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# Popular music in a transnational world: the construction of local identities in Singapore

*Lily Kong*

**Abstract:** *As an area of geographical inquiry, popular music has not been explored to any large extent. Where writings exist, they have been somewhat divorced from recent theoretical and methodological questions that have rejuvenated social and cultural geography. In this paper, I focus on one arena which geographers can develop in their analysis of popular music, namely, the exploration of local influences and global forces in the production of music. In so doing, I wish to explore how local resources intersect with global ones in a process of transculturation. Using the example of English songs by one particular songwriter and artiste whose works are part of the popular music industry mainstream, and that of Mandarin songs of the genre xinyao, I will show that, despite increasing globalising forces, music is still an expression of local/national influences. Indeed, I will argue that globalisation intensifies localisation.*

**Keywords:** *music, cultural geography, globalisation, localisation, Singapore, construction of identities*

Schiller (1994), in writing the introduction to a recently established journal, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, rightly points out the growing trend towards globalisation and the metaphoric vanishing of borders in the world today. This acknowledgement of an increasingly borderless world is reflected in the large body of literature that exists on the subject. It is a diverse literature, evident in the fact that it is produced from within diverse disciplines (such as geography, sociology and cultural studies) and that it has evolved to such an extent that both treatises for academics in specialist subdisciplines and essays of a more general nature for a student audience are now available (see for example, Featherstone, 1990; Allen and Hamnett, 1995; Allen and Massey, 1995). The various aspects of globalisation may be summarised using Walters' (1995) conceptualisation of different arenas in which the transcending of borders has taken place, namely, in the political, economic and cultural spheres. Politically, countries have been drawn into supranational

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organisations, which has had the effect of, *inter alia*, surrendering sovereignty within larger political units such as the European Union, ASEAN, OPEC, and the United Nations. Economically, transnational corporations have emerged as strong contenders in the world of capital, establishing and maintaining business networks in varied parts of the world. Culturally, globalising forces have given rise to transculturation, the interchange of cultural elements (McQuail, 1994) and the breaking down of cultural borders. While these three arenas are closely interrelated, for heuristic purposes, they are often handled separately. For purposes of this paper, my focus will primarily be on the globalisation of the cultural world, although I will emphasise implicitly throughout, and explicitly in my conclusion, the interconnections with other forms of globalisation.

My emphasis in this paper will be that in such a globalising world, the question of identities merits research attention because of the paradoxical situation that we find ourselves in. Specifically, with the growth of the global economy and increasing transnational movements of populations, instead of increasing homogenisation, distinctive cultural practices and differentiated identities have either evolved, been maintained, or even strengthened. In this paper, my intention is to illustrate this paradox by using the example of popular music<sup>1</sup> produced by Singaporeans. I will show that the nature of popular music is altered through the influence of global commercialising forces. However, this is not to say that the music becomes homogenised. Indeed, despite the potentially homogenising forces, songwriters and producers inject in their music various elements (such as lyrics, instrumentation and style) which assert a sense of local and national identity. The music thus produced reflects the particularities of 'neo-tribes' (Maffesoli, 1989) in a postmodern world, a concept which Halfacree and Kitchin (1996) adopt to describe the community and belonging that peoples seek to achieve. Through this analysis, therefore, I hope to contribute to an evolving retheorised cultural geography, in which questions of global and local identities have become important. By focusing on popular music, I hope also to place this hitherto somewhat neglected cultural form more firmly on the agenda of cultural geographical research (see Smith's (1994) and Kong's (1995) discussion of this relative neglect).

In order to develop my analysis of the intersection of global and local resources in the production of music, I will focus on one example of English music and one of Mandarin music produced by Singaporeans. In the former instance, I will examine the music of Dick Lee, a Singaporean songwriter and performing artiste, working mainly in English. In the latter case, I will examine the development of a Mandarin genre termed *xinyao* (Singapore ballads). While it will be evident in my later discussion of conceptual underpinnings that the convergence of globalising forces and local action occurs not only in the realm of production, but in that of consumption as well, my intention in this paper is to focus only on the former.

Although *xinyao* has been analysed elsewhere (Kong, 1996a), the issue of intersecting global and local forces is tackled only indirectly there. Instead, the focus in that work was principally on the construction of youth identities through such music and latterly, on describing the trends in commercialisation

of such music. Earlier analyses of Lee's music (Kong, 1996b; Lee, 1996), however, are closer to the present argument, though what I seek to do here is to use the contrasting scenarios in the two case studies to further my argument that globalisation intensifies localisation. While the single case study of Lee's music in Kong (1996b) illustrated the idea that contact with global resources intensifies local identification in music, by placing that case study side by side with that of *xinyao* in this paper, I hope to illustrate clearly by way of contrast that where the contact between global and local is minimal, then, local identification is muted.

This approach to analysing popular music departs from existing analyses in that an explicit attempt is here made to engage with the larger social and cultural contexts within which music is produced and consumed (see Kong, 1995). This differs from existing geographical research on music which reflects broader cultural geographical interests in the tradition of Berkeley cultural geography (see a recent review by Nash and Carney, 1996). In that tradition, research tends to be much more descriptive, observing, for example, the spatial distribution of musical forms, activities, performers and personalities (Crowley, 1987; Carney, 1987a; 1987b); musical hearths and diffusion of musical styles (Jackson, 1952; Ford, 1971; Francaviglia, 1978; Carney, 1987c; Glasgow, 1987; and Horsley, 1987), and delimiting areas that share certain musical traits (Lomax, 1960; Lomax and Erickson, 1971; Burman-Hall, 1975; Gastil, 1975; Nash, 1975), or relatedly, identifying the character and personality of places as gleaned from lyrics, melody, instrumentation and the general 'feel' or sensory impact of the music (Gleason, 1969; Curtis and Rose, 1987; and Curtis, 1987). While interesting and valuable, much of this work tends to focus very much on music in North America, in particular, the U.S.A. (see, for example, Carney, 1987), which, in many ways, has been one of the tremendous forces of cultural influence, and which some would describe as one of the sources of western cultural imperialism. Given this scenario, the question of 'local reaction' to global forces seldom arises in the analysis of North American music.

The paper will be divided from here into four main sections. In the section immediately following this, my intention is to provide the concepts on which the rest of the paper will be based. In particular, I will discuss some of the existing literature on localism and globalism. In the next section, I will provide some background pertaining to Dick Lee and *xinyao*. This will then be followed by the empirical discussions and conclusions.

## **CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS: GLOBALISATION AND LOCALISATION**

In the growing literature on globalisation, it has been argued that a homogenisation of cultural forms has resulted because of improved technologies, commodification and commercialisation (Cohen, 1991:342). Adorno (1992), for example, has argued that music, in particular, rock music, has been subject to such global processes, what with the proliferation of

technologies such as radio, the cassette and compact disc. With these technologies, it has become possible to involve music in mass production as part of capitalistic ventures. The result is a significant degree of standardisation and homogenisation as huge quantities are produced and widely distributed. It is not uncommon therefore to walk into a boutique in Hong Kong and be greeted by Michael Jackson's music playing in the background, nor is it difficult to locate in London's Virgin MegaStore varieties of world music or ethnic music. Indeed, it has been argued that such border crossing has given rise to conditions of placelessness and timelessness (Wallis and Malm, 1984; and Meyrowitz, 1985). For some, the result is that music loses its aesthetic value, and its ability to evoke or affirm happiness (Adorno, 1992).

Such arguments about the negative homogenising effects of global forces are often equated with Americanisation. Thus, a process of cultural imperialism is said to be at work in which the cultural spaces of (Third World) nations are being broken down by the 'economic and political domination of the United States ... thrust[ing] its hegemonic culture into all parts of the world' (Featherstone, 1993:170). It is argued that this process is damaging to local cultures because they give way under the relentless modernising force of American cultural imperialism. In such a scenario, the sense of collective memory and tradition of localities will be obliterated, such that there is 'no sense of place' (Meyrowitz, 1985).

In the context of music, it is suggested that local musical styles would be effaced. The culture industry becomes like an assembly line developing products of a predictable, monolithic nature (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979), namely, popular songs that are 'standardised with repetitive and interchangeable regularly recurring refrains, choruses and hooks, so that the song would imprint itself on the mind of the listener and then be purchased as a commodity' (Negus, 1995:316). As Hirschkop (1989:301) argues,

The diversity and innovation in performance and reception typical of popular music is erased when the music is abstracted and placed onto the capitalist circuit of radio playlist, promotional tour and record/cassette/CD sales. Without real control over composition, production and conditions of performance, it is impossible for the creation of musical sound to respond to cultural and political needs.

Thus, in this view, 'the commercial imperatives of capitalism directly determine the way in which popular music is produced – corrupting, compromising and coopting creativity' (Negus, 1995:320).

Such views of the negative effects of globalisation and the loss of local cultural identity are, however, countered by other arguments about the role of local resources in anchoring the production of cultural forms. For example, in the context of musical production, it has been suggested that there are 'local sounds', that is, particular sounds which are produced in particular localities with specific characteristics (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996). Such unique local sounds are the result of, *inter alia*, the distinctive interplay of language, lyrics,

melody, and instrumentation. They are also singular because of the general 'feel' or sensory impact of the music. In other words, in recognising that particular musical forms 'originate within, interact with, and are inevitably affected by, the physical, social, political and economic factors which surround them' (Cohen, 1991:342), it is possible to identify unique local sounds produced from unique local milieux, despite broader global capitalistic forces which tend to encourage homogenisation.

While the above arguments about the likely globalising effects on music have been based largely on the analysis of musical production, it is important to recognise that, in musical consumption, the significance of the local is also asserted. As Smith (1994:237) put it, music can be a form of resistance to the homogenising forces of the culture industry, 'not necessarily by producing an alternative sound, but by enabling people to experience music in distinctive localised ways'. Other related arguments are centred on the notion that participation in local musical activities can contribute to people's sense of identity. Street (1993:54), for example, argues that live performances, as the site of local activity, are extremely important in promoting a sense of community identity. Drawing on the works of Finnegan (1989) and Cohen (1991), Street (1993:54) holds that

[l]ive music, because it is necessarily local, being available only in a specific place to a limited audience, is particularly effective at serving a sense of community identity. It serves to differentiate those consumers from others, whilst simultaneously locking them into national trends and events.

Others have also argued that participation, whether as performers, audience or supporters in local musical activities promotes community identity. In nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, for example, brass bands were a means of forging a sense of community and locality (Herbert, 1992). As Russell (1991) points out, they were closely linked to the ceremony and ritual of public life of a particular locality, and thus became bound to the rhythm and identity of that community. In addition, as Bevan (1991) illustrates, brass band competitions whipped up a sense of loyalty for the local 'team', thus fostering community identity.

Beyond contributing to the construction and maintenance of such communities, music can also contribute towards the construction and maintenance of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). As Valentine (1995) argues, audiences at musical performances can feel as part of a community, albeit an imagined one, since members of the audience will never meet or know of others' existence and since there is a temporary perceived bond of comradeship amongst those present. The notion of *communitas* (Turner, 1974), discussed in the context of pilgrimages, may be applied here. Turner argues that pilgrimage results in the abrogation of social structure whereby individuals are temporarily freed of the hierarchical roles and statuses that they ordinarily bear. There is instead a condition of egalitarian association between individuals. The space thus created is a site of unity and equality – a

community. Like pilgrimages, music too can have that effect. This, Kong (1996a) illustrates in the context of *xinyao* audiences.

As the above discussion reveals, there are clearly those who advocate global and local positions. However, global and local cultures are in fact relational rather than oppositional phenomena (Featherstone, 1993:181). This is most evident in the argument that imported pop can in fact be a resource of new sounds, instruments and ideas which local musicians can and do use in their own ways to make sense of their own circumstances (Frith, 1989; Hatch, 1989). In this sense, the position that the world is one in which borders are vanishing because Anglo-American commercial music, with its homogenising effects, is destructive to indigenous music, is a fundamentally untenable one. Instead, the process at work is actually one of transculturation, a 'two-way process that both dilutes and streamlines culture, but also provides new opportunities for cultural enrichment' (Wallis and Malm, 1987:128). Transculturation is apparent when musicians are influenced dually by their own local cultural traditions and by the music industry's transnational standards. The result is local music with a transnational flavour or transnational music with a local flavour (Wallis and Malm, 1987:132). The important question, then, as Wallis and Malm (1987:133) identify it, is how far the transculturation process will go, and what implications that has for the production of culturally differentiated music that is at the same time international in nature.

Another way in which globalisation and localisation can be seen to be relational notions is the argument that globalisation intensifies localisation rather than homogenisation. As Featherstone (1993:169) has argued, globalisation gives rise to 'the awareness of the finitude and boundedness of the planet and humanity' and familiarises us with the range of local cultures. Others go further and argue that beyond 'familiarisation', globalisation 'produc[es] or perpetuat[es] distinctive cultural practices and differentiated identities' (Schiller, 1994:1). Massey (1993) discusses this production and perpetuation in terms of a search for a 'global sense of place', a 'response to [a] desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change' (Massey, 1993:236). This echoes Harvey's (1989) contention that locality only matters *because* of globalisation and that the uniqueness and identity of place has become important because of the need for security in a shifting, uncertain age. This is an argument that I will take up in subsequent sections.

## **IDIOSYNCRATIC INDIVIDUALS OR ARCHETYPAL ARTISTES IN THE COMMERCIAL CIRCUIT?**

In this section, I will provide some background information on Dick Lee and his music and the Mandarin genre of *xinyao*, highlighting the reasons why they have been chosen for analysis. Basically, Lee's music serves as an example of local music that has done well in the global market, having carved a foothold in various East Asian countries in particular. I will show how he is clearly

ensconced in the global commercial world of music production and embraces it. *Xinyao*, on the other hand, is music which is essentially homegrown, with a distinctive style that is folksy and ballad-like. At a point in its development when some *xinyao* composers penned commercially successful pop songs for Hong Kong stars, and when some *xinyao* performers became successful pop stars in their own right in the regional market, they were considered to have moved away from *xinyao*, and new efforts were put into reviving the original style. The intersection with the global music industry is therefore less clearcut. It is because of the different relationships with the commercial world of music that these two cases have been selected for analysis.

Lee is one of the few successful Singaporean artistes and songwriters to have made an impact in the local and, indeed, regional market. When few Singaporeans were being signed to recording contracts, Lee had signed on with WEA, part of the Time Warner conglomerate. He has numerous albums and singles to his name. He writes music and lyrics for musical productions and promotional videos; and performs at numerous concerts, including representing Singapore in international and regional music festivals. He has also succeeded in penetrating the Japanese market, boasting of a fan club, record-breaking sales and full-house performances, no mean feat in a market that is closely guarded. His location in the international commercial music world is further reflected in his winning of several awards: Best Newcomer in 1990 at the Second Annual Hong Kong International Awards (other nominees include Lisa Stansfield, Dee-Lite, Wilson Philips and Mariah Carey); Best Achievement Award in 1993 at Singapore's 93.3 FM Hits Award; and Perfect 10 Music Achievement Award in Singapore for significant contribution to the music scene in 1995.

At the same time, while he is situated in at least the regional marketplace, Lee has also expressed his personal predilections in music-making, reflecting local conditions. From the young age of 15, Lee had already wanted to express himself through his own music and perform his own material. His first solo album, *Life Story*, featuring original songs, bears evidence of his concern with the personal and local, reflected, if nothing else, in the title of the album. Similarly, in his later music, Lee addresses questions of local and global identities, motivated primarily by his personal confusion as to who he was and where he came from. As he has articulated in so many situations:

When you have a bit of the East and a bit of the West in you, you sometimes do not know which one to listen to. When both sides speak up, you sometimes think you are mad (*The Straits Times*, 13 August 1989).

In working through this confusion, Lee has sought resolution in doing things as a Singaporean, that is, one bound by locatedness in a global context. As he asserts unequivocally,

Basically, I am a musician who tries to do things from a Singaporean point of view. I think it is important to always bear in mind that we are Singaporeans . . . I



want to show that I am a true-blue Singaporean. If I am merely writing for myself, I do not have to answer to anyone. But as a musician, I have to show my patriotism (*The Straits Times*, 13 August 1989).

He goes further to claim that

I'm looking for a musical identity for Singapore, because Singapore is a multiracial country, and our traditions are very varied. All this is surrounded and almost suffocated by the Western influence. ... My part is to sort of forge the folk music of the future by mixing the East and the West in a way that is comfortable to us, not forced (*Asahi Evening News*, 30 June 1990).

His attempt to find a local sound is nevertheless

... a conscious effort. I've always been looking for a sound for Singapore music, so I thought I'd try ... and I know that the actual sound should evolve (naturally) but I can't wait that long. So I thought I'd just take a little bit of local elements, and I'm proud of my 'Singlish', so why not use it. Also, I have my Chinese ethnic heritage and I use that in my songs a lot (*The Straits Times*, 21 February 1986).

My decision to use Lee and his music as a case study here is thus predicated on the opportunity he provides for an analysis of an 'idiosyncratic', 'individual' artiste with particular personal agendas who is simultaneously situated within broader structural/economic situations, and who is confronted with global commercial opportunities and constraints. While some have argued that small countries have had 'great difficulty in developing indigenous music in competition with cheap and popular imports' (Wells, 1995:2), Lee's case stands out as an example of the development of indigenous music amidst larger globalising forces.<sup>2</sup>

*Xinyao* is a shorthand term for '*xin jia po nian qin ren chuang zuo de ge yao*' ('the songs composed by Singapore youths'), an extraction of the first and last words of the longer term. It began around 1980 with groups of youths in junior colleges<sup>3</sup> who wrote their own songs and played their compositions informally for one another within the confines of school and during their leisure time. Apart from students, some were also fresh graduates from junior colleges, either serving national service,<sup>4</sup> entering university or in their first jobs. As one observer put it, they were mainly 'boys and girls next door' singing about their feelings (*The Straits Times*, 10 June 1986). Many did not have any prior musical training. Their compositions thus generally consisted of simple melody lines using basic chords, and particularly in the early stages of *xinyao* development, it would not be uncommon to find that 'two guitars at most provided the rhythm' (*The Straits Times*, 22 December 1985). Occasionally, there would be some supplementary piano, flute or violin accompaniment.

The songs they composed and sung were often described as '*xiao yuan ge*' (literally, 'school garden songs', that is, amateur music). Their lyrics were characteristic of youth concerns, including their feelings and aspirations, and

their views regarding events and happenings that they witnessed around them. As Billy Koh, one of the pioneers of the *xinyao* movement expressed, 'The true spirit of *xinyao* is to reflect the feelings of youth and growing up' (*The Straits Times*, 4 July 1985).

In some ways, *xinyao* composers and singers produce 'music at the margins' (Robinson, Buck and Cuthbert, 1991), that is, they are on the periphery of the dominant international music industry. Musicians may produce their own tapes, set up their own small recording companies outside the domain of very large international corporations. Some hope to be 'spotted' and taken into the international markets by these huge recording companies. Indeed, some *xinyao* composers and singers made that leap, such as Eric Moo, Li Weisong and Li Sisong. Among them, they have written award-winning songs for popular Hong Kong artistes, or become well-known pop singers in their own right, establishing reputations in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Through a discussion of Lee's English music and the Mandarin genre of *xinyao* therefore, I hope to illustrate that global and local resources work together in different ways in the production of music. In so doing, I wish to argue that despite a world with many globalising trends, borders are not entirely vanishing. Indeed, I will argue that where the intersection with global forces is stronger, the assertion of the local is concomitantly greater. On the converse, where music is 'at the margin' and is content to remain at the margin, the assertion of the local is sometimes not as resounding, and at other times, more incidental than conscious. Following this, I will focus first on Dick Lee and his music. This will be followed by a discussion of *xinyao*.

## **TRANSCULTURAL MUSIC IN A REGIONAL MARKET**

Lee's music provides evidence of transculturation in that there is simultaneously evidence of global influences and local particularisms, or as McQuail (1994) has described it, an interchange between cultures. This is true in his instrumentation, style, language and costumes.

Lee's instrumentation and style reveals a search for an identity that reconciles different forces. He blends traditional instruments with synthesisers, folk melodies with techno-rhythms. For example, he infuses a traditional Malay folk song 'Rasa Sayang' with a modern rap. Elsewhere, he incorporates tabla beats with pop, jazz and fusion rhythms, and traditional folk tunes with English pop styles (for example, in his songs 'Alishan', 'Springtime' and 'Cockatoo', and many others in his albums *Life in the Lion City* and *The Mad Chinaman*).

In his use of Singlish (Singapore English), Lee displays the interaction between cultures, in particular, how the language of the colonials and international marketplace has been adapted to incorporate a 'local twist, inflection, idiolect' (Chambers, 1994:2). For example, English has come to be interspersed with Chinese and Malay elements, and this colloquial expression is evident in Lee's articulations ('shioh', 'lecheh', 'lah', 'leh', 'meh' and others) alongside his otherwise standard English.

Lee's stage presentation provides further evidence of transculturation. For

example, in performing tracks from his album *Orientalism* (1990) in 1991, Lee was dressed in the style of Elvis Presley, with sideburns, bell-bottoms and the rest of the ensemble, gyrating as the King of Rock did in earlier decades. His songs, however, had to do with, *inter alia*, one's identity as an Oriental. This seeming paradox is reconcilable when we consider Lee's concern with the fusion of East and West, local and global, tradition and modernity.

Apart from these transcultural elements, a sense of the local is also strong in Lee's music and serves to illustrate the challenge of local particularisms to alleged Western universalism. This is evident in two ways: the injection of distinctive local contexts, creating a sense of place; and the recovery of communal and national heritages, drawing often on a combined sense of history and nostalgia.<sup>5</sup>

Many of Lee's lyrics are peppered with local scenes and subject matter and recreate a very strong Singapore/local flavour. References to familiar places, well-known campaigns,<sup>6</sup> local foods and national acronyms can be found in many of Lee's songs, epitomised in 'Life in the Lion City' (1984), in which he sings about

Hawker centres, food on every floor./Singapore, Singapore .../Ang Mo Kio –  
H.D.B./Shenton Way – Productivity/ People's Park – Keep the City Clean .../  
Singapore, Singapore./ Full of tourists and department stores .../Everything is  
tall and new and so clean ...

The emergence of local particularisms is also reflected in the recovery of communal heritage in Lee's music. For example, he draws on his Chinese roots by entitling one of his albums *The Year of the Monkey* (1992), after one of the animals in the Chinese horoscope.<sup>7</sup> He is toggled up as the Monkey God, a well-known figure in Chinese mythology and religion, for the cover of that album and promotional posters, and dons traditional Chinese opera costume for the cover of *The Mad Chinaman* (1989). At his thirty-fourth birthday theme party in 1990 hosted by WEA, Lee's then recording label, the ethnic motif was reflected in the stage decor (red drapes, and Chinese lanterns and masks) and in the dress code of guests (*sarongs*, *songkoks*, *kain batik*, turbans and *cheongsams*) (*The New Paper*, 27 August 1990). In February 1991 when he took his Asia Major Japan Tour to five cities, his stage represented an attempt at recovering his Chinese heritage, with Chinese New Year as the theme, and the large Chinese character for Lee placed centre stage.

Apart from the recovery of communal or ethnic heritage, the assertion of the local is also evidenced through the reference to national history and heritage. For example, in the song 'Rasa Sayang' (1989), he contributes to the consolidation of national history by drawing on Singapore's past. He writes and sings of a well-known story about Sang Nila Utama, a Sumatran prince's discovery of Singapore:

Once upon a time, there were only trees/And a lion or two enjoying the breeze/  
Then a boat arrived one sunny day/And human beings were here to stay/Well, the

king of the jungle couldn't really complain/He got the whole damn island named after him .../ The island has since come very far/All thanks to the man named Utama.

In another song, 'A Human Touch', he calls upon a sense of patriotic pride by singing of 'your sense of local pride' and how the 'old colonial ways are gone', recalling Singapore's independence from British rule. Such importation of national history into popular culture emphasises the local content and just stops short of waving the flag of nationalism.

Lee's music thus reveals how its location within the regional music market has not resulted in homogenisation, but has in fact led to the creation of a new sound, sometimes termed 'Singapop'. In such a sound, some elements of both East and West and of local and global are lost, but others are retained or imbibed. This sound is distinctive for its transnational flavour, its simultaneous localism and globalism. Indeed, I will argue, adopting Harvey's (1989) stand, that locality matters for Lee precisely because of his experience of the global. In the context of a shifting, changing world, in a world where technology and commercialism encourages the vanishing of borders, locatedness and differentiated identities become important and attractive.

## **MUSIC AT THE MARGINS: COMMERCIALISATION AND HOMOGENISATION?**

Unlike Lee's music which consciously resonates with local and transcultural flavour in spite of, or perhaps because of, its location in the regional commercial market, *xinyao* resounds neither as strongly nor as consciously with local flavour, both in terms of style and content. The sense of the local is more incidental and muted than Lee's deliberate stance.

In terms of style, *xinyao* is similar to the Taiwanese ballads in form. Their folksy rhythms and their reliance on one or two guitars is reminiscent of Taiwanese *xiaoyuan ge* ('school garden songs'). In that sense, the regional influence is apparent although the influence has not been effected because of the need to conform to standards and expectations of the international music industry. In terms of content, *xinyao* lyrics, like those of Taiwanese *xiaoyuan ge*, are expressions of feelings and aspirations, hopes, frustrations, problems, fears and desires. For example, *xinyao* captures the yearning for time past and previous place among lyricists, including their reminiscences of school life, the excitement of collective victories, the sadness of shared defeats, the sense of camaraderie, the purity of friendships, and the laughter and tears of innocence. There is a bittersweet nostalgia for a time and an experience that is now irretrievably gone. This nostalgia for childhood is not unique to the local context. In some ways, this is a universal condition, which may therefore suggest *xinyao*'s lack of local content. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Kong, 1996a), the harking back to a less stressful and more playful past may be more acute in places like Singapore where the constant exhortations to push ahead and strive for excellence put additional pressures on people who then

develop a more intense nostalgia for times past. If that is the case, then *xinyao*, by way of its lyrics, does capture simultaneously the universality of experience, and its time and place specific nature. Likewise, the treatment of other themes in *xinyao*, such as the effects of the rat race on people, delinquency, the effects of westernisation on local communities, and the lack of freedom (see Kong, 1996a), reveal local particularities amidst universal conditions. In this way, the production of *xinyao* reflects the intersection of local and global resources although the local flavour is more incidental and subtle than in Lee's music.

By the mid 1980s, the first signs of commercialisation had emerged, a response to a perceived need to make the songs more popular and available to a wider audience. The way to do this was to try and '[plug] into the mainstream of showbusiness and pop' (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1987). Thus, artistes strove to sign up with local and international recording labels, release albums, and make television and stage appearances. Soon, their compositions were hitting the Chinese pop charts and glitzy award presentation ceremonies were being organised and broadcast. Given these various developments, it was observed that *xinyao* was

... no longer the 'students' songs' you once heard in school concerts and community centre events. They are now commercial songs fighting for a footing in the competitive recording business (*The Straits Times*, 30 March 1988).

What then were the influences of the global commercial music market on the essentially localised, if not local musical form? What do these trends imply for the process of creation and the quality of authenticity?

As Adorno (1992) argued, commercialisation can lead to an 'adulteration' of a style, an argument that has been adopted in relation to this originally amateur music-making activity. For example, as some observers pointed out, *xinyao* had 'left behind its salad days when the sole source of musical backing was the guitar' (*The Straits Times*, 12 October 1986). Some went so far as to suggest that *xinyao* songs had become 'adulterated with rock and soul and embellished with band music' and that they had even incorporated disco music (*The Straits Times*, 3 May 1984). Original *xinyao* performers were now backed by six-piece bands and many tunes had begun to embrace a distinctively pop flavour. In the 1987 Festival,<sup>8</sup> for example, it was suggested that

the fast upbeat numbers which dominated the show would have gone down just as well in a rock concert. As would the performers' outfits and presentation. Most of the singers were dressed to the nines as they belted out their numbers to the accompaniment of a four-piece band and back-up dancers, not to mention the constant criss-cross of strobe lights (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1987).

For those who opposed this trend, the view was that '*xinyao* had sold out, what with the strong commercial element replacing the earlier rustic appeal' (*The Straits Times*, 12 October 1986). Those who supported and indeed, embraced the trend were proud to proclaim that *xinyao* would no longer be strictly ballad

and that songs would go pop, thus detaching from its origins (*The Straits Times*, 30 August 1987). This movement towards Mandarin pop sounds (and relatedly, Cantopop too), traditionally of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong commercial mould, is akin to a standardisation and homogenisation of styles, which some readily pointed to as evidence of lower standards and loss of creativity (*The Straits Times*, 4 July 1985). As one *xinyao* pioneer acknowledged, writers were beginning to pander to public taste (*The Straits Times*, 3 May 1984).

As *xinyao* became increasingly commercialised and reached wider audiences, its success ironically led to the 'death' of the term, if not the music. Originally coined to represent the then rare breed of local compositions, *xinyao* had been so successfully assimilated into mainstream Chinese music that it made little sense to talk about it as amateur music by youths, for youths anymore. By 1990, *xinyao* as it was understood in its original sense was beginning to die a natural death. The Young Songwriters' Society (formed in 1986 at the height of the *xinyao* movement as an official body to bring together groups and singers and to coordinate and promote activities for them) found it difficult to sustain activities with little money and manpower. Pioneers who had succeeded in going professional such as Eric Moo, Li Weisong and Li Sisong had left *xinyao* behind, having progressed not only from simple schoolboyish guitar strumming to sophisticated studio-enhanced sounds, but also from singing about a variety of youth concerns to singing primarily about love and romance, themes characteristic of Mandarin and Canto-pop. Further, the associated sense of youth identity, the spaces of production and consumption, and the sense of camaraderie and community, had all been lost (see Kong, 1996a). In this sense, therefore, it may be argued that globalising trends, borne on the chariots of modern telecommunications, and commercial imperatives have led to a degree of homogenisation of music. Metaphorically speaking, cultural borders are indeed disappearing, and Adorno's prediction of how musics become commodified and therefore bland and homogeneous seems to have come true. In fact, it can be argued that it is the dissolution of economic borders with increasing transnational trading in cultural commodities that has led to the tendency towards cultural homogenisation. While such an argument would not be untrue, it would be premature to conclude the discussions thus. As I will illustrate below, the subsequent development of *xinyao* shows how the local reasserts itself in the face of globalisation, a re-erection of cultural borders in the face of vanishing ones.

Two indications will be cited to reflect the revival of this movement. The first is the establishment of new groups committed to *xinyao* compositions more like those of the pre-commercialisation phase. The second is the appropriation of these compositions by the state as an emblem of the local, thus hoping to find in them symbols of 'Singaporeanness'.

At least three groups have been established in the last five years to revive *xinyao* compositions and activities akin to those of old. One example of such an amateur group is Serious Musicworks. Members provide mutual support in their common interest of songwriting and singing. Comprising undergraduates,

junior college students and national servicemen, aging from 17 to 22, the group was set up in 1991. They staged two concerts between 1991 and 1992 which showcased members' original compositions. These had the usual ballads on youth concerns, such as friendship and family relationships, as well as the probing of social issues. They will not pander to standards dictated by the commercial market, but write their lyrics and compose their melodies in ways that they deem authentic. In all these ways, they can be likened to the early *xinyao* style.

A second example of *xinyao* revival is the setting up of the Music Artificer Brewing Factory in August 1993. The name is a direct translation of the group's Chinese name, which actually means 'a group of happy people making music.' There are a total of 18 members ranging in age from 18 to 30. They are attached to the Bukit Timah Community Centre and meet there weekly for rehearsals and discussions. Their performances are similar to previous *xinyao* performances, with straightforward acts, the use of guitars and minimal arrangement. Their lyrics focus on young people's feelings towards environmental protection, the generation gap and romance (*The Straits Times*, 4 March 1994).

Another group, Intersection Music Lab, comprising about 60 young Singaporeans aged between 16 and early 30s, also got together in early 1996 to keep the musical style alive. They compose, discuss their works at monthly meetings, and occasionally perform at polytechnics or bubbletea cafes. Relatedly, they have also set up a publishing company to publish a magazine which discusses the history of *xinyao*, its songwriters, groups and singers. They too have produced an album called 'Unknown tribes', featuring new compositions sung by the respective composers and other group members. The title of the album unwittingly calls to mind Maffesoli's notion of 'neo-tribes', reinforcing the argument that he was crafting, of the establishment of

... a 'multitude of individual acts of *self-identification*' (Bauman 1992, 136), where people gather together to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (Maffesoli 1991, 11) in their search for community and belonging, the loss of which is the *leit-motif* of the postmodern condition (Giddens 1991; Harvey 1989).

While some of the members of Intersection Music Lab have aspirations to turn professional, it is to become professional producers promoting *xinyao*, or professional *xinyao* singers, unlike some of their predecessors who sought to go the way of the global pop market. *Xinyao*, in their lexicon, retains the earlier nuances of folksy ballads sung to guitar strumming, expressing the concerns of local youths. In this sense, there is a reassertion of the local in the face of homogenising forces.

Apart from the establishment of such new groups that prefer the more localised and nuanced style of old over the commercialised pop/disco/rock styles of the late 1980s, another indication of the assertion of the local voice is the appearance of *xinyao* in state events. In the 1994 National Day celebrations, for example, pioneer *xinyao* songs like 'Voices' were employed as part of the

celebrations, elevating them to the level of 'national' songs. This further established *xinyao* as part of Singapore's heritage and tradition as opposed to the cultural domination of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the arena of Chinese popular music.

## CONCLUSIONS

What I have sought to illustrate using the two empirical cases is that musical analysis provides an avenue for the understanding of intersections between global and local forces. At one level therefore, I wish to make the point that cultural forms such as music deserve fuller research attention within geography (see also Kong, 1995).

At another level, what I have illustrated is that as we move towards the end of this century and into a world of seemingly vanishing borders, the new international order in the 21st century is not necessarily going to be one of cultural homogeneity. As Halfacree and Kitchin (1996:47) show, 'Adorno's predictions regarding the increasing blandness and homogeneity of commodified music may be seen as being unnecessarily bleak or one-dimensional'. In fact, when the local and global do not come into contact, local particularisms are incidental, subtle or muted. It is when local particularisms are challenged by the trend towards universalisation that they assert themselves all the more. From a political perspective, therefore, globalisation is not simply a case of cultural (Western) imperialism, as has so often been argued, but involves a process of negotiated identities.

At yet another level, it is clear from my empirical discussions that the three arenas in which Walters discussed globalisation (culture, politics and economics) are integrally linked. In particular, I argue that culture and commerce are mutually constitutive forces. The capitalist (music) world shapes the contexts and constraints within which cultural (musical) forms evolve as I illustrated in both the case studies above. Yet, at the same time, songwriters and performers do not entirely follow the dictates of commercial trends. Indeed, they may try to set the trends (as with Lee), thus creating new sounds, or even oppose them (as with some *xinyao* revivalist groups). Concomitantly, the cultural is also political. Popular cultural products and cultural icons may be appropriated as national symbols, traditions that are invented to help cement fragile bonds of nationhood and national identity. This is the case when local pop groups perform at national functions, when local compositions are given air time, and when such compositions are given prominence during occasions of national significance. Overall then, I would reason that, though constructed on the basis of specific case studies situated in the context of Singapore music, contextually located case studies can yield useful detailed insights into possibly broader phenomena, an argument that Mitchell (1986) and others have defended well. In this instance, it may well be that my arguments, crafted from an analysis of two case studies of the production of music in Singapore, illustrate how the world is one of multiple intersections: of the global and local; of the economic, cultural and political.



## NOTES

1. By popular music, I refer to non-classical music but acknowledge that that leaves open a wide range of musical genres from jazz to rock. My focus will be narrower than that, as my case studies will illustrate.
2. Lee's example is unique in the context of Singapore although he does represent part of a new and nascent shift towards pan-Asian pop cultural unity in which 'Asian youths are beginning to find cultural icons in their own backyards after years of cultural domination by Levis and Coca Cola, Marlboros and Madonna' (Kong, 1996b: 287). These cultural icons draw from various cultural dimensions, for example, from music to fashion and literature.
3. In the Singapore education system, students may move from secondary schools to a two-year junior college education, at the end of which they sit for the General Certificate for Education 'Advanced' level examinations. Junior college education is meant to be an intermediate training ground for students who wish to pursue university education subsequently. Junior college students are generally 17 to 18 years of age.
4. National service, that is, two-and-a-half years in the army, is compulsory for all Singaporean males when they turn 19, with some state-approved exceptions.
5. The following discussion is a summarised version of that which will appear in Kong (1996b).
6. The government has hoped to effect many social engineering programmes over the years through campaigns, from 'Keep Singapore clean' to 'Speak more Mandarin, less dialect' and 'Girl or boy – two is enough'.
7. Lee was born in the Year of the Monkey.
8. The *Xinyao* Festival was a yearly event, organised to allow composers to share their works with other enthusiasts.

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