

## Shiyue

Shiyue's presence in music of popular folk culture has been somewhat understated and this exploration can only serve as a preliminary view to its understanding. Its historical position, unfortunately, is that of a slightly poorer relation next to the Taiwan college songs – Mingge – which had commercial and more concerted air-space, reaching out to aspiring pre-Xinyao practitioners before Xinyao was identified in 1982. Strangely the strongest defence via its accounting for it exists alongside Xinyao; one view of Shiyue holds it as a predecessor to Xinyao.

### Chronology

A source known as the Xinyao Diary<sup>1</sup> marks the year 1978 as the beginning of *shiyue* or poetic music. Students of the **Nanyang University Poetic Society** decided to write music to their own poems and performed them. There is a sense of history in that poets even from the Tang Dynasty were known to perform their prose or poetry by approximating their delivery to what we would identify as music. Unfortunately, this area of enquiry has not been pursued in much greater depth and eventually we are told that from 1982, *Shiyue* evolved into *xinyao* and *xinyao* developed from here.

As a practice, Shiyue somehow lagged behind Xinyao largely because there was a way in which Xinyao arrived at a propitious moment in a narrative that we identify with musical practice in Singapore. Shiyue is defined literally as poem songs in a parallel way, as does Art Song in Euro-American practices. One of many questions that remain unanswered is the practice of shiyue. Just as Shiyue's rise to prominence in 1978 marks its solidification, there are some questions as to its practice which must have preceded its bracketing.

The Story of Shiyue reportedly begins with a poem:

*You are a fallen star  
Freed from the heavenly realms  
I am a boatman  
Carrying with me beautiful stories  
A harbour that's no longer  
Waves that are brittle  
Declaring the soft cries of thunder  
We tell  
Of little stories  
Quite forgetting the shores and lands we have reached*<sup>2</sup>

Pan Zhenglei created this story in a lecture theatre at the **Nanyang University** (or Nantah) Arts/Humanities Faculty. He passed this story on to Zhang Fan who wrote the music for **Story**. Through, this simple account we are informed of the beginning of *shiyue*. When they were not having classes, these ambitious members of the **Nantah Poetry Society** often strum away on their guitars while translating their thoughts into poems before embellishing them with music.

On the fourth of August 1978, they put together ten such works of “*shiyue*” (“poetic music”) and presented them at the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry Exhibition Hall. Within a matter of few months, on 1 December 1978, the **Nanyang University Poetry Society** once again held a *shiyue* performance. Some of the seventeen songs showcased, **Waving the Hands, Outside the House, By the Lake**, to name a few, became very popular on campus. Even after graduation, Zhang Fan and his friends continued to be enthusiastic about music. At that time, the **Singapore Association for Activities of the Elderly** was raising funds for the Elderly Clubhouse” Building Fund. These young people then showed that their enthusiasm was for more than just their art alone by holding the **February Green Grass Shiyue Concert** in the name of the **Singapore Youth Association**. On 24 August 1980, the **Aljunied Literary and Translation Society** was established, and later became heavily involved in the promulgation of *shiyue*. 1981 marked the year when Minyao and Shiyue practitioners met. A year later, between 17 and 18 April 1981, the **Aljunied Literary and Translation Society** brought together the **Johor Bahru Bai Zhuan Choir**, pioneers of Taiwanese contemporary folk songs **Yang Tsu Chun** and **Wu Tsu-Tsu**. Altogether, 23 songs were performed in this concert called **Wind in April**. In the same year, National Junior College also organized the first ever performance of original compositions in July.

On 1 February 1982, members of *shiyue* organized an exhibition named “An Exhibition of History”. The focus of the exhibition was on the history of Singapore-Malaysian literature. After this exhibition, they were “exhausted”. In addition, having just stepped into the working world, they decided to become less “active” and focus all their energies on the literary periodical “Stratosphere” and another literary publication (“Stratospheric Literary Books”).

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 “Talentine” organized by then Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). The group was officially formed on 6 September in a fast food restaurant.

Although *shiyue* had quietened down, 1982 was in fact the peak period of folk songs in Taiwan. Thus, the students on the campuses would be singing American folk songs of the sixties and the seventies if they were not strumming and singing Taiwanese folk songs. At the same time, one question seemed to plague each of the young people here: “Where are *our* songs? Are we going to just sing the songs of others forever?” Thus, many youngsters, especially junior college students, started forming groups with like-minded friends around them. Initially, their songs were called (“Sing folk songs”). This was later interpreted as (“Singaporean folk songs”) or (Original songs composed by Singaporean youths”). Since then, (“*xinyao*”) had been flourishing on the prolific music scene.

Liang Wern Fook’s own accounts are worth the quote:

*In the past for our generation, our parents forbade us to listen to them, particularly to the educated group—that differentiates between artistic and entertainment songs. In the older generation, children were encouraged to listen to Nantah (shiyue). Before (shiyue) in the 70s, Most of the songs we listened to in the 70’s I would describe as one-way traffic—either from Taiwan or Hongkong—music from Taiwanese films—love songs...also theme songs from Hongkong TV serials...basically Taiwan Lui Chia Chang—important prolific write in Hongkong it was Hu Chia Hui—considered the godfather of “theme songs”. We got very few opportunities to listen to then unlike our parents generation where they listened to quite a lot of songs from China in the 50s and 60s...Mandarin and Cantonese—Sam Hui...before **Shiyue**, there hadn’t been much of students or undergrads writing their own songs, especially among the Chinese community in Singapore. Nantah’s songs were basically songs written for poetry. To me, although I myself write a lot of poems, it will, on the one hand it is very artistic, it has very good literary values. On the other hand, it will cause a 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...In the conflict between musical content and lyrical content, it is the phrasing of the words. Usually when it comes to poetry writing, you tend to use more profound words and have it more condensed...in many ways Xinyao is different from shiyue. I belong to the generation that listened to shiyue. In 1981*

*and 1982, the Shiyue group of people, our seniors, organised an annual concert at the DBS Auditorium. I remember this very clearly. Before this, we listened to Taiwanese singers but this is the first time we got to listen to our own locals and they are not singers and they are not shiyue professional singers, whether trained or doing this for money...they were just like us...students...a few years older than us....and they were still pursuing their studies...we felt their music was very refreshing and different—the style of Shiyue. At the time we were studying in JCs (Hwa Chong, NJC and Jurong JC) and Polytechnics. As the audience that played an important role in our lives. Their efforts had a strong influence and impact on us. In reality, we had been writing songs on our own around this period.<sup>3</sup>*

There are at least two known practitioners, Pan Cheng Lui and Zhang Fan. Of the two, I spoke with Zhang Fan:

*Taiwan, at the time was undergoing a change which reflected a more personal expression.... 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 and university undergraduates in Taiwan turned to writing their own material and songs; that's why they called it Xiao Yuen Ge Shui (College Songs). There were three guys who became the pioneers of the Taiwan local song revolution...during that period in time they expressed themselves through songs; a parallel with Bob Dylan in the USA in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>*

*We were writing these songs, **shiyue**, around 1975 music based on poems...around the same time as the Taiwan Movement so we were not influenced by them. This is because they attended our concerts (Wern Fook attended our concert)—attending to music based on poems. There were a few concerts that we organised...the first concert was August 5 1978. This concert coincided with a poem exhibition at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Exhibition hall. This poem exhibition featured Chinese calligraphy with poems—a sort of multidisciplinary exhibition—painting related to poems. So we also presented the songs that reflected the poems. This is the first concert which we had which was quite a success. These are the songs that we sang...the few songs that I wrote...I was the only composer. But then the second concert that we organised, there was only music....no exhibitions this time. This second concert 1<sup>st</sup> September 1978 was held at Nanyang University Arts Faculty main lecture hall. The third concert was the concert that Liang Wern Fook, Billy Koh, all the young people attended on February 9 & 10, 1980, at the DBS auditorium. This was a fund-raiser for a Spring concert. Here we described the songs that we sang. On April 17 and 18, 1981, we organised another concert at DBS auditorium, this time inviting pioneer singers from Taiwan.<sup>5</sup>*

A very obvious but little delved into aspect of change in Taiwan is made a little clearer in Benjamin Ng Wai-Ming's study of Japanese popular music in Singapore. He informs us that, *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>6</sup>

Gaps in the knowledge are quite easily filled in here. Shiyue seemed to share with Taiwan campus songs, an aversion to already popular Taiwanese songs. As Zhang Fan elaborated earlier, the Taiwan campus songs represented a time *Taiwan was undergoing a change which reflected a more personal expression, the same time we were singing our songs...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.*<sup>7</sup>

In the face of an ideological rejection, it is now possible to understand the reaction against 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 practitioners in the Singapore context. This of course was to impact Xinyao practitioners a little later.

Why and how did Shiyue slip into Xinyao? Why was it not possible for Shiyue to continue? Zhang Fan explains. *I think in 1980, there was a combined degree at NUS. Only one batch before NUS came along and Nantah became obsolete and NTI came about. So the NUS was legally, officially Nantah and Sintah...of course there are sentimental issues. Nantah was regarded as the only Chinese university in Southeast Asia.*<sup>8</sup>

With regard to **shiyue's** waning and xinyao's emergence, Zhang Fan offered this explanation. *Shiyue was more academically oriented—it was more an undergraduate experience and undertaking whereas Xinyao was more something that happened in the secondary schools and JCs. For shiyue, when we stopped, there was no more shiyue...it was unable to become popular because there's no cassette...we needed a platform for its dissemination and that platform was slowly shifting in a different direction...also the focus of Shiyue. The poems were actually written by local poets...the lyrics are deeper in meaning...I was actually thinking of it similar to Schubert lieder...I am*



*classically trained...I sing German lieder so that's the way I thought of shiyue music...I took up formal lessons towards the LRSM from Samuel Ting Chu San...after Dunman High (school) days...after university graduation so I can say I have a classical background...also I was only responsible for the music.*

*What about broadcast possibilities? It is mentioned that in this first concert there is this cassette...sent abroad to Taiwan and it was broadcast (over radio?)...if you remember there is a very famous Chinese lady writer called San Mao (already passed away). She brought it with her and she had it broadcast and she received hundreds of letters of feedback about music from our first/second concert in the early 80s. San Mao came to Singapore in about 1981/82...I could say that we were naïve about not making this commercially viable. We just thought it was good that people liked our music and it seemed fine...it was not our intention that we should take a commercial approach like getting it published. But as for the last concert in the later 70s...we didn't make the cassette.<sup>9</sup>*

*Was any attempt made to revive it or create opportunities for it? These songs, one called **Chuan Tng**...and right now this particular song we have together with Du Nan Fah (chief editor of Shin Min)...its in the Singapore Press Holdings...they organised a competition....Golden Lion award...Chuan Tng...passing down the lantern...we performed in front of Ong Teng Cheong...then the Minister of Culture in 1984...After listening to the songs, in the opening ceremony...I played the guitar and sang....it's a chain effect...strange because in the audience was students from JB...Quan Rong Secondary school (Foon Yu is in Hakka) it's the largest Chinese independent school (clan association)...in fact it is the largest Chinese school in JB...so this group of students managed to transcribe it...on one occasion I visited my friend (1987) in JB...and they sang this song...every Festival...this song in a sense reflects ways of upholding Chinese values and traditions...this would be the true spirit of shiyue....this coming concert we are performing it...but I don't like this arrangement...I still like to listen to Chuan Tng out there...(In Malaysia)...with thousands of people singing...Chinese festival in Malaysia are quite major events there...each year they are organised by different states..at one time I was in Malacca...they kept singing the song for two-three hours...<sup>10</sup>*

*Were there attempts made to revive or relive Shiyue?*

*Together with a friend of mine, we went to Japan to learn about Chinese culture...we realised that the Japanese retained their culture so well and they were so refined...why shouldn't we as well? We were all working with some resources financially speaking...after a seven year absence, Pan Cheng Lui, Du Nan Fah, Chou Wee Chueh...July 8-9 1988, organised another concert...we wanted to set some directions...maybe invite more young people to join us...get a new group of people to write music based on poems. But you realise that in*

*1988, Xinyao is already active. Shiyue is different from xinyao...shiyue does not have much commercial involvement.<sup>11</sup>*

Until further research explores this musical practice in greater depth, **shiyue** seems destined to remain an enigmatic practice with apparent links to Xinyao.

## REFERENCES

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