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Making "Music at the Margins"? A Social and Cultural Analysis of Xinyao in Singapore

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Introduction: Popular Music in Geographical Analyses

Formalist critics and aestheticians have argued that music does not possess any kind of "extra-musical" significance, that there is no meaning beyond the form and structural relations of the notes. For them, music exemplifies the laws of mathematical harmony and proportion rather than the social and political contexts within which it is produced, reproduced and consumed.¹ This view has been challenged by a number of social theorists: Max Weber, Theodor Adorno and Edward Said² have all argued for an understanding of music within its social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Such analysis of popular music is now unquestioned. Indeed, it is viewed as valid and important, and within sociology and cultural studies, for example, there has long been no need for justification. Within geography, however, popular music has not been explored to any large extent. As I have illustrated elsewhere,³ where writings exist, they have been somewhat divorced from recent theoretical and methodological questions which have rejuvenated social and cultural geography. Yet, as I argued in that paper,

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- 1 Christopher Norris (ed.), *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989).
 - 2 M. Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, translated and edited by D. Martindale, J. Reidel and G. Neuwirth (Carbondale: Illinois University Press, 1958); T. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, translated by A.G. Mitchell and W.V. Blauster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), and *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, translated by E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1976); E. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).
 - 3 L. Kong, "Popular Music in Geographical Analysis", *Progress in Human Geography* 19, (1995) 183-98.

existing lines of inquiry can be expanded, using retheorised perspectives in cultural geography as springboards for discussion. These retheorised perspectives, as applied to the study of popular music, may take a variety of forms: the analysis of symbolic meanings in music; music as cultural communication; the cultural politics of music; musical economies; and music and the social construction of identities.⁴

In this paper, I do not wish to reproduce my arguments for the various directions suggested. Instead, I intend to apply some of those ideas in a specific situation. In particular, I wish to explore two key themes: the importance of music in contributing to the social construction of identity, specifically, youth identity; and the nexus between commerce and creativity in the production of music. I will do so by focusing on *xinyao*, a particular form of Mandarin music in Singapore, exploring its production and consumption within larger social, cultural, economic and political contexts. In analysing *xinyao*, I have chosen to focus on the social construction of youth identity and the culture-commerce nexus because of the way in which this musical genre has developed from a distinctive form of amateur music by and for Singapore youths in its early stage to one in which commercialisation has altered its original form. My choice of conceptual underpinnings is thus guided by specific empirical developments.

The paper will be divided from here into six main sections. In the next section, my intention is to provide a broad overview of existing literature that focuses first, on the relationship between music and youths, and second, on the commercialisation of music. In this discussion of existing literature, I will also highlight conceptual positions which I will adopt in my later empirical discussion. Following this, I will provide some background pertaining to *xinyao*. This will pave the way for my empirical discussions, divided into three parts to reflect the chronological development of *xinyao*. The first part focuses on *xinyao*'s initial phase in which it played a significant role in the social construction of youth identity and the development of "community". The second part follows on the second phase of *xinyao* development in which there is increasing commercialisation. Here, I address the tensions between commerce and creativity. The third part takes readers through the most recent phase in the history of *xinyao* in which there is evidence of a revivalist movement, albeit in modified ways. The focus here is on the recovery of the creative and "authentic" in order that *xinyao* talents may then be identified and thereby establish a foothold in the international commercial world of music. The final section of the paper then draws together the discussions with some concluding observations.

4 Ibid.

Contexts and Concepts

Music and Youths⁵

Studies that focus on the relationship between music and youths have been carried out under the rubric of various disciplines, particularly within sociology and cultural studies. These generally adopt a "societal" framework, focusing on the effects of music on youths. This framework must be contrasted with the "cultural" framework, which I adopt in the next section on commerce and creativity. There, the debate is centred on whether music is produced as art or commodity, that is, the intent of music production. Research on music and youths can broadly be divided into four categories. The first group of studies explores music preferences and tastes among adolescents. The focus here is on adolescents' consumption of music. For example, Hakanen and Wells⁶ explore empirically the nature of adolescent music tastes and their socioeconomic correlates. Similarly, Christenson and Peterson⁷ examine the popular music preferences of college students and discover significant gender differences. Some researchers have taken this one step further by investigating the relationship between musical preferences and the values, attitudes and behaviours of adolescents.⁸ Lewis,⁹ for example, has studied how musical preference is

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- 5 I use the terms "youths" and "adolescents" interchangeably in this paper although I am aware that in other contexts, attempts have been made to distinguish between the two.
 - 6 E.A. Hakanen and A. Wells, "Music Preference and Taste Cultures among Adolescents", *Popular Music and Society* 17 (1993), 55-69.
 - 7 P.G. Christenson and J.B. Peterson, "Genre and Gender in the Structure of Musical Preference", *Communication Research* 15 (1988), 282-301.
 - 8 J.S. Lemming, "Rock Music and the Socialization of Moral Values in Early Adolescence", *Youth and Society* 18 (1987), 363-83; T. Schlattman, "Traditional, Nontraditional and Emotionally/Behaviorally Disturbed Students and Popular Music Lyrics", *Popular Music and Society* 13 (1989) 23-35; P. Verden, K. Dunleavy and C.H. Powers, "Heavy Metal Mania and Adolescent Delinquency", *Popular Music and Society* 13 (1989), 73-82; J.S. Epstein and D.J. Pratto, "Heavy Metal Rock Music, Juvenile Delinquency and Satanic Identification", *Popular Music and Society* 14 (1990), 67-76; J.S. Epstein, D.J. Pratto and J.K. Skipper, Jr., "Teenagers, Behavioral Problems and Preferences for Heavy Metal and Rap Music: A Case Study of a Southern Middle School", *Deviant Behavior* 11 (1990), 381-94.
 - 9 G.H. Lewis, "Towards a Uses and Gratifications Approach: An Examination of Commitment and Involvement in Popular Music", *Popular Music and Society* 7 (1980), 10-18.

related to self-reported drug use among 16-year-old Californians while Edwards¹⁰ has examined the possible relationship between the content of popular music and adolescents' expectations about love, sex and relationships.

A second group of studies deals with the role of music in adolescent socialization in which the importance of music as a "social lubricator"¹¹ is explored.¹² It is argued, for example, that "adolescent discourse centers around the language and terminology of rock" and that "music provides the core values of numerous adolescent subcultures".¹³ Indeed, others¹⁴ illustrate that there is a strong relationship between an adolescent's level of familiarity with and use of popular music and his/her popularity. Relatedly, studies have also shown how music contributes positively to a youth's sense of identity and self-esteem, for example, through participation in planned musical activities.¹⁵

A third group of studies deal with how opposition and rebellion among youths are expressed through music. Frith's classic book *Sound Effects*¹⁶ is an oft-cited study in this respect. It deals with youth culture and rebellion in the 1950s and 1960s when there was explicit opposition to both peer-group and adult middle-class norms expressed through rock-and-roll music and associated expressions (such as Beatles haircuts, surfing styles, facial hair and so forth).

10 E.D. Edwards, "Does Love Really Stink? The 'Mean World' of Love and Sex in Popular Music of the 1980s", in J.S. Epstein (ed.), *Adolescents and their Music: If It's Too Loud, You're Too Old* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994), pp. 225-49.

11 Keith Roe, "The School and Music in Adolescent Socialization", in J. Lull (ed.), *Popular Music and Communication* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987), p. 215.

12 P. Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); D. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); M. Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); S. Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1981); J. Lull, "On the Communicative Properties of Music", *Communication Research* 12 (1985), 363-72, and "The Naturalistic Study of Media Use and Youth Culture", in K.E. Rosengren, L.A. Wenner and P. Palmgreen (eds.), *Media Gratification Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985); D. Rouner, "Rock Music Use as a Socializing Function", *Popular Music and Society* 14 (1990), 97-107.

13 Roe, op. cit., p. 215.

14 J. Johnstone and E. Katz, "Youth and Popular Music: A Study in the Sociology of Taste", *American Journal of Sociology* 17 (1957), 569-78; R. Brown and M. O'Leary, "Pop Music in an English Secondary School System", *American Behavioral Scientist* 14 (1971), 401-13; H. Adoni, "The Function of Mass Media in the Political Socialization of Adolescents", *Communication Research* 6 (1979), 84-106.

15 V.T. Berry, "Rap Music, Self Concept and Low Income Black Adolescents", *Popular Music and Society* 14 (1990), 89-107.

16 Frith, op. cit.

A fourth group of studies which draws together music and adolescents focuses on the usefulness of music as a teaching tool in the classroom. Geographers and sociologists alike have discussed the potential of music as a pedagogical tool, and how it may be applied in the teaching of concepts and issues such as cultural hearth, cultural diffusion, race, class, gender, social expectations and demands for conformity, attitudes toward authority, civil rights concerns, ecological concerns, urban living, economic instability and place images.¹⁷ This group of studies, however, is least relevant for present purposes.

Commerce and Creativity

Geographical research that links economic concerns and music is scarce. Most of the few existing works have dealt particularly with "musical economies", illustrating the manifold economic importance of the music industry. Such works draw on larger ideas than sociologists have advanced regarding culture industries. For example, Frith¹⁸ has conceptualised the varied roles of culture in contributing to the economy in terms of the development of industrial cultural policies. These, he suggests, can take three forms. First, a cultural industries policy encourages the development of technology for manufacturing cultural artefacts for sale in mass markets (such as films and television programs), and focuses on the development of electronic goods and the media. Second, an industrial cultural strategy may take the form of a tourist policy, in which

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- 17 M. Meyer, "Country Music and Geographical Themes", *The Mississippi Geographer* 4 (1973), 65-74; J. Hraba, E. Powers, W.F. Woodman and M. Miller, "Social Change through Photographs and Music: A Qualitative Method for Teaching", *Qualitative Sociology* 3 (1980), 123-35; B.L. Cooper, "Audio Images of the City: Pop Culture in Social Studies", *Social Studies* 72 (1981), 130-36, and "Social Concerns, Political Protest and Popular Music", *Social Studies* 79 (1988), 53-60; J.C. Lehr, "Music as an Aid in the Teaching of Geography", *The History and Social Science Teacher* 19 (1984), 223-27; D. Walczak, J.M. Alger and M. Reuter, *Songware: Using Popular Music in Teaching Sociology* (Washington DC: American Sociological Association Teaching Resource Center, 1989); J. Lashbrook, "Notes Towards Teaching a Critical Social Psychology", *Teaching Sociology* 19 (1991), 182-85; M. Reuter and D. Walczak, *Songware II: Using Popular Music in Teaching Sociology* (Washington DC: American Sociological Association Teaching Resource Center, 1993); D. Byklum, "Geography and Music: Making the Connection", *Journal of Geography* 93 (1994), 274-78; T.A. Martinez, "Popular Music in the Classroom: Teaching Race, Class, and Gender with Popular Culture", *Teaching Sociology* 22 (1994), 260-65.
- 18 S. Frith, "Knowing One's Place: The Culture of Cultural Industries", *Cultural Studies from Birmingham* 1 (1991), 134-55.

cultural forms are developed for a tourist market. Such forms could include museums and arts festivals (including music festivals), which would attract tourists to cities, thus rendering consumers "imports". Third, industrial cultural policy can function as "cosmetic policy", in which culture is a sort of "urban make up".¹⁹ In this case, cultural forms help to make a place look attractive to tourists and to visitors who might end up staying. Investors looking for locations for their new industries may also identify locations by the "quality of life" offered.

It is entirely possible for some of these arguments to be applied specifically to the context of music. Writing as a geographer with interests in questions of economic restructuring, Hudson²⁰ analysed how music as a cultural industry has provided the basis for local economic regeneration in Derwentside, Britain, in the 1980s. In another vein, Sadler²¹ has explored how Japanese companies have bought into the USA music and film industry in order to secure new markets for their technology. While their actions are economically driven, the cultural significance is underscored in the nationalistic outrage in USA about how Japan is invading Hollywood. Both these studies illustrate the importance of exploring the nexus between the cultural and the economic, using music as the site of analysis.

While some initial inroads are being made in geographical research into the relationship between music and economy as the above examples illustrate, an important issue that has slipped away from geographical analysis is the question of commercialisation and its impact on the quality of music produced. Given the way in which *xinyao* has developed since its early days, I would suggest that this is an extremely relevant question that needs to be addressed. In this respect, Negus,²² a sociologist, provides a useful framework within which the discussion can be developed. He conceptualises the relationship in terms of four positions.

First, he highlights the view that commerce corrupts art. This view must be cast within the larger literature on globalisation and the concomitant commodification and homogenisation of cultural forms. As Adorno²³ argues, music

19 Ibid., p. 140.

20 R. Hudson, "Making Music Work: An Alternative Route to Local Economic Regeneration?", paper presented at *The Place of Music: Culture and Economy* conference held at University College, London, 13-14 September 1993.

21 D. Sadler, "Consumer Electronics Companies, Technological Change and the Music Industry", paper presented at *The Place of Music: Culture and Economy* conference held at University College, London, 13-14 September 1993.

22 Keith Negus, "Where the Mystical Meets the Market: Creativity and Commerce in the Production of Popular Music", *Sociological Review* 43 (1995), 316-41.

23 T. Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia*, translated by R. Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 1992).

becomes commodified, homogenised and globalised as a consequence of commercialism. The culture industry becomes like an assembly line producing standardised products.²⁴ Specifically, the writing of popular songs "becomes 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".²⁵ Indeed, Adorno²⁶ goes so far as to argue, paradoxically, that this process causes music to lose its aesthetic value and its ability to evoke or affirm happiness. As Hirschkop²⁷ similarly 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".²⁸ To overcome this, there have been popular movements that organise their own production and distribution, for example, the setting up of Olivia Records by feminists in the 1970s, and the many attempts to marry musical activities to political agitation (for example, Rock Against Racism).²⁹

A second position that Negus discusses is captured in arguments within cultural studies by the likes of Dick Hebdige and Iain Chambers. Their contention is that "the capitalist organisation of popular music production is irrelevant, because the creative possibilities are realised in the act of consumption".³⁰ This is the view subscribed to by scholars who argue that music is a cultural text whose meanings are decoded by audiences. These meanings are sometimes concordant, at others discordant, with the encoded meanings. The act of consumption is thus one in which the creative is retrieved; it is an act of productive consumption. This relocation of the creative activity to the realm of

24 T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979).

25 Negus, op. cit., p. 316.

26 Adorno, op. cit., 1992.

27 Ken Hirschkop, "The Classical and the Popular: Musical Form and Social Context", in C. Norris (ed.), *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 301.

28 Negus, op. cit., p. 320.

29 Hirschkop, op. cit.

30 Negus, op. cit., p. 320.

consumers and this celebration of consumption has been criticised because it confuses two different types of production: that of commodity and meaning.

A third position that Negus discusses is that of continual tension between commerce and creativity. This is best illustrated in Cohen's³¹ study of Liverpoolian musicians in which they expressed annoyance that "commercial criteria" rather than "creative judgements" had been used to review the level of success of bands. The use of attendance at performances (ticket sales) and record sales instead of the quality of music as measures of success is indicative of this trend. In Cohen's study, band members also considered the prospect of earning extra cash from cabaret work as "prostituting themselves for money".³² This is again indicative of the tension between commerce and creativity.

Finally, Negus highlights Frith's³³ argument that the commercial and creative are "continually produced together".³⁴ In this view, the idea that commerce and creativity are in opposition with each other is rejected as clichéd. Quoting the rock musician Manfred Mann, Frith suggests that "the more people buy a record, the more successful it is—not only commercially but artistically".³⁵ Thus, "art categories have been dissolved by commerce, commercial categories have been dissolved by art".³⁶

Negus³⁷ contribution towards conceptualising the relationships between commerce and creativity is useful in painting the broad brushstrokes within which the specific details of particular case studies can be analysed. What the present case study of *xinyao* can provide is precisely those details which illustrate the transformation of an amateur music-making activity and musical form by and for youths, emphasising the creative potential of individuals, to one that is firmly entrenched in commercialisation and open to globalising and homogenising forces.

Xinyao as "Music at the Margins"

Within the multidisciplinary arena of popular music studies, attention has been focused mainly on the small minority of professional performers and "stars",

31 S. Cohen, "Popular Music and Urban Regeneration: The Music Industries of Merseyside", *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991), 332-46.

32 Ibid., p. 50.

33 S. Frith, "The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from the Populists", *Diacritics* 21 (1991), 4.

34 Negus, op. cit., p. 324.

35 Ibid., p. 325.

36 Frith and Horne, quoted in *ibid.*

37 Negus, op. cit., p. 325.

rather than the vast majority of amateur music-makers.³⁸ My focus on *xinyao* composers and singers constitutes a focus on such "music at the margins".³⁹ Such music and musicians are described as marginal because they are on the periphery of the dominant national/international music industry. Musicians may produce their own tapes, set up their own small recording companies outside the domain of very large international corporations, or hope to be "spotted" and taken into the international markets by these huge recording companies.

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 colleges⁴⁰ 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,⁴¹ entering university or in their first jobs. As one observer had it, they were mainly "boys and girls next door" singing about their feelings.⁴² 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".⁴³ Occasionally, there would be some supplementary piano, flute or violin accompaniment.

The songs they composed and sang 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 (see later discussion). As Billy Koh, one of the pioneers of the *xinyao* move-

38 S. Cohen, "Ethnography and Popular Music Studies", *Popular Music* 12 (1993), 126. Groce, however, notes that there is increasing research on small-time or local level aspiring artists and performers rather than those who have achieved commercial success (S.B. Groce, "The Sociology of Popular Music: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography of Recent Work", *Popular Music and Society* 16, 1 (1992), 49).

39 D.C. Robinson, E.B. Buck and M. Cuthbert, *Music at the Margins: Popular Music and Global Cultural Diversity* (Newbury Park, SA: Sage Publications, 1991).

40 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 17-18 years of age.

41 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.

42 *The Straits Times*, 10 June 1986.

43 *Ibid.*, 22 December 1985.

ment expressed, "the true spirit of *xinyao* is to reflect the feelings of youth and growing up".⁴⁴

As interest in this amateur music-making grew, groups of students began to organise their own songwriting competitions and performances within their junior colleges in their assembly halls. Other students soon came to know about their activities and began to do likewise within their own schools. Groups and individuals were invited to perform at one another's schools and to judge one another's competitions. The audience comprised almost exclusively youths. In this early stage then, *xinyao* was by youths, for youths, developed within the space of the school, away from the homogenising influences of the marketplace. Given this brief background, in the next section, I will turn my attention to the precise ways in which such music acted as both a medium and an outcome of youth identity.⁴⁵

Xinyao and the Social Construction of Youth Identity

Hughes,⁴⁶ in discussing Elgar's music, suggests that through his music, national and class identities are asserted against threatening forces of upheaval. While referring to classical music and national and class identities, the argument may be adapted for current purposes, and it is my intention to discuss in this section how *xinyao* asserts youth identity against the personal forces of upheaval that accompany growing up. Specifically, I will illustrate how, through *xinyao*, youth identity within the context of Singapore is socially constructed. What will also become evident is that the notion of "youth" and the experiences of youths are time and place specific, on the one hand, and yet universal on the other. My analysis will proceed along two lines, first, focusing on the music texts, and second, on the local activities and groups.

Constructing Identity through Musical Texts

Xinyao texts are bound by various commonalities which distinguish *xinyao* as music of youths. One of the common characteristics is *xinyao*'s musical style. As I indicated above, early *xinyao* is characterised by simple melodies, relying

44 Ibid., 4 July 1985.

45 My empirical discussions will draw on a few sources of information: interviews with selected *xinyao* composers, singers and audiences; newspaper reports; and songs by Liang Wern Fook (chosen because he has been one of the most prolific and well-known *xinyao* composers and lyricists).

46 M. Hughes, "The Duc d'Elgar': Making a Composer Gentleman", in C. Norris (ed.), *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), pp. 41-68.

on guitars rather than elaborate instrumentation. Apart from this distinctive style, the lyrical content of *xinyao* also effectively acts as both medium and outcome of youth identity. Three main elements characterise *xinyao* lyrics: nostalgia for childhood; youth concerns; and social commentaries. I will discuss each of these in turn.

Sacred time, sacred place: memories of childhood:

Woods and Gritzner,⁴⁷ in a paper on the images of place in country music, discuss how nostalgia for paradise, expressed as sacred time and sacred place, is evident in the lyrics of country music. Drawing on Eliade's work, they discuss how time and place are neither homogeneous nor uniform but differentiated into sacred and profane time and place. They argue that a strong desire often exists to overcome the bonds of profane time and place and to recapture the wholeness of sacred time and place.⁴⁸ This search is often expressed symbolically as a quest for paradise: "a universal desire to transcend humankind's existential crisis, which has resulted from his or her ensnarement in profane or historic time and space".⁴⁹ Eliade calls this the nostalgia for paradise.⁵⁰ In the context of country music, it is suggested that two basic expressions of such nostalgia are evident in lyrics. First, the sacred occurs at some distant place and future time. Second, the sacred is experienced as existing in the past and is typically found in a rural area closely associated with family and home.⁵¹

Woods and Gritzner's⁵² arguments find parallel in my analysis of *xinyao*. One of the themes that recurs is a yearning for time past and previous place. This past time and place is often characterised as the time and place of childhood in which life was simpler. The yearning is for an uncomplicated place and time and is evidenced in Liang's lyrics (see footnote 45). For example, in "*Wo jiang bei ying liu gei ni men*" ("I leave my shadows for you"), Liang writes about the sadness when one suddenly realises that one has left one's childhood behind. He reminisces about school life: the excitement of triumphant moments, the camaraderie shared, for example, at campfires, the purity of friendships, and the laughter and tears of innocence. He reinforces these themes in other songs such

47 Louis A. Woods and Charles F. Gritzner, "'A Million Miles to the City': Country Music's Sacred and Profane Images of Place", in Leo Zonn (ed.), *Place Images in Media: Portrayal, Experience, and Meaning* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1990), pp. 231-54.

48 Ibid., p. 234.

49 Ibid., p. 236.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p. 238.

52 Ibid.

as "*Pai pai zuo*" ("[Children] sitting side by side"), "*Qing chun 1,2,3*" ("Youth 1,2,3") and "*Fang fu*" ("It is as if ...") and takes them further in "*Tong yao 1987*" ("Childhood 1987"). In this last song, he expresses the view that children today should have more freedom and time to themselves so that they can be children: to engage in childhood pranks, to enjoy the laughter and tears of child's play and not to worry about the rat-race. This is revealing of the context in which Liang writes: a Singapore milieu in which the constant exhortation by both state and society is to push ahead and to strive for excellence.⁵³ It is believed that this exhortation, extending to young and old alike, has resulted in lost childhoods today. Given such a context, paradise, or sacred time and place, is to Liang, built on a bittersweet nostalgia for a time and an experience that is now irretrievably lost. As Woods and Gritzner⁵⁴ indicated in the context of country music, the "mist-shrouded past ... has now undergone re-evaluation into a sacred place". While nostalgia for childhood (reinterpreted as paradise) is not unique to the Singapore context, the acuteness of such feeling may be, given the pressures confronting youths in a newly-industrialised country striving for developed country status. The experience of youth is thus universal and simultaneously time and place specific.

As one *xinyao* pioneer suggested in an interview, youths at the threshold of adulthood are confronted with the challenges of modern living, and are particularly conscious of the blissful childhood days left behind. As composers and lyricists, they chose to capture this loss and yearning in their compositions. *Xinyao* thus became the outcome of a certain youth experience. At the same time, in its expressions, *xinyao* also became the medium of establishing a shared sense of identity.

Youth concerns:

Just as the nostalgia for a simpler childhood characterises *xinyao* lyrics, the expression of youth concerns similarly distinguishes this musical genre. Such expressions reflect the personal feelings of the lyricists: young people's ideals, their aspirations, hopes, frustrations, problems, fears and desires, or "just about any theme that appeals to young sentiments".⁵⁵ To illustrate this, I will focus on four examples.

53 B.H. Chua, *Community Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

54 Woods and Gritzner, op. cit., p. 242.

55 *The Straits Times*, 10 June 1986.

As psychologists and other social scientists have observed, adolescent years are often plagued by feelings of loss and uncertainty about the future.⁵⁶ This is a universal condition, and finds expression in many *xinyao* compositions. Nowhere is this more vividly captured than in Liang's "*Yan zhe ji mo de bian yuan zou*" ("Walking on the borders of loneliness") in which he writes about "aimless wandering and being lost in the process of growing up". Likewise, in "*Wo jiang bei ying liu gei ni men*" ("Leaving my shadows for you"), Liang writes: "Still we asked, although there are no answers".

The trauma of growing up is also reflected in the many instances when adolescents feel alone and hurt, with little offer of support, and little possibility of problem-sharing. In "*Yan zhe ji mo de bian yuan zou*" ("Walking on the borders of loneliness"), Liang writes:

How many scars can a person take
You look at me with a face looking relaxed
Actually I'm already very tired
Smiling proudly to mask the face of mine that's actually weak
Turning around, I wiped away the tears at the corner of my eyes
There is too much laughter in the crowd
Can't hear my voice calling out
This is no time for sorrows.

Reflecting the paradox of adolescence, loss, uncertainty, fear and hurt are balanced by the euphoria of first love, the strength of treasured friendships, and the fired optimism of youth.⁵⁷ For example, many a song expresses the rapturous excitement that confronts the young when they fall in love:

Finally on a Wednesday night
I sat beside you
Oh! My heart was thumping wildly
But then, we still have not spoken a word
("*Ji zhu ni dian hua hao ma de fang fa*"/"A method for remembering your telephone number").

Others depict the importance of everlasting friendships that can stand the test of time (for example, "*Xi shui chang liu*"/"The west river is long"). Yet others

56 See, for example, A. Freud, "Adolescence", in A.E. Winder and D. Angus (eds.), *Adolescence: Contemporary Studies* (New York: American Book, 1968), pp. 13-24.

57 These paradoxes parallel the oscillations of behaviour that Stanley Hall, pioneer researcher in adolescence, observed and tried to explain (G.S. Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*, Vol. 1 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1904)).

reveal the optimism of youth, which holds fast to the beliefs that humans are in fact loving people and that hatred is not incurable, for example, in "*Wo men de ge zai na li*" ("Where are our songs?").

In such lyrical expressions, *xinyao* writers reveal how their music is simultaneously the medium and outcome of youth identity. As Larson and Kubey's⁵⁸ study suggests, music is important to adolescents because "it speaks to their concerns, from heterosexual relationships to autonomy and individualization". Through their lyrics expressing their personal experiences and insights, they are locked into the universality of youth experiences across cultures and plugged into a larger cross-cultural world in which youths share similar problems and concerns, pleasures and satisfactions.

Social commentaries:

While reflecting and reinforcing youth concerns, *xinyao* is not all about navel-watching youths. In fact, an analysis of *xinyao* lyrics reveals how lyricists are also concerned with local and global conditions, and develop their own views about them. These views are encoded in the songs as social commentaries.

At the level of local social and political conditions, Liang comments on a variety of issues such as the rat-race in Singapore and its effects on people; the lack of freedom; delinquency; Westernisation; and the development of Singapore as a nation and society.

Modern urban living with its intense competition (characterised as the rat-race in which everyone is striving to get and stay ahead), jealousy, hatred and fatigue is explored in "*Men*" ("Doors"). Here, Liang writes about how people no longer dare to face their real hopes and dreams but follow instead the demands exerted by social pressure. "*Jiang xin bi xin*" similarly focuses on how a modern urbanite will learn through time to hide his/her feelings and true self behind facades. This is poignantly expressed in the question:

Do you, like me, learn to keep my sighs
Do you, like me, see the loneliness that sits listening in laughter and fun.

Liang has this advice to offer to displaced and dissatisfied urbanites: one has to learn to be satisfied in life because there will always be too many things to strive for and it is impossible to have everything ("*Tai duo tai duo*" ("Too much")).

Apart from the hypocrisy and pain associated with such urban living, Liang also hints at the lack of freedom in his song "*Xuan*" ("Tied down"). Here, he

⁵⁸ R. Larson and R. Kubey, "Television and Music: Contrasting Media in Adolescent Life", *Youth and Society* 14 (1983), 13-31.

manages to evoke the image of constriction by likening a window to a frame that puts a boundary on a natural scene, thus constricting the beauty of what is natural. Liang also writes about delinquent youths and their aimless wanderings. This he captures in the song "Ah Ben, Ah Ben", for example, in which he describes the "Far East and Centrepoint kids"⁵⁹ whose behaviour reflects a lack of direction and purpose.

Westernisation and its concomitant "ills" are also given space in Liang's songs. In "*Yi ge dong fang nan zi de bei ju*" ("An Eastern boy's tragedy"), Liang suggests that due to Western influences, girls have become bolder. They are no longer caught in their own feelings; they express what they feel; they choose the "independent way". This is said to be a tragedy for Eastern men:

The words of the (winds of the) west
The more they blow, the more they become untamed/arrogant
The love of the East is sighing softly.

Finally, the evolution of Singapore as a nation and society also constitutes a theme in Liang's lyrics. This theme is best illustrated in the song "*Xin jia po pai*" ("The Singapore Label/Brand"). This is a song about the short history of Singapore and the struggles of Singaporeans to create an identity of their own. It chronicles how the country gained independence in the 1960s and struggled to survive amidst tremendous scepticism: "back then, nobody believed in the Singapore 'brand'; there were even people who migrated overseas". In the 1970s, industrialisation was pursued as the means towards development and this found expression in the "smoke funnels at Jurong Town". By the 1980s, Singapore had progressed so rapidly that the MRT's "legendary" speed had become a reality. Other changes were also taking place in the landscape, captured in his observation that the old cinema in his neighbourhood had become converted into a church (an observable trend in the 1980s). In the 1990s, people were migrating to Singapore in the belief that here, it was possible to lead a good life: "The situation now is that everybody is emigrating here/ Who doesn't like the Singapore 'brand'/ I like the Singapore 'brand'/ I love the Singapore style best". This Singapore style is now distinctive and is captured in the symbolism of food: while others (Westerners) brought the knowledge of and preference for apple pies into the local diet, Singaporeans have learnt to invent

⁵⁹ This refers to youths who would loiter in the open spaces of shopping centres such as the Far East Shopping Centre and Centrepoint. Some groups may have similar dress codes and some even develop their own lingo. Their noticeable presence led to their being labelled as the "Far East" and "Centrepoint" kids.

their own pies. This is taken to be indicative of the development of local trends and identities, drawing from but not wholly absorbing more global influences.

Apart from the varied local observations, Liang also writes occasionally about global issues. At this level, Liang writes about war and destruction, expressing sadness that they should continue and the desire to see them end. In "*Tan yi zhi liang liang de ge*" ("Play a soothing song"), he writes:

Remove all the boundaries in the world
And make them into guitar strings
To play/strum a clear and soothing song
Block up gun barrels and cannon eyes
Demolish the guns and bullets in the entire world
Weave them into musical notes
To play a clear and soothing song
Wash away fresh blood and hatred.

Constructing Identity through Music Practice

Apart from the role of music texts in the construction of youth identity, *xinyao* as a form of music practice also contributed to the construction of identity and the empowerment of youth communities in its early stage of development.

The early *xinyao* groups, based largely in junior colleges, were isolated groups of teenagers with a love for composing and singing, sharing their music informally within their schools in their own time. None of them knew that there were others with like interests. As one such individual recounted in an interview, it was after one group chose to perform their compositions in a school concert that knowledge of other groups developed:

Actually, a lot of people who were quietly composing songs also did not know what *xinyao* was back then. They continued their compositions based on their love for music, for composing. It just happened that with the performance, we realised there were also a lot of people around who shared the same interests. So we wanted to meet and make friends with these people. Hence, after the performance, we started to locate these people and to invite them to our next performance as special guests, etc. This chain reaction started and slowly, the driving force became stronger and we became more cohesive.

Gradually, as these groups began to organise and host joint activities, their participation as composers, performers and organisational personnel gave rise to a sense of community identity. A performer in the early years of *xinyao*, Pan Ying, has this to say:

I feel that it was quite good then. Maybe that period coincided with the fact that we had just left school and so we were still very nostalgic about school life. Maybe because the group of friends were very innocent. Our relationship was very good. I feel that there was a kind of strength. Everybody worked together. Although the performance was only once a year, everybody treated it with the utmost importance. Some did the props, some did the control room duties, some were responsible for food, etc. Everybody performed their duties well.

As *xinyao* further developed, groups were formed at community centres.⁶⁰ The first such group, the Merlion, was formed at the Clementi Community Centre in 1983. By the end of 1985, there were fourteen groups registered with the People's Association (PA), with more than one hundred members who met regularly to write and sing their own songs. In addition, there were about twenty other *xinyao* groups that were not registered with the PA. *Xinyao* courses were conducted at some community centres. The PA also provided support by allowing the free use of community centre facilities and musical instruments for practices, as well as help in organising concerts. *Xinyao* camps were also organised by the PA, the first being held in 1986. They involved the exchange of ideas regarding a range of issues, including the improvement of skills, the discussion of musical trends and the role of *xinyao* in social functions. Each of these centres developed communities of *xinyao* enthusiasts, with each meeting regularly, practising and sharing their music. At one level, therefore, very real local communities were evolving. These groups would also be invited to perform at local community events, for example, at community centre functions like National Day dinners, and at neighbourhood shopping centres, thus becoming bound to the rhythm and identity of that community.

At the same time, at another level, a sense of "imagined" community⁶¹ was also developing, in which the different composers and performing groups and their audiences felt as if they belonged to a community with like interests, yet may never have met. Nevertheless, their participation in *xinyao* activities (whether as producers or consumers), particularly at a live performance, encouraged them to indulge in a temporary perceived bond of comradeship. As interviews with former *xinyao* fans indicate, the feeling that those at a concert shared similar concerns about growing up, like aspirations, comparable world views, and enjoyed the common music, made them feel as if they "belonged to a family", in which there were "few barriers" between members. Indeed, to

60 Community centres can be found all over Singapore. Each caters to a particular housing estate, offering recreation facilities and organising varied classes and activities, such as cookery, flower arrangement, chess and guitar-playing.

61 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

extend the idea further, the anthropologist Turner's⁶² notion of *communitas*, discussed in the context of pilgrimages, may be applied here. Turner argues that pilgrimage results in the abrogation of social structure, a state in which individuals are temporarily freed of the hierarchical roles and statuses that they ordinarily bear. Instead, there is a condition of unmediated and egalitarian association between individuals. The space thus created is a site of unity and equality. This is particularly true of live performances. As Street⁶³ pointed out, because live music is necessarily local (by being available only in a specific place to a limited audience), it is especially effective at serving a sense of community identity because it differentiates those consumers from others. *Xinyao* performances too have had that effect. In these ways, my focus on local activities and groups (as both audiences and musicians) illustrates how music activities can be a tremendous source of social and personal identity for those involved. This reflects Finnegan's⁶⁴ argument that amateur music-making in Milton Keynes provided musicians and audiences with a sense of personal identity and community.

In sum, whether it is through the music text and its expression of youth identity, or the participation of youths in production and consumption of *xinyao*, it would appear that they are making active informed decisions about their music preferences. As Frith⁶⁵ has argued, this is a commitment to music which is as aesthetic as it is political. While the music may have little to do with protest or resistance, it is about "comradeship, being on stage, self-expression, recognition, as an outlet".

Marginal Music, Commercialisation and Homogenisation

While *xinyao* began as amateur music by and for youths, it was not long before the first signs of commercialisation emerged. In 1984, an album of twelve original songs was launched. A view was developing among *xinyao* enthusiasts that *xinyao* should go commercial so that the songs could be made more "popular" and "acceptable to adults as well".⁶⁶ After this start in 1984, the trend towards commercialisation gathered momentum and became strongest

62 V.W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

63 J. Street, "Local Differences? Popular Music and the Local State", *Popular Music* 12 (1993), 43-55.

64 R. Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

65 S. Frith, "The Cultural Study of Popular Music", in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P.A. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

66 *The Straits Times*, 22 March 1985.

between 1985 and 1989. It is my intention to trace this development briefly below. In the process of chronicling this development, I wish to highlight the tensions between commerce and art, and how, in some views, commerce actually corrupts art, while for others, the commercial and creative are seen to be continually produced together.

The impetus for the development of commercial intent was strongly articulated by a *xinyao* participant, Tan Swee Wan, who expressed the view that:

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 naive always. *Xinyao* songs are not for students only. They are songs written and sung by young people who have a common interest.⁶⁷

It may well be said that the "common interest" was not a simple case of youth expression and the assertion of youth identity, but that of popularising the songs and reaching out to wider audiences. This is reiterated by others in the *xinyao* movement who argue that:

We don't want to restrict ourselves to simple compositions suitable for students only. We aim to reach out to adults.⁶⁸

As part of this desire to enlarge the audience pool, it has been suggested that *xinyao* is a music style that "wants to be plugged into the mainstream of show-business and pop".⁶⁹

Evidences of the trend towards commercialisation abound. After the first album in 1984, six albums were released in 1985, each selling an average of 10,000 copies.⁷⁰ By 1986, there were sufficient hits to warrant a collection of three years of popular *xinyao* favourites in an album called "A Gift from Our Hearts". This was one of seventeen *xinyao* albums that had been produced by 1986.⁷¹

Some of the rapid development in commercial activity involving *xinyao* was made possible because early *xinyao* enthusiasts had themselves set up recording companies. Ocean Butterflies Production, for example, was set up in 1986 by

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 30 August 1987.

70 Ibid., 13 September 1985. Wells illustrates how record sales of 30,000-40,000 is considered big and 5,000 is good for local acts (A. Wells, "The Internationalization of Asian Popular Music: Singapore and Taiwan", paper presented at the International Popular Culture Conference, Oxford University, 23-29 July 1995, p. 6).

71 Ibid., 28 September 1986.

three members of one of the earliest *xinyao* groups, The Straw. The company was one of five specifically set up by 1986 for the production of *xinyao*. Meanwhile, other established companies had also recognised the market potential of these homegrown songs and had signed on *xinyao* singers.⁷²

Alongside the production of albums for the commercial market, *xinyao* compositions also began to hit the Chinese pop charts. The premier *xinyao* album, for example, produced two Top 10 hits, and one of them stayed on the charts for an unprecedented seventeen weeks.⁷³ *Xinyao* artistes such as Dawn Gan, Eric Moo and Jiang Hu were also pushing foreign songs off the charts.⁷⁴ This reflected the growing trend in which early *xinyao* groups were giving way to solo musical careers. After Thomas Teo and Dawn Gan became the first to sign contracts with international recording companies as solo artistes,⁷⁵ their cassette tapes were selling between 10,000 and 30,000 copies each in Singapore, much higher than the average of 5,000 copies for other local singers.⁷⁶ Following them, Eric Moo and Yan Liming also turned professional in 1985, singing at music lounges, appearing on television and making recordings.⁷⁷ By 1986, Eric Moo had signed on with a new recording company set up by well-known Taiwanese singer Liu Wenzheng, who had plans to break Moo into the Taiwanese market. Indeed, Moo has been so successful that his songs have since hit the charts in Taiwan and Singapore several times over. Concomitant with the trend of *xinyao* singers turning professional, the annual *xinyao* festival that had begun to be staged in 1985,⁷⁸ and which had involved school and community centre groups in the early years, had by 1987 become a platform for *xinyao* performers who had turned semi-professional or even professional. Only three community centre and school groups shared the stage.⁷⁹ By 1987, music awards were being conferred at the *Xinyao* festival for individual contributions and best albums. While initially taking on the style of a school concert ceremony, by 1989 the award presentation had become televised and "very glitzy and hyped-up" so as to "inspire more part-time songwriters and singers to go full time, and pave the way for more recording opportunities".⁸⁰

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 18 November 1985.

75 Ibid., 4 October 1985.

76 Ibid., 30 March 1988.

77 Ibid., 13 September, 1985.

78 While earlier *xinyao* concerts had been organised, it was in 1985 that the first *Xinyao* festival was held as a two-day event. It involved eighteen groups of songwriters and singers and attracted overwhelming response.

79 Ibid., 30 August 1987.

80 Ibid., 8 October 1989.

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.⁸¹

What do these trends imply for the process of creation and the quality of authenticity, or put in another way, what are the tensions between the commercial and the creative?

In line with the views put forward by the likes of Adorno,⁸² there were certainly those within the *xinyao* circuit who raised criticisms of the increasing commercialisation of an originally amateur music-making activity. These criticisms centre on the "adulteration" of a style. For example, as some observers pointed out, by the time *xinyao* entered its second stage of development, that is, its early days of commercialisation, it had "left behind its salad days when the sole source of musical backing was the guitar".⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ This is evident, for example, in the 1986 *Xinyao* festival, in which almost all the performers were backed by a six-piece band or had taped music accompaniment. Many tunes had also begun to embrace a distinctively pop flavour. In the 1987 festival:

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.⁸⁵

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".⁸⁶ Indeed, *xinyao* participants themselves proclaimed at a forum in 1987 that *xinyao* would no longer be strictly ballad and that songs would go pop, thus detaching from its origins.⁸⁷ This movement towards Mandarin pop sounds, traditionally

81 Ibid., 30 March 1988.

82 Adorno, op. cit., 1992.

83 *The Straits Times*, 12 October 1986.

84 Ibid., 3 May 1984.

85 Ibid., 30 August 1987.

86 Ibid., 12 October 1986.

87 Ibid., 30 August 1987.

in the Taiwanese mould, is akin to a standardisation and homogenisation of styles, which some readily pointed to as evidence of lower standards and loss of creativity.⁸⁸ As Billy Koh acknowledged, writers were beginning to pander to public taste.⁸⁹

In opposition to these views that commerce was stifling true creativity, supporters of the process of commercialisation, mainly *xinyao* writers and performers themselves who had gone or intended to go commercial, argued that:

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.⁹⁰

The reason for commercialisation is underlined, that is, the desire to reach out to a larger audience. In addition, it is argued that facing market competition can ensure an improvement in the quality of songs. It is also argued that the motive for writing songs remains the same: to express one's feelings. Even if it meant that songs were closely resembling, if not replicating, pop music from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the West, Eric Moo articulated the view that such global influences were inevitable "as we have grown up in an environment filled with such music".⁹¹ For these reasons, far from commerce corrupting culture, and far from feeling a continual tension between commerce and creativity, many *xinyao* participants seem to subscribe to Frith and Horne's⁹² position that art categories have been dissolved by commerce, and commercial categories have been dissolved by art.

Coming Full Circle? From Commercial Music to Music at the Margins

As *xinyao* became increasingly commercialised, its very 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* has been so successfully assimilated into mainstream Chinese music that it makes little sense to talk about it as amateur music by youths, for youths anymore. As Eric Moo suggested, they have "out-grown" the term.⁹³ By 1990, *xinyao* as it was understood in its original sense was beginning to die a natural death. Recording companies were hesitant to groom new talents. The novelty of its early "life", which had captured the

88 Ibid., 4 July 1985.

89 Ibid., 3 May 1984.

90 Ibid., 22 March 1985.

91 Ibid., 3 May 1984.

92 Negus, op. cit., p. 325.

93 *The Straits Times*, 28 September 1986.

imagination of students and young working adults because it was fresh and home-grown, had worn off. 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 from simple schoolboyish guitar strumming to sophisticated studio-enhanced sounds. By 1992, the annual award presentation had to be called off because not enough *xinyao* albums had been produced. *Xinyao* had gone fully commercial, not only in terms of artistes going professional and cutting albums; the music style, the associated sense of youth identity, the spaces of production and consumption, and the sense of camaraderie and community, had all been lost.

However, with such loss has also come indications of revival, albeit in slightly different veins from the original movement. While some efforts approximate early *xinyao* in their disregard, if not rejection, of the temptations of the international commercial market, others are likened to *xinyao* because of the similarity in musical style, differing in that there is every intention to eventually go commercial. Serious Musicworks, an amateur Mandarin music group formed in 1991, comprising undergraduates, junior college students and national servicemen, aged from 17-22, exemplifies the first category. They staged two concerts between 1991 and 1992 which showcased members' original compositions. These included the usual ballads on love, friendship and family relationships, as well as the probing of social issues. They did not pander to standards dictated by the commercial market, but wrote their lyrics and composed their melodies in ways that they deemed authentic. In all these ways, they can be likened to the early *xinyao* style. Nevertheless, they do not consider themselves *xinyao* if *xinyao* is defined as having a raw, folkish and "school-like" ("*xiao yuan*") quality. This is because they view their compositions to be "more sophisticated".⁹⁴

A second example that illustrates some form of revival is the establishment of *xinyao* lounges. Ark Lounge, modelled after Taiwanese folk song lounges and restaurants, was opened in 1993. Patrons can have a drink and some snacks, then take up their guitars and sing their own compositions. The lounge displays Chinese books and magazines from Taiwan. Guitars and music scores with folksy Mandarin music are placed strategically in the lounge to encourage people to perform. There is also a message board on which patrons can write poems, short articles or comments for others to read. The idea behind its opening is a commercial one: that it can help bring fame and fortune to singers in

94 Ibid., 17 June 1992.

Singapore.⁹⁵ By 1994, it had become very popular and "young people flock[ed] to the place to sing their songs and exchange songwriting tips".⁹⁶ In June 1994, another lounge called The Fifties was launched as a *xinyao* joint by afternoon and a pub by night. The intention was also to help songwriters sell their works overseas and to groom Singapore's singing talents.

A third example of *xinyao* revival is the formation of new groups of *xinyao* composers and singers. For example, Music Artificer Brewing Factory was set up 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 eighteen members ranging in age from 18-30. 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. While in all these ways, they approximate *xinyao* of old, the difference is again that their intention is to go commercial eventually. In this case, intent influences the cultural content: they use catchy tunes and simple lyrics.⁹⁷

Conclusion

In discussing the development of *xinyao* over the last decade and a half, I have chosen to omit many interesting details and innumerable verbatim comments shared by those directly involved and others interested in the musical form.⁹⁸ Instead, I have opted to use the empirical details of *xinyao*'s development as a springboard for discussing conceptual arguments regarding the importance of music in the social construction of identity, and the nexus between culture and commerce.

In the same way that research has revealed the relationship between music and ethnic identity, for example, this study reflects the importance of *xinyao* in the construction of youth identity within the context of Singapore. Just as Black

95 Ibid., 30 November 1993.

96 Ibid., 2 September 1994.

97 Ibid., 4 March 1994.

98 At the time of writing, Singapore's National Archives and Oral History Unit has indicated its intention to organise a Chinese music exhibition in 1997, as part of its series of public activities on "Musical Heritage" to begin in 1996. The interview material collected for this study, containing rich ethnographical details, much of which has not been used directly in this paper, will be offered to the Unit, which can facilitate public access to the material.

American music reinforces black identity in America;⁹⁹ just as Jamaican reggae music is an integral part of Rastafarian identity;¹⁰⁰ and just as traditional Cuban music plays an important role in preserving ethnic identity for Cuban-Americans,¹⁰¹ *xinyao* was an important medium for expressing youth identity for Singaporean youths (particularly the Mandarin-speaking community). At the same time, it represented the outcome of their youth concerns. Whether it was through their musical texts and lyrics, or through their cooperative efforts and participation in amateur music-making activities, or simply through their attendance at and support of *xinyao* activities, real and imagined communities developed.

As *xinyao* evolved, the amateurs began to turn professional. From the school yards and assembly halls as autonomous creative spaces, and from the community centres as sites of neighbourhood amateur music-making, the sounds of *xinyao* came to fill the same concert halls used by major international acts. Where Jacky Cheung entertained in the World Trade Centre Auditorium and Kallang Theatre, *xinyao* stars also ventured. They invaded the airwaves through radio and television, not as amateur performers who were being given opportunities, but as "stars" in their own rights. Rather than being contained within the spaces of amateur music-making, they had learnt to take on open displays of showmanship, and their music had become performed in places of spectacle and display. Their music too began to share more similarities with major commercial acts, as young *xinyao* artistes began to shed the style of the collective *xinyao* label. In effect, the music which they were producing and performing increasingly reflected the styles that had emerged from the major Chinese entertainment centres of Hong Kong and Taiwan, prompting at least one *xinyao* pioneer to observe (and indeed, defend) the inevitability of such global influences. While some condemned such a trend as destructive of the creativity and authenticity of the amateur musician, others defended it with the suggestion that competition on the open market improved the quality of music.

In this paper, I have therefore examined *xinyao* and its development within two frameworks. Within a societal framework, I have explored the social impact of *xinyao* in terms of how it has contributed to the social construction of youth identity. In many ways, the youths in question found in their music a means of

99 P.K. Maultsby, "Soul Music; Its Sociological and Political Significance in American Popular Culture", *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (1983), 51-60.

100 J.A. Winders, "Reggae, Rastafarians and Revolution: Rock Music in the Third World", *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (1983), 61-73.

101 J.R. Curtis and T.D. Boswell, *The Cuban-American Experience: Culture, Images, and Perspectives* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983).

defining their existence,¹⁰² of creating collective excitement¹⁰³ and of bringing about a sense of solidarity.¹⁰⁴ Within a cultural framework, I have pursued the question of how it has been produced as art or as commodity. As art, some have argued that *xinyao* served as "the authentic expression of creative individuals", as Weinstein¹⁰⁵ suggested with reference to rock. As commodity, it served as a "tool of capitalism", "shaped not by authentic expression but according to commercial standards to enable it to appeal in the marketplace to the mass audience".¹⁰⁶

102 J.S. Epstein, "Misplaced Childhood: An Introduction to the Sociology of Youth and their Music", in J.S. Epstein (ed.), *Adolescents and their Music: If It's Too Loud, You're Too Old* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994), pp. xiii-xxxiv.

103 D. Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Lexington, 1991).

104 R. Sardiello, "Secular Rituals in Popular Culture: A Case for Grateful Dead Concerts and Dead Head Identity", in J.S. Epstein (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 115-39.

105 D. Weinstein, "Rock: Youth and its Music", in J.S. Epstein (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

106 *Ibid.*