

# Shuo Chang (说唱): giving voice to and *through* Xinyao (新谣), a musical practice in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

*Singing – as a natural human expressive outlet – is a phenomenon both assumed and understated and a few reasons are offered to account for this ambivalence. First, the act/activity understood as ‘singing’ disguises its psychoacoustic reality as ‘voiced sounds’ (Sundberg 1991) as well as its secondary biological function (Vennard 1967, p. 37) in human endowment. Secondly, as sound ‘personifies’ (Ihde 2007, p. 21), ‘voiced sounds’ personify the confluence of individual and social identities. Finally, as a combination of sonorous and lyrical textuality, ‘voiced sounds’ interpret sonorous outcomes such that words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 217).*

*Our study of 新谣 (Xinyao) as a musical practice in Singapore (Groves 2001) examines the assertions of singing ‘as a natural human expressive outlet’. Following the accounts of a prominent voice in the practice for whom singing is 说唱 (shuo chang) – speech singing, we suggest an understanding of shuo chang first as voiced sounds and second as a practice involving voiced sounds.*

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## INTRODUCTION - XINYAO (新谣)

The musical practice of *Xinyao* (新谣) appears in an entry on Singapore in the Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians as 'a Mandarin vocal genre accompanied by guitars which began in the early 1980s among teenage students' (Groves 2001, pp. 421- 423). The word itself *Xinyao* (新谣) is shorthand for 'xin jia po nian qing ren chuang zuo de ge yao' (songs composed by Singapore youth, 'Xin' from the word 'Xin Jia Po', Singapore, and 'Yao' from 'ge yao', songs). English-medium mass circulation print reports suggested *Xinyao* as a name these young singers, lyricists and song-writers coined for themselves (Leong 1985) while anecdotal accounts suggested *Xinyao* as a construction of the Mandarin-medium print media. What was notable however was the rate of growth from the point of public prominence through hitherto unheard-of names and groups Dawn Gan, Liang Wern Fook, Eric Moo, Billy Koh, Tan Kah Beng, brothers Lee Wei Shiong and Lee Shih Shiong, Ng King Kang, Thomas Teo and groups like *Straw*, *Di Xia Tie* and *San Ren Dui* to name a prominent few. The legacy of *Xinyao* is evident in local music labels such as Ocean Butterflies which launched the careers of local singers Kit Chan, Tanya Chua and A Do. Among these names, the Lee brothers, Tan Kah Beng, and Loy Fei Huay have established themselves in the region as composers and lyricists for Wen Zhang, Tracy Huang, Alex To and Tony Leung Kar Fai in Hongkong and Taiwan (Chin 1994). One name that continues to remain the most widely recognised as being synonymous with *Xinyao* is Liang Wern Fook ([http://www.ntu.edu.sg/HSS/chinese\\_eng/Faculty/Pages/chinese\\_profilelwf.aspx](http://www.ntu.edu.sg/HSS/chinese_eng/Faculty/Pages/chinese_profilelwf.aspx)) who was recently awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest honour for artists (<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1086653/1.html>). For the purposes of this article, we draw on extended interviews with *Xinyao* practitioners with decided focus and attention on singer/songwriter Liang Wern Fook and his works.

## SHUO CHANG (说唱) – SPEECH SINGING

Emergent throughout his interviews are references to his singing style via a keyword (说唱) *shuo chang*. Although it has acquired meaning for a song-like rendition of recitation of classic Chinese poems and declamation in Chinese staged and street opera, Liang qualifies his own interpretation of (说唱) *shuo chang*:

I wanted to express myself because I had something to say and expressed it in creative writing. I am a person of words; I express my soul when I use words. The most natural and effective vehicle of expression for my creative writing was in *Xinyao*. That's why people have been referring to my songs as 说唱 *shuo chang*...speech singing (Interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003).

Liang's explanations about being expressive through creative endeavour articulate the significance of *shuo chang* by considering speech *and* singing both conjunctively and disjunctively. But the multiple meanings located in the literal, musical and metaphorical dimensions of a musical practice such as *Xinyao* seem to hinge on the centrality of the voice. It is with the centrality of the voice in a musical practice that we begin by examining *shuo chang* as sounded out by the human voice.

## SHUO CHANG (说唱) – VOICED SOUNDS

Singing – as an act/ivity or behaviour – cannot ignore its roots in physiological functions of the human voice. Vennard informs us that singing 'is a secondary, or superimposed function of the larynx. All animals that breathe, whether they phonate or not, have a valve to hold breath and to keep food from entering the lungs' (Vennard 1967, p. 37).

In his classic book, *The Structure of Singing*, Richard Miller cited observations by Luchsinger & Arnold:

*When an adult engages in heavy physical activity such as lifting, pulling, or shoving, or even in throwing the arms backward from the torso in an attempt to swing the hands behind the back, an involuntary grunting noise results. One grunts because glottal closure has been extreme and the sudden release of pressure becomes audible with the expulsion of air. The grunt, introduced into phonation, represents reversion to primordial action in laryngeal function (Luchsinger & Arnold, 1965, pp. 118-9, cited in Miller 1986, p. 3).*

For Miller, the 'human respiratory-phonatory mechanism evolved from the need to protect the upper air passages of the respiratory system during the essential exchange of metabolic gas – a biological function'. Phonation 'arose as a secondary, specialised activity, as the result of certain gains and losses accompanying physiological changes within the vocal tract' (Miller 1986, p. 241). While Miller cites Negus (1949, p. 194) in suggesting that 'the human larynx...is uniquely suited to the demands of speech and song' (Miller 1986, p. 241), his fundamental view remains that 'singing is an extension of the nonbiological function (or the second order function) of the larynx' (Miller 1986, p. 242).

This view is corroborated by Johann Sundberg who suggests that 'voiced sounds' are generated by what he calls the voice organ: 'The voice organ is an instrument consisting of a power supply (the lungs), an oscillator (the vocal folds) and a resonator (the larynx, pharynx and mouth). Singers adjust the resonator in special ways' (Sundberg 1991, p. 104). Therefore it is not so much that singing is a 'natural human expressive outlet', as it is that the activity known as singing – 'voiced sounds' – is uniquely positioned to negotiate the more fundamental and natural functions of the 'human respiratory-phonatory mechanism'.

Consequently, singing as 'voiced sound' activity and behaviour seems somewhat dissonant with singing as it has emerged as 'coiffured practices' in terms of technique and technology. 'Singing-as-technique', as skill acquisition of 'instrumental techniques', is valorised in specific practices within accepted conventions and standards of excellence in that convention; and emerges substantially as learned, conditioned and disciplined behaviour. 'Voiced sounds' are much less a 'natural human expressive outlet' than 'a/venues' by which voice organs and mechanisms involved in respiration and phonation are enabled towards being expressive. If the physiological act of singing is secondary in both function and nature, it follows that the substance of what is articulated and expressed 'through the singing voice' has a more fundamental role and identity; 'singing-as-technology'.

But 'singing-as-technology' cannot be understood merely as a function of mechanical achievement (musical and instrumental technique), but also as a function of the human capacity as 'instrumentality'. Francois Sigaut observes that human beings have puzzled over...something they acquire without knowing how, that they possess but which something possesses them even more, that is not a part of them but without which they would

not be what they are' (Sigaut 2002, p. 421). However, in citing White (1940), Sigaut suggests what holds in common across observation of techniques is that they are material actions 'in the sense that they all make a material change in something; and that they are intentional and are so on several levels... the social goals have taken the form of material needs and these have become the agent's true goals... the activities... are not simply material, they are "intentionally" material' (Sigaut 2002, p. 424, emphasis in original).

However, both singing-as-technique and singing-as-technology seem to work on the assumption that the intentional materiality (read as person and community of practice) is amenable to observation and the prediction that it may be replicable elsewhere. Sigaut raises his doubts: 'What should be used as the basis for identifying operations: 'our' sciences or 'native' knowledge? The answer to this question depends on how well the one translates into the other' (Sigaut 2002, p. 425).

That 'un/ease' of translation is a function of how the diversity and variety of musical practices vary across cultures around the world and what counts as singing. A few examples make this point about blurring the boundaries between speech and singing: growling in *umngqokolo*, which is a vocal tradition of the Xhosa people in South Africa, growling before phonation in *kakegoe* in Japanese Noh theatre, *pitched growls* common in Extreme metal musical practice; or even *rapping* or *beat-boxing* within hip-hop practices. It would be fallacious to assume a universal approach or apprenticeship in the teaching and learning of 'voiced sounds' across diverse musical practices around the world.

Moreover, this problem is not a simple matter of translation of technical or even technological skill. A voiced sound is uttered through a voice organ mechanism which belongs to a body; a body that is not only musically but also socio-culturally situated. This is what is suggested in 'singing-as-technology': operations, paths, networks and eventually lineage, not only of changes in instrumental sources and resources but also instrumentality with reference to contingency on power, and political status. Don Ihde recounts of the processes of ancient Greek tragedies spoken in 'sonorous voices through the persona, or "masks" which, later were held to mean also persona or "by sound"' (Ihde 2007, p. 14 emphasis in original). This sonorous voicing reinforces Ihde's suggestion that sound 'personifies' (Ihde 2007, p. 21) and even more so voiced sounds since a voice belongs to a socially constituted body.

Songs that emerge through 'per/sonae' and 'per/sonare' in their socio-cultural diversity, difference and distance necessitate a deeper engagement not only of textual matters but also the sounds that are uttered through these songs. Ron Eyerman draws attention to the fact that songs, as synergies of music and poetry, are 'more than texts... they are also performances... This gives more force to music as a carrier of collective memory, tradition... with meaning more than the cognitive, literal level... can empower, help create collective identity, a sense of movement, in an emotional and almost physical sense' (Eyerman 1999, p. 119-20). As a synergistic combination of sonorous *and* lyrical textuality, sonorous outcomes are such that *words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world* (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 217). Songs are not only culturally specific and culturally situated textual utterances but also involve 'practices involving voiced sounds'; providing clues to an understanding of behavioural patterns of persons who created, performed and attended to them.

Given the scarcity of information about *Xinyao* in English as well as academic writings in English, research was initiated through word-of-mouth queries and e-contact. Once contact was made and established however, extensive interviews were conducted with creators, performers, agencies and promoters of *Xinyao* with a view to

get an informed perspective of this musical practice. Funds for the research were made available through an R&D grant awarded by the National Arts Council of Singapore (Dairianathan & Phan 2005).

## **XINYAO – A CHRONOLOGICAL ACCOUNT**

Much of this account is adapted from a previous publication (Dairianathan & Chia 2007, pp.149-50). Students from junior colleges and polytechnics formed groups and performed their own 'ballads' and songs from broadcast media in their schools/campuses, predating newspaper articles and newly minted terminology that became *Xinyao*. The first reported *Xinyao* concerts graced the period 1983-1985. In the same period, local broadcast media featured creators-as-performers on a half-hour radio programme. A singing competition (better known as the Talentime Series) organised by local Chinese (read Mandarin language) broadcast media introduced an amateur vocal group category in 1983. *San Ren Dui* ( 三人队 ) became the first *Xinyao* group to win this section of the singing contest in 1984.

The release of the first *Xinyao* compilation album in 1984, *21 Tomorrow*, generated sales of 20,000 copies and considerable interest in print and broadcast media. *Xinyao* Songs like 'Chance Meeting' by Eric Moo gained entry to the Singapore Chinese Billboard charts. Thomas Teo, Dawn Gan and Eric Moo later, became the first *Xinyao* singers to successfully release solo recordings, encouraging the Chinese talentime series to introduce a 'local compositions' category. The inaugural two-night *Xinyao* Festival was held in 1985; fuelling the formation of the Young Songwriters Society in May 1986 which had for its aims, the promotion of *Xinyao* artistes and activities. By 1987, the annual *Xinyao* Festival featured 'newcomers' such as strobe lights, back-up dancers, four-piece bands, performers' outstanding outfits and slick presentation (Low 1987). Towards the end of the 1980s, prominent *Xinyao* songwriters took to singing their own songs; Liang Wern Fook and Loy Fei Huei being the most notable.

The 1990 annual *Xinyao* Festival however, was 'reduced to a school concert playing to a half-empty hall' and the Sing Music Awards (1990) was scrapped because 'too few *Xinyao* albums were submitted for nomination' (Chin 1994). On the other hand, *Xinyao* gained greater interest from consumption through the 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* – launched through the joint efforts of a local radio station, 'Radio 100.3FM' and a *Xinyao* organisation called 'Feeling Associates' – began airing a *Xinyao* selection to introduce 'the better songs to overseas record companies. Hongkong, for example, is greatly in need of songs for its many stars' (Chin 1994).

Into the millennium, a 'XingPop' concert of Singapore Chinese pop music from 'yesterday till today' as one of the opening celebrations at the Esplanade in 2002 (Lee 2002), a two-night sold-out concert featuring *Xinyao* and Taiwanese *Mingge* ( 民歌 ) practitioners, a COMPASS (local performing rights group) press-release in 2002 of a resurgent *Xinyao* Festival in mid-2003, a *Xinyao* Reunion Concert on 22 March 2003 featuring Eric Moo and Friends, the launch of a book and CD-compilation by Liang Wern Fook *Xie Yi Shou Ge Gei Ni (I'll Write A Song for You)* in May 2004 and a publication edited by Liang (*Xin yao: wo men de ge zai zhe li*) also in the same year.

A very recent Mandarin print media article attempted to stimulate interest in *Xinyao* among a wider and younger audience (Chen 2010) drawn around prominent practitioners like Liang Wern Fook, Loi Fei Huay and Xing Cheng Hua. This article highlighted results of a questionnaire about what *Xinyao* was or could be defined as and took on board a brief account of its prominence. A larger question loomed in the article pertaining to continuation, what it meant to have continuation, what about *Xinyao* might be continued, who might be identified in the continuation and the ways such continuation might take place. While Wern Fook suggested 'continuation' might be too onerous a term, he deferred toward finding ways to maintain the vitality and energy *Xinyao* brought through its prominence and practice as well as its advocacy and accessibility to a younger and larger audience who might not know of its coruscating past or its impact on Mandarin language popular music in Singapore.

## **SHUO CHANG AS EXTRA/MUSICAL PHENOMENA**

*Shuo chang* as speech singing resonates with 'voiced sounds' because the special adjustment of their vocal resonators comprising the larynx, pharynx and mouth (Sundberg 1991, p. 104) is what separates singers with training from those without because of the difference in formal/ised training and conditioning of the voice-organ and its use for specified purposes. This helps explain why Liang avoided calling himself a singer. But it cannot explain *Xinyao*'s prominence through its practitioners and aspirants who seem to have missed that training and conditioning. So how does this relate to singers without such training or formalised education in the use of voiced sounds?

For Liang Wern Fook, training needs qualification:

*That depends on how you define training. No one comes from a vacuum – when you write or compose, that is definitely the influence of the past works you have listened to. To me that is important training although you might not realise it when you read great works of masters. Now that I write lyrics [and] write songs, I will not say that this totally comes from myself. (Oral Interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003).*

Liang's point – read literally, musically and metaphorically – was that *Xinyao* could not be sounded without a point of origin; much as voiced sounds are dependent on steady 'power supply from the lungs' (Sundberg 1991, p. 104). Liang's definition of training in articulating the appropriate phonation acknowledges the informality of oral and aural transmission and by extension, an 'origin/arity':

*I learnt about other forms of music through avid listening to different genres of songs. I also got to hear many songs from my parents who enjoyed singing them... Chinese art songs like '满江红' (The River All Red)... songs by (very old) singers like '周璇' (Zhou Xuan) and '白光' (Bai Guang)... 'O Sole Mio' and 'Come Back to Sorrento' sung with Chinese lyrics. When I was in Secondary Four I wanted to write some of my own songs rather than just playing classical pieces. I heard pop songs in secondary school [aged 13–16 years]... songs like "我家在哪里?" (Where is My Home?)... songs by 刘家昌 (Liu Jia Chang) or songs from Hong Kong drama serials... very simple melodies [but] able to impact and move people very naturally... I also heard quite a few songs from Taiwan written by undergraduate students on campus 民歌 (Mingge) somewhere in the late seventies. I was about fifteen or sixteen years old...*

songs like ‘兰花草’ (Orchid), ‘恰似你的温柔’ (Just Like Your Gentleness), ‘外婆的澎湖湾’ (Grandmother’s Penghuwan)... very catchy and simple. I felt that they were very endearing. Thus, I started to write my own songs. (Oral Interview with Liang Wern Fook, January 2004).

Koh Nam Seng, a member of the pioneer *Xinyao* group *The Straw* was well-immersed in Euro-American art-music choral activity and was an avid listener of songs of contemporary American folk and popular culture. This repertoire was additional to folk songs from all over the world introduced through a Mandarin radio channel:

*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, Bob Dylan... because they gave me a sense of what is alive in a song... ‘Where have all the flowers gone’...we just liked the music... guitar...and voices that harmonised... it captured me... that is how I came to music (Oral interview with Koh Nam Seng, December 2003).*

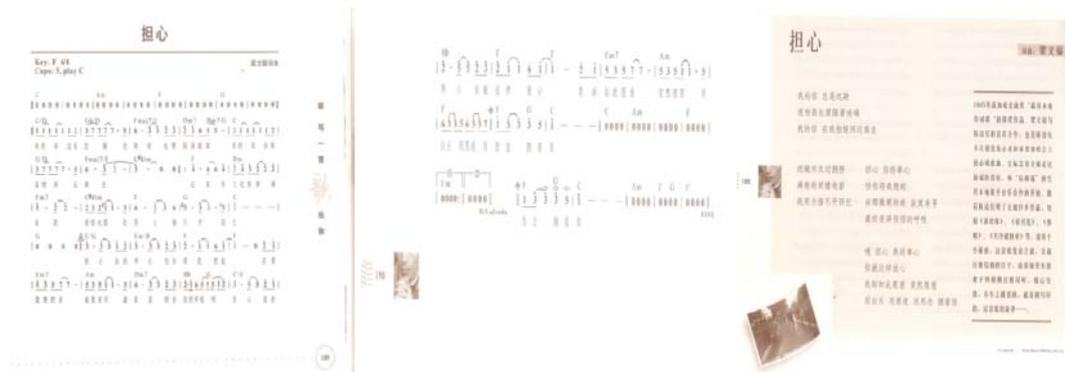
Both Liang’s and Koh’s accounts corroborate an informal/ised learning, despite the lack of specialised training, to ‘adjust the resonator in special ways’ (Sundberg 1991, p. 104). Their accounts also resonate well with Miller’s (1986) view of the physical act of singing, vis-à-vis Sundberg, as a secondary function. Qualifying *shuo chang* as speech singing however, yields the understanding that the skill and act of trained singers’ special adjustment of their resonators (Sundberg 1991, p. 104) becomes secondary to a larger cause in three ways: vocal phonation developed through aural and oral transmission of ‘songscaapes’ and ‘vocal soundscapes’; secondly, textual/ity of the song through vocal phonation; and, finally as a combination of sonorous and lyrical textuality, yielding sonorous outcomes such that *words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world* [read world of and through *Xinyao* ] (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 187).

Given their informality of learning through oral and aural transmission, Liang’s and Koh’s choice of simple lyrical and musical-architectural constructions, simple chords and memorable melodic lines enabled them and other *Xinyao* practitioners to be effective in creating and performing their own songs with Mandarin text. But such skills rely on much more than proficient ‘mechanical technique’ to gain prominence and myth. Lefebvre reminds us that:

*... in the conflict between ‘domination’ and ‘appropriation’ is a contradiction between technology (know-how) and technicity (modus operandi) on the one hand and poetry and music on the other... although all music or poetry has a technical – even a technological – aspect, this tends to be incorporated, by means of appropriation into the qualitative realm. (Lefebvre 1991, p. 391-2)*

Simplicity of melodic and harmonic construction therefore is not to be confused with commensurate *simplicity* of matching textual material in Mandarin as Liang explains:

*There is a certain rhythm that is inherent in a poem itself. If you can match these rhythms and place the emphases in the right places, repeating certain syllables, putting the emphasis on certain repeated words, it can help to convey the message more effectively. Another method is through the use of homophones. In the song that I wrote called Worrying Heart [担心], I had this verse ‘worrying’ – dan xin for your lonely heart – dan xin [单心].*



Worrying Heart [担心] in cipher notation and text (Liang 2004, p. 188-190)

The first dan refers to 'worry' and the second dan xin refers to 'a lonely heart'... collectively... 'I worry for your lonely heart'. Because of this [linguistic] homophony, you can unearth two 'layers' of meaning... language [use] is very important... If one wishes to adopt such a technique, it has to culminate in a certain characteristic of the work and achieve a certain effect. It shouldn't be the case that one just sloppily adds in the words for the sake of finishing the work in haste' (Oral Interview with Liang Wern Fook, January 2004).

Here the 'voiced sound' acts in double counterpoint; first of musical homophony against homophony in language (same sounding but different meaning); secondly, the technique of Mandarin as language against technology of musical creation and performance. Given the complexity of language use, a sensible strategy on their part would naturally involve a technology (read as what people do) of memorable melodic lines supported by simple chord construction and simple and clear textures for *Xinyao* practitioners to be most effective with the sophistication of proficiency (technique as learned and conditioned behaviour) they clearly possessed in Mandarin. Sophistication of use of Mandarin language would have also set them as a voiced sound in contradistinction to white Anglophone-influenced commercially available Mandarin popular music.

### SHUO CHANG – INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL EXPRESSION

The name *Xinyao* is by now understood to refer to songs composed by Singapore youths but as constituted in the practice of amateur music-making before the name. Provenance of the term *Xinyao* therefore seems less important than a discussion of its dynamics and emergence as a culture. This recalls 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...it follows that manifestations of this culture are obvious not only in the aural but oral and visual sense as well' (Blacking 1973, p. 3). *Xinyao* was dependent on and had the support of a critical mass prior to its formation, similar to the way voiced sounds were possible physiologically because of a consistent and continuous stream of energy sustaining it.

How did the processes of the everyday experience manifest themselves? According to Mindy Lin's interviews with a number of *Xinyao* practitioners, oral culture featured very strongly at the everyday experience, lyrics were available via aural transcriptions or passing material via cassette tapes of tunes sung by students who were able to recall what they had listened to and disseminate it. The transmission of repertoire took place through schools exchange programmes or concerts, with the lead singer using piano, guitar, or other portable instruments as

accompaniment. Concerts of this nature in schools were likely to have been organised 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 (Lin 2004).

But socio-cultural sustenance begs another question. According to Lily Kong, *Xinyao* was not only a practice but helped 'with' and 'in' the construction of identity among Mandarin-speaking youth and the empowerment of youth communities in its early stage of development (Kong 1996, p. 115). Chinese communities (from all dialect groups) make up more than three-quarters of the resident population (including permanent residents) in Singapore (<http://www.singstat.gov.sg/> accessed 28 February 2010). If the various communities of Chinese ascription form three-quarters of Singapore's resident population, a demographic statistic established for nearly a century, how and why was *Xinyao* only 'emergent' in print media – even formalised with the name – in the early 1980s? Little of the print media discussions past or present reveal mainstream connection with a local community of Mandarin-speaking youth.

Mindy Lin's research on *Xinyao* (Lin 2004) identifies schools that came under a Special Assisted Plan scheme (SAP) who offered English and Mandarin at equal levels of proficiency (other schools use English as a first language and Mandarin as an 'unequal' second language). These SAP schools and specific junior colleges (pre-university institutions) formed the nexus of activities in *Xinyao*, mainly because they had highly developed Chinese (read Mandarin) Language Debate and Drama societies. Given the smaller number of these SAP schools than mainstream schools and their 'elite' nature, the practice of *Xinyao* would have been considered a 'niche practice'. Although the musical practice of *Xinyao* was and still remains a valid and unique community of supporters and believers of their practice, *Xinyao*'s presence and rise even within Chinese, let alone non-Chinese, communities represented something of a surprise.

## **SHUO CHANG AND POINTS OF COINCIDENCE**

However, *Xinyao*'s prominence at public settings did coincide with a national *Speak Mandarin Campaign* initiated in 1978. It made no difference to a Mandarin-conversant speaker for whom official and domestic discourses were 'status quo'. For a Chinese dialect speaker, however, such a campaign would result in the use of Mandarin in official communication; curtailing (and later removing) use of dialects. This 'official' use of Mandarin extended to commercial endeavour resulting in a severely reduced use of dialect among family and friends. A non-Mandarin speaker, as too an English-conversant speaker, would have been made aware, albeit a different awareness and consciousness, of Mandarin as a unitary language of communication across the diverse Chinese dialect-speaking communities.

This *Speak Mandarin Campaign* involved and affected all levels of society in Singapore and provided for a galvanisation of social forces not previously achieved. This campaign was followed by the introduction and production of local television drama serials in Mandarin based on Singaporean experiences, for example The Japanese Occupation (*The Awakening*), and the quintessential coffee shop (*Kopi-O*). This introduction of local television drama serials in Mandarin marked a change from imported serials from Taiwan and Hong Kong which were then dubbed into Mandarin for local consumption. Therefore, it is difficult to think of *Xinyao*'s gained prominence in public settings without the political technology of Mandarin as a language of unitary consciousness in Singapore.

*Xinyao* practitioners however, are very clear about the sense of priorities which signal motivation towards their practice; their involvement in *Xinyao* was not fuelled by any direct association with national or political campaigns nor did they capitalise on it. Had *Xinyao* practitioners, in fact, wanted to capitalise on the *Speak Mandarin Campaign*, they would have had considerably greater success creating and performing commercially available music of Mandarin popular culture. For Koh, the privileging of Mandarin did not really have the effect of cultural capital for the predominantly Chinese community in Singapore: 'If *Xinyao* was considered something of a cultural miracle, it was probably because *Xinyao* composers had something to say. If this campaign [*Speak Mandarin*] helped *Xinyao*, at best it helped indirectly' (Interview with Koh Nam Seng, December 2003).

Yet in the 1990s, Tan points out that 'Cai Li Lian was chosen as 'spokesperson' for the *Speak Mandarin Campaign* and *Xinyao* was included in the programme for the Chinese Cultural Festival' (email correspondence with Tan Wei Ping, June 2003). In 1999 and 2000, the promotion of Chinese language and culture through an outdoor series of Chinese Heritage programmes included *Xinyao* among performances of Mandarin acappella, 'wayang' (staged and street opera), Chinese orchestra performances and story-telling in Mandarin (<http://mandarin.org.sg/campaign/milestones/default.htm>; <http://www.dbj.org.sg/PDF/S35e.pdf>, accessed August 2005).

## **SHUO CHANG AS COMMUNITY MUSIC**

Although, print media expressed surprise at its rise to prominence, *Xinyao* did not go unnoticed in community music circles. The group Koh Nam Seng was a member of, *The Straw*, was courted by a community centre (community club today) which came under the umbrella of the *People's Association* (<http://www.pa.gov.sg/about-us/history-of-pa.html>):

*'We had links also with a community centre through students, newspaper reporters, Nanyang Siang Pao (南洋商报, discontinued presently) and other contacts... whenever there were concerts, activities in the community centre (CC), they asked us to come in [to perform]... they assured us that they could find us a place, support us... so we accepted...'* (Oral interview with Koh Nam Seng, December 2003).

The first community centre organised *Xinyao* concert was held at the Hong Lim community centre in 1984 apparently coinciding with the formation of a *Xinyao* performing group. In 1986, the *People's Association* organised a concert for young music enthusiasts from 14 community centres in the hope that young people in other community centres would form their own *Xinyao* groups as a healthy and creative activity, to express their feelings, regardless of the theme. The *People's 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. With a view of *Xinyao* as the medium of expression for locally composed music, the role of the *People's Association* emerged as facilitator and coordinator to create more opportunities for *Xinyao* enthusiasts to perform, exchange and grow through activities like concerts, competition and music camps as well as providing technical support in management, production, and administration while performing artistes concentrated on their work on music-creating and performing. Billy Koh, a *Xinyao* pioneer, thought the *Peoples Association* could help popularise *Xinyao* at the grassroots level while professionals concentrated on enabling their songs into the local chart-topping list. More than 70 *Xinyao* enthusiasts from community centres took part in a *People's Association*-organised three-day *Xinyao* music camp. Veterans and professionals like Eric Moo, Billy

Koh and Dawn Gan were invited to give tips and share their experiences so that students would benefit more from *Xinyao* if they discussed the songs with musicians, artists and literature writers in the industry. It was also hoped that experienced and accomplished senior musicians would give the youngsters not only spiritual support but also practical guidance. At that time, it was also hoped that *Xinyao* could attract participation from the local English-educated Chinese communities (Low 1986).

## **SHUO CHANG – INFLUENCES AND CONFLUENCES**

It would be tenuous to assume *Xinyao* emerged as an insulated musical practice in Singapore in 1982. Oral interviews with pioneer *Xinyao* practitioners revealed a phrase *Xiao Yuan* ( 校园 ) frequently; a term used in *Mingge* ( 民歌 ), Taiwanese college campus songs. Taiwanese *Mingge* ( 民歌 ), *Xinyao* and *Shiyue* shared an aversion to commercialised Mandarin popular music as *Shiyue* practitioner Zhang Fan elaborated: 'When we were singing our songs (*shiyue* - 诗乐), university undergraduates in Taiwan were writing their own material and songs; that's why they called it college campus songs *Mingge* ( 民歌 ) . With fifty years of Japanese influence, Taiwanese Mandarin popular music was based more or less on Japanese tunes' (Oral Interview with Zhang Fan, March 7, 2003). Benjamin Ng's study of Japanese popular music in Singapore makes a similar observation, that 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 [sic] Chinese in Singapore and Southeast Asia...although few realised that their favourite Mandarin songs [were] borrowed from Japanese tunes' (Ng 2002: pp. 1-2). *Xiao Yuan* in the Singapore context encompassed songs composed by youth in polytechnics and junior colleges. Liang's pre-*Xinyao* repertoire included *Mingge* ( 民歌 ) songs in the late 1970s. Koh recalls his immersion in American contemporary folk songs citing songs (of an anti-Vietnam war frame) by Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary as musical influences. But as a function of time, *Xinyao*'s predecessors coincided with another local creative practice *Shiyue* ( 诗乐 ) by students from Nanyang University (Nanyang Technological University today) which took place during the late 1970s as well. According to Zhang Fan, a proponent and supporter of *Shiyue* and later *Xinyao*, Billy Koh (*Xinyao* pioneer) suggested that it was the spirit of creativity in *Shiyue* that influenced *Xinyao* writers (Oral Interview with Zhang Fan 2003).

Liang Wern Fook remembers this group of *Shiyue* practitioners vividly:

*I remember in 1981 and 1982, the Shiyue group of people (our seniors) organised an annual concert at the DBS Auditorium. Before this [concert], we listened to Taiwan [Mingge] but this is the first time we got to listen to our own locals [Shiyue] and they were not singers... not professional singers (trained or doing this for money)... they were students just like us... a few years older... still pursuing their studies... their music [Shiyue] was very refreshing and different. At the time we were studying in junior colleges... we met Billy Koh and others who were studying at Singapore Polytechnic among the audience. That played an important role in our lives. Their efforts had a strong influence and impact on us. Although we had been writing songs on our own around this period, hereafter, we got together and attended other schoolmates' school concerts (Oral interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003).*

Summarily, *Xinyao* as creative, performative and consumed practice could not avoid confluences comprising American contemporary folk songs (protest culture specifically), folk songs around the world broadcast on a local Chinese radio programme, Mandarin popular music and *Mingge*. However, *Xinyao* writers had been writing songs on their own initially then met together and attended other schoolmates' school concerts in junior colleges. Moreover, with respect to the creative process, *Shiyue* songs were considered by *Xinyao* practitioners as poetic songs, artistic with very good literary values. *Xinyao* practitioners on the other hand, created and performed music composed for audience advocacy, hence a focus on texts which had direct access and relevance to the lives and lived experiences of their audience who were probably students like themselves.

Summarily, *Xinyao* acknowledged voiced sounds of differing inter/national ascriptions; *Mingge* (Taiwan), American contemporary folk songs, *Shiyue* (local Nanyang University poetry-based songs) and songs from the Euro-American art-music tradition. Local and international radio, newspaper articles, concerts, interacting with classmates and informal learning and writing all played a contributory role in the arrival of *Xinyao* in public/ised space. However, it was the youth from SAP schools, junior colleges and some polytechnics who mutually supported and sustained each other in *Xinyao* as creative endeavour.

*Mingge* may have had aural and oral influences for *Xinyao* but *Shiyue* lent confidence to local creative endeavour which *Xinyao* was identified with in the 1980s. Wern Fook pointed out that before *Xinyao*, 'people did not respect local singers and local song composers. The impression of these people was that of entertainers, making a living by singing at restaurants, staged shows or night clubs' (Oral Interview with Liang Wern Fook, June 2003). Whether or not this perception is warranted, two things emerge: confidence in *Xinyao* local creative endeavour; and *Xinyao* gradually gaining credibility at an international level.

## **SHUO CHANG – POINTS OF HOMAGE AND DEPARTURE**

The problems and prospects of entertaining commercial aspirations, even as it gained prominence had already been broached in print media juxtaposing different identities on the practice. For instance *Xinyao* was identified in 1983 on broadcast media in the following way:

*'Miss Pang Siew Moi, producer and presenter of the SBC Radio 3 (95.8FM today) 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" ' (Koh 1985a).*

That view was one of homage and departure, according to Tan Swee Wan, a team leader of a production team called *Fame*: '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' (Koh 1985a).

The album this *Fame* production team helped put together was called *Fei* [飛] – translated as fly:

*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. (Koh 1985a, emphasis in original).*

It is not clear that when *Xinyao* practitioners entertained the possibility of using the machinery of popular culture to gain wider dissemination, that they were aware not only of the musical and technical demands for the commercial recording industry but also cognisant of negotiating creative output with an industry that viewed creativity from a market-driven and financially rewarding perspective. Pan Cheng Lui, a *shiyue* practitioner contemporary with Zhang Fan, 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. Xinyao nowadays tends 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. (Koh 1985b).*

Two years later, at a forum held in August 1987, there was already an identity crisis surrounding this debate of identity and value when *Xinyao* practitioners were confronted with the prospect of tapping into the recording industry of entertainment culture in Mandarin. The eventual view was that songwriters' creativity should not be hampered by the term *Xinyao*; somewhat consonant with the image/ry of the 1987 annual *Xinyao* Festival featuring 'strobe lights, back-up dancers, four-piece bands, performers' outstanding outfits and slick presentation' (Low 1987). Towards the end of the 1980s, prominent *Xinyao* songwriters took to a professional singing career out of their own songs while the early 1990s saw reduced subscription to the annual *Xinyao* Festival and eventual scrapping of awards because 'too few *Xinyao* albums were submitted for nomination' (Chin 1994). Not surprisingly then, 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' (Chin 1994).

'Capital/ising' on *Xinyao* inevitably impinged on the multiple roles of creator as documenter/social author/story-teller/entrepreneur conflated with polished performer and 'caterer' to market fashion. These demands, let alone prioritising them, acted as a double-edged sword. *Xinyao* in its earliest manifestation created no real boundary between creator/performer/audience. Priorities *other* than a polished performance would have dominated ways of thinking among an audience as advocate. *Xinyao* pioneers and practitioners were affirmed and admired but descriptions from anecdotal evidence stop short of idolising them. A newly negotiated tension transpired between creative and 'recreative' endeavour in *Xinyao*; between 'creator among the crowd' and 'creator as idol', not to mention 'meeting industry standards' in commercial media of popular culture. What space would have been left for the aspiring *Xinyao* creator who just wanted a hearing by sharing 'voiced sounds' among friends?

On the other hand, what if *Xinyao*'s primary goal in commercial endeavour comprised a protection of "community identity", an encryption (on compact disc) of its ideals and spirituality more than 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. But, if this 'raw material' provided a point of homage and departure, might current generations and cross-cultural encounters be enabled but encouraged towards voicing their own musicality given the 'raw' *Xinyao* as a lived and living sound; cultural dialogue more than economics?

*Shiyue* practitioner Pan suggested the assistance and support of clan associations and funds to help the young composers financially in organising concerts and cutting records to ensure quality control (Koh 1985b). Might that not have rendered these young aspirants hostage to organisations desiring to capitalise on them for a hidden agenda? Secondly, schools and the *People's Association* remained as supportive as possible of *Xinyao* from its beginnings. But by the 1990s, the *People's Association* gradually lost its influence on *Xinyao* in the 1990s (Tan 2003). Moreover, research on activities in school in the 1990s yielded a single record of *Xinyao* as co-curricular school based activity (Leow 1998).

In her academic exercise, Tan Wei Ping attributed this loss of relevance and subscription to a growing 'incompatibility' among pioneers and practitioners of *Xinyao*, schools and community centres, and such practices between the present and the past:

*Xinyao began as a 'creative endeavour' by a group of people in the 1980s. It was a matter of considerable significance and nostalgia for this group of people who took Xinyao from 'nothing' to 'something'. Xinyao has become an unfamiliar term with students in the present; a consequence of passing fashion across different decades of popular culture. (Email correspondence with Tan Wei Ping, June 2003).*

Changes in sites considered important in the creative process and transmission of the spirit of *Xinyao* inevitably signal changes in function and significance affecting the motivation for creative energy. Like the human vocal mechanism, an alteration in the source of power has been met with a commensurate alteration in the voiced sound.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

What will we have learnt from engaging in the musical practice of *Xinyao*?

The most recent newspaper article (Chen 2010) is notable for a quintessential characteristic of Liang Wern Fook's treatment of text; linguistic homophony. In this newspaper article, *Xinyao* appears as *Xin Yao* (New ballad [歌谣]) and even *Xin Yao* (New rumour [谣言]). *Xinyao* is now not only understood as an instance of local creative endeavour but also a reminder of their unique double play; musical and linguistic homophony.

Physiologically, the vocal generation and delivery of songs of this practice are better described as Sundberg does, 'voiced sounds' or Liang's preferred term for speech singing, *shuo chang*. But as voiced sounds they are nuanced and layered in double homophony (musical and linguistic) not to mention honed to extract the most out of the subtleties Mandarin possessed for an utterance. This play on double meaning in linguistic homophony recalls Gayatri Spivak's articulation of the concept of 'burden' of the teaching of English in India but has special relevance in this context: 'I use the word "burden" in at least its two chief senses. First as the content of a song or account... second, as a singular load to carry, in a special way' (Gayatri Spivak 1993, p.134 emphasis in original).

Achievement of and through its pioneering practitioners notwithstanding, *Xinyao* is eventually a practice of a niche Mandarin-proficient and Mandarin-enabled community which articulates its situatedness not only among

the Chinese community but also among other local non-Mandarin conversant, local non-Chinese and international communities in Singapore.

With Mandarin as their 'first burden' (in contradistinction to English in India in Spivak's context), *Xinyao* practitioners were enabled through *shuo chang*; the second/ary function of singing as 'voiced sounds' with musical accompaniment. *Shuo chang* crystallised an outpouring of composing self of the *Xinyao* practitioner, his/her song became a load to carry, but in a special way.

*Xinyao* emerged as an account by a niche community of youth in Singapore and became a singular load to be carried in a special way, through creative, socio-cultural, political and commercial technology. The synergy expressed as *shuo chang* enabled *Xinyao* to acquire iconic value, transcending the iconicity of the situation and context, transformed its practice into sacrosanct spaces in time, even transcending time. In the present context, *Xinyao* as load, albeit not longer singular, is carried by communities marked by difference and time.

The challenge in partaking of *Xinyao* is come to terms with *shuo chang* phenomenologically as *speech-singing*; first to explore the difference and distance of expression/s deeply seated in individuals, and second, to be accessible and amenable to those not only 'within' a community but also 'among' diverse communities. Future and further explorations necessitate explorations of the difference and distance contained 'within' and 'without' *Xinyao*; to locate, in Ihde's words, 'meanings as they are constituted' (Ihde 2007, p. 27).

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