glitzy, pop-like stance taken up by the current generation. Parvati Nair discusses the dilemma in a marginalised community in Spain whose only recourse to prominence in the public sphere was a recording that was relatively successful economically-speaking and provided for them the only means of cultural recognition through the music-making.<sup>58</sup> The issues at stake here no longer hinge on economics but of cultural recognition and dialogue. One facet focuses on culture as economic impetus while another focuses on economics for cultural recognition.

Wern Fook saw Xinyao's largest single contribution as the point at which singers and composer were respected for their creative effort.<sup>59</sup> By placing Xinyao in the marketplace, Xinyao was inevitably engaged at a larger platform. Acknowledgement of Xinyao in the discourse of musical practices in Singapore and even beyond it sets up the possibility of negotiating cultural differences and cultural identities. How else can one explain Malayan Mandarin art-song, Christian fervour, American folk and protest songs, and sonic flavours of other local Singaporean communities in Xinyao recordings? Are Xinyao practitioners themselves not consumers of world music made available to them by MNCs and TNCs that cross-cultural encounters allow their own musicality to survive and grow?<sup>60</sup>

Parvati Nair informs us of the propensity of a musical practice as an orally transmitted cultural form to adapt to new circumstances whilst maintaining the façade of authenticity and homogenous identity. When an alien becomes “one of the family”, the alien both extends the limits of identity of a musical practice and updates the practice which is so often relegated as ‘primitive’ to the margins of modernity, in an electronic age. The presence of an alien in such a practice locates the participants in the midst of technical innovation and invention of a tradition.<sup>61</sup> The central concern therefore of a musical practice’s evolution is its marketability. In the context of a musical practice seeking international markets, this is no more than...*market for a commodity*. As such, a musical practice foregrounds the connections and tensions between the cultural and the economic in the context of both the local and global.

Nowhere is this more keenly felt than the tension between re-creations of ‘authentic’ Xinyao culture and contemporary effort which has had derisory labels of **pop-songs** and lyrics which betray a lack of language proficiency in Mandarin. In an unusual way, this particular version of Xinyao culture becomes crucial in establishing support in numbers, much in the same way Blacking identifies participation in music in terms of distance from the music which ranges from enticement to entrenchment. Tan Wei Ping offers her own thoughts:

*Kit Chan and Stephanie Sun are more like the new incarnations of the former Xinyao singers—their songs are largely commercial and catered to the current song-listening Chinese students, and I do not compare them to the earlier 'down-to-earth/simple' compositions that Xinyao originated from. I would not regard Kit Chan as Xinyao singer, but a "post-Xinyao" singer.*<sup>62</sup>

The other consequence of constructing a commercial package out of Xinyao which began as a secondary and post-secondary endeavour, is the intimidation...*the school kids they see their role models...the products...and these products are produced professionally...and if they still retain the cassette or guitar, they'll be embarrassed. I think that is probably the reason. To go up to that standard...there are fewer choices...doesn't mean they cannot write good melodies...just that the packaging is like the first generation when it first began with Tomorrow 21.*<sup>63</sup>

Who should be included in Xinyao culture? The litmus tests of identity and identification surface when two names emerge: Li Wei Song and Li Si Song. According to Zhang Fan, *Si Song was often not associated with Xinyao...he is not really involved. Si Song is from a different route...I mentioned the Singapore Artists Association in the days of the 1950s...the chairman of the association at the time was Fu Su Yuin who was a very popular singer in the 1950s. When I was in secondary school (15 years old), I joined the association in the choir. Therefore I managed to associate with this group of entertainers...local entertainers...besides singers, they are magicians, drama actors, old guard...Wang Sa and Yeh Fong. Si Song and Wei Song, with their father's encouragement became the students of Fu Su Yuin...In the beginning, Si Song and Wei Song started out with a very clear commercial motive...pop approach...in the early days they even cut records...got an award from China that gave them recognition but then they could not make it in the pop scene...one record wonders like Jimmy Yeh...but they kept an interest in the professional level doing teaching...Li Wei Song singing school...Si Song established himself as a much demanded producer...EMI gives him singers to do recordings... they started off writing pop songs...a completely different route...and also important element...remember I talked about TCS or SBC drama series...each song...they wrote so many of these theme songs...they have this platform you know this including the theme song from the Awakening (Wu Souw Nanyang) but Wei Song & Si Song wrote a lot of theme songs they have connection with the TCS producers [because] they have [earned] this trust....*

Tan Wei Ping offers a slightly different but balanced reading. *Xinyao was supported by a very niche group of young people - not very big, but definitely very enthusiastic and committed students from about 16-20 years of age, mainly JC and tertiary. In the early 1980s it was never lucrative until they took on a commercial style in the late 1980s, where music style changed into more complicated musical arrangements. I feel that recruiting new blood in song composing area creates the intention for the resurgence of Xinyao festival, but they do not have to use the term "Xinyao" again, since the songs now are so different from the 1980 or 1990s Xinyao. The youngsters today have no idea what Xinyao is. The use of the old term **Xinyao** is the work of former members of Xinyao and their nostalgia for the past.*<sup>64</sup>

## Xinyao as Authentic Culture

It would seem that the very space that they occupied in their sojourn in the school garden (**Xiao Yuan**) was being re-appropriated in or transferred to an inauthentic and incongruent space. Discussion already surfaced the association with Xinyao, as **popular folk culture**, alongside **shiyue** or **Taiwan college campus songs** or both. The frequent mention of the guitar in newspaper articles as well as oral accounts by **Xinyao** supporters is a revelation of how much more than a guitar it is. Folk songs, particularly the songs of Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul and Mary and Don Maclean, are nearly always accompanied by a guitar (or more). The guitar in this context no longer functions as just another musical instrument of convenience and practicality; it is transformed, in folk pop genres, into a symbol as powerful as the lyrics of the song, as magnetic as the musical processes in the songs. The guitar in the context of **Xinyao** makes a powerful spiritual and physical connection with its community of supporters, particularly its audience. Unlike the virtuoso musician who is invested with the responsibility to emote in public while his/her audience participates passively, the folk pop icon is somehow invested with social responsibility to amplify and empathise the expression of his/her audience.

It is no accident the newspapers refer to the old xinyao in terms of its *humble beginnings*, or *raw folksy ballads*. It is this spatial representation of Xinyao that is best known and adhered to. It should not surprise one that reliving and recreating that past became an attraction at selected Xinyao Lounges at the beginning. An alteration of these roles has ramifications for audience reception. Tan Wei Ping offers more, *Xinyao can be heard at 'Xinyao theme' restaurants such as Ark's Lounge in Apollo Centre and Suntec and musicdreamer.com at Marina Square. From what I know, not all lounges share the same ideals of "Xinyao", commercialization has become a bigger part of the setting up of lounges. Even members of the same "Xinyao" group have different views on "Xinyao". Some stick to the non-commercialised songs of the 1980s and disregard the commercialised songs as Xinyao, whereas others think that both the 1980s and the commercialised songs can be considered Xinyao. Music dreamer is one lounge which holds a lot of memories for Xinyao of the 1980s. They have allocated specific days of a month for Xinyao songs to be played, and they call it "Xinyao zhi ye", which means "the night for Xinyao". The bosses of music dreamer were members of a Xinyao group in the 1990s called "jiao cha dian", means "intersection". That may explain why they feel so much for Xinyao and the movement itself in the 1980s. They are also quite active now in helping out in the Xinyao festivals. From what I know, "tan chang ren" is another lounge which is*

*still very supportive of the 1980s Xinyao. Lounges emerged in the 1990s but not all managed to survive; "mu ji ta" closed down.*<sup>65</sup>

With regard to audience reception, some e-interview accounts suggest revelations about the recent Xinyao Reunion Concerts featured songs that from *the Eric Moo concert that I attended recently practitioners of xinyao came mainly from the Mandarin speaking community...from working to middle class...because the words are witty, humorous and meaningful they attract both intellectuals and the working class people alike. These practitioners were mostly in their late 20s and early 30s, the ones who encountered xinyao during their college days and speak Mandarin as a first language to peers and with family members...the genre of xinyao will probably never attract the "ah bengs" and "ah lians" due to the intellectual content [of the lyrics].*<sup>66</sup>

#### Support systems in everyday settings

In 1986, the Peoples Association organised a nation-wide concert to bring together all the young music enthusiasts to let them say what they wanted heard. They were youth from **Xinyao** groups of 14 community centres singing with two guitars at most providing the rhythm. In the words of its Regional supervisor (South) Mr. Low Foo Yong: *we hope more young people in other community centres will form their own Xinyao groups as it's a healthy and creative activity.* Community centres catered to **Xinyao** performing groups in which 'boys and girls next door' sing about their feelings...any theme that appeals to young sentiments. The Peoples Association, which in 1986 had 24 such groups under its fold, hoped to popularise local ballads by working with **Xinyao** performing artistes and those who had made their mark with celebrated **Xinyao** hits. Mr. Kwok Kian Chow, then an assistant director of programmes in the PA, said, *Xinyao represents the emergence of a Singaporean expression in music. We hope local compositions in the other languages will come just as far. PA's role is to facilitate and coordinate. We want to create more opportunities for enthusiasts to perform, meet and grow through activities like concerts, competition and music camps.* Mr. Kwok added that while performing artistes can provide inspiration to budding singers, PA could provide technical support in management, production and administration. Mr. Billy Koh, a **Xinyao** pioneer saw a role for both grassroot and professional bodies: *The PA can help popularise Xinyao at the grassroots level. Professionals can do so by pushing their hits up the charts.* For example, more than 70 **Xinyao** enthusiasts from community centres took part in a PA-organised three-day **Xinyao** music camp at

Pasir-Ris. Veterans and professionals like Eric Moo, Billy Koh and Dawn Gan were invited to give tips and share their experiences. It was believed **Xinyao** would eventually catch on with the English-educated Chinese community. The first CC organised **Xinyao** concert was held at Hong Lim community centre in 1984; the same time as the formation of the first CC **Xinyao** performing group. The PA expected more to be set up. *Its good to see other organisations making efforts to promote Xinyao, said Mr. Kwok. PACT (Peoples Association Cultural Troupe) included these local ballads in its performances.* Meanwhile, Mr. Tang Guan Seng, the Parliamentary Secretary (Education) said at the closing ceremony at this inaugural **Xinyao** Music camp that students would benefit more from **Xinyao** if they discussed the songs with musicians, artists and literature writers. Mr. Tang said experienced and accomplished senior musicians would give the youngsters not only spiritual support but also practical guidance. This would help raise the standard of Xinyao.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, as the **Xinyao** Festival in 1987 indicated quite clearly, only three entries from the Community Centres and schools shared the limelight. This may have prompted Dawn Gan to announce that she hoped Xinyao would not be tarnished by the introduction of awards. *I hope everyone will continue to sing Xinyao out of interest.*<sup>68</sup>

When Xinyao moved from the School hall setting to the strobe-lights, the way it was reported in the newspapers was that of the numbers of amateur groups and CCs involved...their participation was in a sense alienated from the Awards...people who got the awards were in the scene...big names...there was only one group from a CC which picked up any award of any sort. The situation at the Sing Awards in 1987 could well have been a double-edged sword; while it recognised and affirmed efforts by its better known participants but at the same time it discouraged, indirectly, the very people who wanted to belong to this Xinyao community and were not there thinking of winning any awards. Why then were the Xinyao Awards introduced? Nam Seng offered his version, *we wanted people to be able to recognise us...we needed to recognise ourselves as well...we needed to encourage our singers, our composers...that time we were in the Young Songwriters Association...I was the chairman...we wanted to promote...an aim to write music. If they wanted to give us something to say...as the pioneers, they would have thought that we were one of the goals...they would also like to have these goals...then this [Sing Awards] would be a form of encouragement to them...we didn't really want to cut them off...but if we don't have this we really don't have anything to aim for.*<sup>69</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Paradoxically, while Xinyao provided opportunities for school garden song amateurs with undreamed of professional recording contracts, focussing on the power of exquisite Mandarin poetry riding on the directness of musical material, it was to become by the 1990s an entrepreneurial package and commercial endeavour. By 1994, *the term 'Xinyao' no longer means the raw, folksy and school-like songs that guitar strumming students sang in the past. It has now come to encompass a varied and sometimes more sophisticated range of songs that even Taiwanese and Hongkong stars are crooning to.*<sup>70</sup> Much of the nostalgia for the past both in spirit and sound can only be recovered in select Music lounges. On the other hand music of present popular culture in Mandarin cannot deny the influence of nor avoid reference to Xinyao.

Tan Wei Ping reflects on the current reality: *We cannot compare schools and Community Centres in the present with those of the past. Furthermore, Xinyao is not a term familiar with students today. Different decades have their own popular culture. If their Xinyao is no longer a popular culture among youngsters, then schools and Community centres are a non-issue. We must not forget Xinyao began as a "creation" by a group of people in the 1980s. For this group of people, Xinyao had a lot of significance; from "nothing" to "something" is a great process. But after we have our own songs, the emphasis has changed. Community centres and schools are important in the "creation" process, and the period of passing the Xinyao spirit down, but when it is no longer popularised by and among the youth, the function is not there.*<sup>71</sup>

Wei Ping's last word on the subject draws on her own interviews with Liang Wern Fook: *I feel that recruiting new blood in song composing area is the intention for the resurgence of the Xinyao festival, but they do not have to use the term "xinyao" again, since the songs now are so different from the 1980 or 1990s xinyao. and the youngsters nowadays have no idea on what is xinyao. They use back the old term "xinyao", I think its the ex members of xinyao may be seeking their feeling for the past...but different people explain Xinyao differently...Dr. Liang suggests it is not a sense of "past", but about the "future".*

Paradoxically, what we do know about Xinyao is more of what it does much less what it is. What was the role played by Xinyao in its community of believers? Was the music the easiest vehicle for transmission of Mandarin youth concerns? Or was Xinyao a social phenomenon most clearly articulated through music? More than two decades later Xinyao is still as exciting as it is enigmatic.

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- 6 Lee Beng Beng, op.cit.
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- 17 Leong Weng Kam, Youths share their songs—*Straits Times*, September 13, 1985, p.13.
- 18 Blacking, John, How musical is man?, p.3.
- 19 Oral Interview with Koh Nam Seng, 13 December 2003, Singapore Life Church 10am. Nam Seng was studying in Singapore Polytechnic at the time.
- 20 Mindy Lin, Singaporean ballads, Academic Exercise, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 2004.

21 E-interview with Mindy Lin.

22 Oral interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003.

23 Oral interview with Koh Nam Seng, 11 December 2003.

24 Oral Interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003.

25 Oral interview with Koh Nam Seng, 11 December 2003.

26 One is reminded here of the proliferation of music of popular culture among the Chinese Community. Oral and anecdotal accounts with practitioners reveal the influence of Taiwan and Hong Kong, much less China. The reference to instrumentation like saxophone, brasses and trumpets, is likely also to imply a situation of night-club or cabaret.

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44 Lily Kong; "Making Music at the Margins"? A social and cultural analysis of Xinyao in Singapore, *Asian Studies Review*, Vol 19, no.3, April 1996, pp.100-124, p.115.

45 Mindy Lin, e-interview.

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47 For instance, in the Visual Arts, Portraits, brush painting, calligraphy were considered worthy pursuits alongside painting and drawing, while street theatre or wayang remained firmly in place in the Chinese community compared to Western opera and even Gilbert and Sullivan. This is contrasted with the learning of Chinese traditional instruments as compared to the learning of western classical music.

48 Interview with Koh Nam Seng, 13 December 2003, Singapore Life Church, 10am

49 Ibid.

50 E-interview with Tan Wei Ping.

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