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## POPULAR MUSIC AND A "SENSE OF PLACE" IN SINGAPORE

Lily Kong\*

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*This paper illustrates how popular music written, produced, and performed by Singaporeans provides a means through which the culture and society of Singapore may be understood. Music with English language text conveys a sense of place and reflects a distinctively Singaporean spirit and identity. The paper examines four themes: the portrayal of Singapore's multiracial population which reflects a unique cultural synthesis; the Singaporeans' concept of urbanity, manifested as the simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the city and the desire for nature and the rustic; the distinctive social engineering in Singapore; and the way in which global issues are imported into local agendas, as reflected in "green" concerns in Singapore-produced songs.*

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### Introduction

#### *Popular Music: What Role for Geographers?*

Among social scientists, geographers have been slow to realise the value of studying popular culture and the mass media (Burgess 1990). As I have illustrated elsewhere, popular music, in particular, has been relatively neglected by geographers (Kong 1995a). Yet popular music can hold great value for geographers. For one, it can capture the unique features of places, as Paul Weller, formerly of the British rock group The Jam, has pointed out:

It's like a line from one of your songs "The USA got the sea / British kids have got the streets" . . . most

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American songs are about walking round stoned and that or picking up some chicks in a Cadillac, which don't go on in Britain cause it's usually raining and you ain't got no money and you gotta sit in some poxy caff, drinking cold tea. (quoted in Jarvis, 1985:121)

In other words, music lyrics from a specific area can convey images of the place. Indeed, this ability to convey images is not only confined to lyrics. Rather, music is a whole package comprising lyrics, melody, instrumentation, and the general "feel" or sensory impact of the music. It is this aggregated package which often provides us with images of regions. For example, the "San Francisco sound," as Gleason (1969) has illustrated, conveys such a unique sense of California that "whatever you feel from the music is what it feels like to be there" (quoted in Jarvis, 1985:121). Ultimately, the communication of these images to an audience can have a behavioural dimension. Images can influence the knowledge and cognition of other places (Stephenson and Stephenson 1973), which in turn may influence behaviour, as behavioural geographers such as Pocock (1973, 1974) have postulated.

Music is also a medium through which people convey their environmental experiences, which, according to Burgess (1990:141), refers to the relationship which people have with the physical world and the built environment. A great deal of contemporary music contains ideas of "place," the idea that "place is security, space is freedom" (Tuan 1977:3-7) and the idea of the alienated individual in an urban environment. As Reich (1970:247) states, contemporary music gives us

an understanding of the world, and of other people's feelings, incredibly far in advance of what other media have been able to express.

Music is thus a powerful medium through which people experience environments indirectly. Music is also an outcome of environmental experience. Musicians write songs because they wish *inter alia* to express and convey to others their environmental experiences. Music therefore reflects a dialectical duality (Giddens 1981:27): it is both the medium and the outcome of environmental experience.

Music is also a medium through which social meanings are transmitted and consumed; it is a reflection of the nature of social

relations between various groups in a society. It can be used by a dominant group to arouse loyalty to the nation and to those in power, and this is visible in the patriotic songs which are found in many countries. Thus, ruling elites can make use of music to exercise hegemonic rule over their subordinates. This is reflected, for example, in recent work on Singapore which examines how music is used by the ruling elite to perpetuate certain ideologies that seek to inculcate a civil religion, directing favour and fervour towards the country (Kong 1995b; Phua and Kong, forthcoming). Music is also a means by which certain groups in society define their identity. As Frith (1978:198) writes,

The rock audience is not a passive mass, consuming records like cornflakes, but an active community, making music into a symbol of solidarity and an inspiration for action.

These groups and subcultures decode messages from music as a call for them to establish their identity and purpose. Therefore, music can also be viewed as a medium through which excluded groups in society express their resistance to hegemonic rule by an elite class (Wicke 1987). For example, Frith's (1983) work is a classic analysis of youth culture and rebellion in 1950s and 1960s Britain when explicit opposition to both peer group and adult middle class norms was conveyed through rock and roll music and associated expressions (such as Beatles haircuts, surfing styles, facial hair and so forth). In similar vein, Tanner (1978) analyses how punk music is representative of the attitudes of subcultures, such as Skinheads, towards ruling elites.

Yet another reason why geographers may wish to study music is because music has, in recent years, come to carry messages about environmental awareness and protection of the environment, as noted by a recent president of the Association of American Geographers (Mather 1992). Indeed, the music and film industries have jumped on the "green" bandwagon in recent years, with many songs and film screenplays reflecting "green" themes (*The Sunday Times*, December 9, 1990, 12). Popular music (and popular culture in general) has thus become a medium through which environmental messages are conveyed to an audience (Burgess 1990). This may spur people towards positive action.

Clearly, geographers have every reason to examine popular music. With this in mind, my intention in this paper is to illustrate the value of popular music as a means through which Singapore culture and society may be understood. I will focus specifically on how music with English language lyrics,<sup>1</sup> which is written, produced and performed by Singaporeans, conveys a sense of place and reflects a distinctively Singaporean spirit and identity.

### **Literature Context**

My empirical work can be cast within the context of existing geographical research on music, both classical and popular. Such geographical work (which is not necessarily produced only by geographers) can be divided into two main categories corresponding roughly to the tenets of "traditional" and "contemporary" cultural geography (Cosgrove and Jackson 1987). The former is characterised by five main themes. First, there is a concern with the spatial distribution of musical forms, activities, performers, and personalities, with the bulk of work originating in the United States (Nash 1968; Crowley 1987; Carney 1987a, 1987b). Second, there is the exploration of musical hearths and diffusion, that is, where certain musical forms first developed, and where they diffused to, using concepts such as contagion, relocation, and hierarchical diffusion. Scholarship in this vein also and examines the agents of and barriers to diffusion (G. P. Jackson 1952; Ford 1971; Francaviglia 1978; Carney 1987c; Glasgow 1987; and Horsley 1987). Third, geographers have focused on delimitating areas that share certain musical traits (Lomax 1960; Lomax and Erickson 1971; Burman-Hall 1975; Gastil 1975; Nash 1975). Fourth, they have attempted to identify 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). Finally, geographers have explored pertinent themes in music, such as the image of the city (Henderson 1974; Marcus 1975; Jarvis 1985).

Interpretive research on popular music reflects the emphases of "contemporary" cultural geography and is concerned with the production and consumption of symbolic meanings. Music is studied as a medium through which musicians (composers, lyricists,

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<sup>1</sup> This will be referred to in the rest of the paper as "English language music."

and performers) who represent a section of society express their resistance to domination which is often effected through ideologically hegemonic ways. This has been studied in the context of Singapore, for example in Kong (1995b) and Phua and Kong (forthcoming). Similarly, Lockard's (1991) analysis of Malaysian popular music since 1950 also includes a section on Singapore composer and performer Dick Lee's music in which some discussion focuses on social commentary and criticism. Music is also analysed as a means through which identities are constructed. One example is Valentine's (1993) study of the construction of gender identity through the music of k.d. lang, while Kong (forthcoming a) explores the question of the construction of local, regional, and global identities through music. At the same time, the nexus between the cultural and the economic is also explored through the analysis of the music industry, thus erasing the artificial (if sometimes pedagogically necessary) division of the economic and cultural spheres (Cohen 1991; Hudson 1993; Sadler 1993).

### **Singapore's English Language Music Scene**

Before launching into an analysis of Singapore music, I will first outline briefly the English language music scene in Singapore. There are two main groups of contemporary musicians: mainstream and independent musicians. Mainstream music-makers can be classified into two groups. The first comprises those performers/recording artists who have recording contracts with major recording labels. Their songs are tailored specifically with a target audience in mind, such as the local teen or young adult market. These songs are usually not written by the performers themselves, and the lyrics tend to focus on issues such as love and romance. Examples include Jessica and Maizurah who would sing songs made popular by other international stars such as Whitney Houston, for example. The second group comprises those who pen many of their own songs, often injecting a strong sense of place in their compositions. Examples include Dick Lee, whose albums such as *The Mad Chinaman* and *Asiamajor* make use of traditional ethnic Asian tunes, often with a touch of humour, and the Kopi Kat Klan, whose *Why U So Like Dat* captures a strong sense of Singaporean culture.

Apart from the mainstream musicians, there are the alternative or independent musicians. These music-makers, usually bands, are often not bound by contract to major recording labels. As

such, they are free to record their own type of music without the constraints of having to produce for a particular target audience. They therefore present audiences with alternatives to mainstream offerings, often in terms of both lyrics and style. Alternative musicians in Singapore, as a collective group, play a rather eclectic mix of musical genres, from folk to punk rock, hardcore, thrash metal, death metal, and cyberpunk. Examples are groups such as Global Chaos, Swirling Madness, and Corporate Toil.

For present purposes, my discussion will draw from the above categories of music, with the exception of mainstream music of the first type which has little that is specific to Singapore. Analysis will focus mainly on the lyrics, style, and instrumentation.

### **Singapore Culture And Society In Popular Music**

In analysing Singapore's English language music, four themes emerge which reveal a unique culture, spirit, and identity that is distinctively Singaporean. These are the multiracial character of the population; the tension between Singaporeans' simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the city and the desire for nature and the rustic; the extent of the government's presence in Singaporeans' public and private lives, as evidenced through the multiplicity of campaigns for social engineering purposes; and the influence of global issues on local concerns.

#### *Multiracial Singapore*

The vibrance of Singapore's multiracial population is revealed in a variety of ways. First, the musical styles of the various races in Singapore are infused in English language songs which use predominantly pop tunes. Ethnic rhythms and instrumentation are incorporated. Many of Dick Lee's songs, for example, embody traditional tunes, including traditional Malay favourites (such as "Bengawan Solo," "Rasa Sayang" and "Burong Kakak Tua"), Chinese tunes (such as "The Ding Dong Song," "Lover's Tears" and "The Little White Boat"), Indian tunes (such as "Chin Chin Choo") and Peranakan<sup>2</sup> tunes (such as "Lenggang Kangkong" and "Suah Suih Kemuning"). As Lee writes in the preface to his album *The Mad Chinaman*,

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<sup>2</sup> A Peranakan is of mixed Chinese and Malay descent, and is distinguished by a culture that combines elements of both groups, for example, in the language and food.

I picked out the local elements of my Asian, (more importantly, Singaporean) heritage and applied it to the musical medium most comfortable to me—i.e., POP, with just a hint of fusion. Most of the songs were inspired by folksongs and nursery rhymes I grew up with.

Second, while predominantly using the English language, the selective inclusion of other languages in songs also underscores the multilingual character of Singapore society. Three examples illustrate this point. Chris Ho's "Buddy Buddy" is a case in point. Although predominantly in English, the song also contains many Malay words and phrases, such as "*salah*" ("mistake") and "*bodoh*" ("silly person"). The song also features a rap in Malay. Dick Lee's tribute to the Peranakans entitled "I Am Baba" is another example: the lyrics of this song contain the colourful *patois* spoken by Peranakans, which is a mixture of Malay and Chinese dialect. In the humorous song "Mustapha," a duet with Jacintha Abisheganaden, Dick Lee conveys the image that Singapore's multilingualism draws from the variety of local languages as well as the inclusion of foreign languages, reflecting the broader cosmopolitan and global influences on Singapore's culture. This is revealed in the use of local and foreign languages in the lyrics:

*Cherie je t'aime, cherie je t'adore*<sup>3</sup>  
My darling I love you a lot more than you know  
*Cherie je t'aime, cherie je t'adore*  
My darling I love you a lot more than you know  
Oh Mustapha, Oh Mustapha  
*Yen Kathalan*<sup>4</sup> my Mr. Mustapha  
*Sayang, sayang,*<sup>5</sup> *na chew sher wo ai ni*<sup>6</sup>  
Will you, will you fall in love with me.

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<sup>3</sup> A term of endearment in French.

<sup>4</sup> A term of endearment in Tamil.

<sup>5</sup> A Malay term of endearment.

<sup>6</sup> The transliteration of a Mandarin phrase meaning "I love you."



In the space of only one verse, English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and French are used, a reflection of the multilingual character of Singapore society where diverse cultures meet and intermingle.

One distinctive trait that characterises Singaporeans, which is accurately reflected in some locally-penned songs, is the use of "Singlish." As Singapore is a place where different cultures mix, it is not surprising that a unique brand of spoken English should emerge. This unique brand of English, Singlish, is sometimes ungrammatical and often spoken with a distinctive accent, with words from Malay, Mandarin, and Chinese dialect thrown in. This colourful language is used, for example, in a humorous rap performed by MC Siva Choy and the Kopi Kat Klan entitled "Why U So Like Dat:"

I let you kopy<sup>7</sup> all my sum [sic]  
Because you always blur<sup>8</sup>  
But when I try to kopy back  
You always call the Sir<sup>9</sup>.

Oui, why u so like dat ah?<sup>10</sup>  
Why u so like dat?  
Why u so like dat ah?  
Why u so like dat?

You tell me you don't like girl  
I also donno why  
But when you see a pretty girl  
Your voice go up damn high.

Oui, why u so like dat?  
Why u so like dat?  
Why u so like dat ah?  
Why u so like dat?

This use of Singlish in popular music, as well as in other local cultural forms (such as television advertisements and plays) (*The*

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<sup>7</sup> Singlish pronunciation of "copy," pronounced with an unaspirated "k."

<sup>8</sup> Singlish expression for "lost."

<sup>9</sup> Local way of addressing a male teacher.

<sup>10</sup> Singlish expression meaning "Why do you behave like that?"

*Straits Times*, May 2, 1992, 28) is revealing of how much Singlish has become a distinctive part of Singaporeans' linguistic heritage.

Apart from the musical styles and instrumentation, and the selective incorporation of other languages, the contents of the lyrics also reveal the multiracial and indeed cosmopolitan nature of Singapore society. In a light-hearted vein, some of the songs reveal the multiracial character of Singaporean society through the variety of foods that may be found in Singapore, including Chinese, Malay, Indian, Peranakan and Western cuisines. MC Siva Choy and the Kopy Kat Klan, for example, reveal this in their song "Beer and Mee Goreng and Albinoni:"

Beer and *mee goreng*<sup>11</sup> and Albinoni  
Is all I ask on a Sunday afternoon  
Or maybe *dim sum*<sup>12</sup> with rum and some Rossini  
Or offer that with your fried *bee hoon*<sup>13</sup>  
Rum Ravelle and *rojak*<sup>14</sup> make me drowsy  
*Orluak*<sup>15</sup> and cognac make me cool  
*Char Siew fan*<sup>16</sup> and Beethoven and Sarsi  
Knock me out a little bit too soon.

Similar references to the huge variety of foods from different cultures are evident in songs by other groups, such as in The Wah Lau! Gang's "Ice Kachang" and Dick Lee's "Mustapha."

Other lyrical evidences of the cosmopolitan mix that constitutes Singapore's population and culture are explicit. For example, in Dick Lee's "Rasa Sayang," he sings:

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<sup>11</sup> Fried noodles, Malay style.

<sup>12</sup> A Chinese meal consisting of various types of savouries, such as dumplings, porridge and century eggs and buns.

<sup>13</sup> A Chinese vermicelli made from rice flour.

<sup>14</sup> A local salad consisting of pineapple, cucumber, turnip, bean sprouts and fried dough sticks (commonly known as *you tiao*) mixed with prawn paste.

<sup>15</sup> A Chinese dish consisting of oysters fried in eggs.

<sup>16</sup> A Chinese meal made up of rice and roast pork.

Now we can explain in a little while  
This is not an ordinary tropical isle  
Everything we have has the best  
Of the fabulous East and wonderful West.

Apart from the light-hearted revelations of Singapore's cosmopolitan character and those expressed with pride, there are, however, possible problems when individuals are confronted with a question of identity. This is revealed in Dick Lee's "The Mad Chinaman," in which he explores the question of how people who are raised in Singapore's cosmopolitan environment may feel a sense of confusion with regards to their identity. His lyrics are explicit in this regard:

Traditional, International  
Western feelings from my oriental heart  
How am I to know, how should I react?  
Defend with Asian pride? Or attack!

The Mad Chinaman relies  
On the east and west sides of his life  
The Mad Chinaman will try  
To find out which is right.

These lyrics reflect an ongoing issue in Singapore—that Singaporeans are adopting Western lifestyles and habits at the expense of losing their own cultural heritage. In the rush to modernise, many Singaporeans have to face this dilemma. Some people have viewed the onslaught of Western influences as cultural imperialism and resisted it with "Asian pride," while others have adopted a less confrontational approach and adapted and imbibed new norms, sometimes in a bid to cope with what are seen as inevitably changing times. Popular music thus acts as an important barometer of the cultural experiences and struggles that confront Singaporeans (see also Kong, forthcoming a).

In analysing Singapore's English language music therefore, the overall effect is the image of a unique cultural synthesis, one in which a multiracial mix occurs not only at the level of society but also at the level of the individual. In other words, not only do the songs reveal the multiracial mix of people in Singapore, they also reveal how Singaporeans, as individuals, have embodied some

elements of other cultures in their everyday lives. While this is sometimes portrayed as a rich diversity, at other times, such multiplicities suggest a clash of civilisations and an instability of identity.

*The country and the city*

Singapore has sometimes been described as an urban jungle. Much of the island is highly planned and built-up, and little of the original natural environment remains (Savage and Kong 1993). As urban denizens, Singaporeans seem to harbour a paradoxical attitude towards the city and urban living. On the one hand, there is a tendency to extol the virtues of city living, and in particular, city living in Singapore. Indeed, Singapore is portrayed as a food and shopping paradise, a place where one can find cheap and delicious food, and a range of shopping centres luring people to “shop, shop, shop!” The newspapers are also said to be full of enticing advertisements that boast of sales in different department stores. As Dick Lee writes in his “Rasa Sayang,”

Eat till you faint, so cheap some more<sup>17</sup>  
Ya, the best thing has to be the price  
Singapore’s my Fried Rice Paradise  
We can eat, eat, eat till we nearly drop  
Then we can all get up and we shop, shop, shop

We work, then *makan* (eat), watch a film  
Enjoy the fruits of tourism  
There are so plenty tourists, but  
We love their spending money, what!

Such a portrayal is also true in local popular fictional works, as Chan (1989/90) has illustrated.

Conversely, the city is also portrayed as an ugly place in both physical and social terms. For example, the city is portrayed by The Raw Fish as a noisy place with unceasing activity and movement:

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<sup>17</sup> A Singlish expression meaning “even the price is very cheap.”

Automobile noise  
Out in the traffic  
Black cars and blue cars go by.

Automobile noise  
The exit signs and subway trains  
Twenty-four hours  
Statues in the rain  
Walk in the headlight  
Walk in the daylight.

The juxtaposition of the terms “walking in the headlight” and “walking in the daylight” emphasises the incessant noise and movement by suggesting that there is no let up in the incessant activity even at night. In the midst of all this activity, however, people lose their identities and the city becomes an impersonal place. As Chris Ho points out in “Buddy Buddy,” “[i]n the city you’re just a number.”

The city is also portrayed as a place where people are alienated from one another and where they fail to find their niche in society. In a song from The Raw Fish’s album *15*, the city is a setting for relationships that are neither lasting nor sincere. Everyone is caught up in “this big rhythm” of the city and live for the moment; they just as easily drop out of relationships as they seem to form them. The Raw Fish’s lyrics reflect the feeling that everything in the city is ephemeral, including interpersonal ties.

The ugliness of the urbanscape can have serious personal repercussions. Global Chaos describes the loneliness that urbanites can feel. The city is so obsessed with progress that inevitably, some people are left behind. The agony which these people feel is described in “A Piece of a Puzzle” which was written in response to the suicide of a friend:

Goodbye my friend, I bid you farewell  
I’m sorry your dreams aren’t fulfilled  
Tears locked away in your private hell  
Fire is your friend and your mind is sealed

Life is full of wonders  
But we chose to ignore the colours of the rainbow  
Yearning for the thunder  
I can still hear you whisper “I’ve got no place to go.”

You're slipping away from me  
Walls of confusion, a piece of a puzzle  
A candle in the wind  
You're dreaming away inside this concrete jungle.

According to a member of the group, this song was written to express his frustration and anger at the impersonal way in which people are treated in cities, and at the way in which larger society ignores the needs of those who have been left behind in the race to succeed. The lyrics of this song convey the anguish that one feels when dreams are not fulfilled and nobody cares. Urban life is like "a candle in the wind," in danger of being extinguished at any time.

Urban living, it appears, can also lead to the development of ugly personalities, caught up in the cult of consumerism, ostentatious consumption, and, for Singaporeans in particular, "*kiasu*," a term that is widely applied to describe a fear of losing out to others and the constant desire to be ahead of the pack, even if it must be at the expense of others. As The Wah Lau! Gang's "Kiasu King (KK)" illustrates, the *kiasu* king is "pure Singaporean" and is "afraid to lose, don't want second best." The *kiasu* king goes to all the sales, queues overnight for tickets to the hottest R-rated<sup>18</sup> movie, stuffs himself full at buffets, takes more than he can consume, and attends anything that is free. In "Sophisticated Baby!" the Wah Lau! Gang further illustrates the ugliness that urban lifestyles encourage through consumerism. Here, they comment on Singaporeans who strongly desire to show off their wealth and who delight in displaying their fashionable possessions (such as Chanel products, Karl Lagerfeld designs and Gucci scents) in order to be one-up on other people. This ostentatious show of wealth is portrayed as a trait that has become rather common in the past decade as Singaporeans have become more affluent.

These paradoxical images of the city—as a place of opportunity and plenty, and as a place of alienation and despair or of ostentatious consumption—also parallel the discussions in other studies. For example, Marcus (1975) has shown how in rock and roll music, American cities (particularly Californian cities) are portrayed as exciting places with plenty of new opportunities while Meyer

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<sup>18</sup> This refers to Singapore's R(A) movies, that is, Restricted (Artistic).

(1973) has illustrated how in country music, the city is inevitably portrayed in negative terms.

The smallness of Singapore (the main island is little more than 620 square kilometres) has become a constraint for many Singaporeans who feel a sense of claustrophobia in a city where everybody seems to be watching everybody else and where "space" and "mobility" are lacking. This is illustrated in the song "Elizabeth," by the group The Ordinary People, in which the title character "knows where she wants to go": she wants to flee from the shackles of home; she longs to "fly," "to roam, to search, to find." She longs to escape from the drudgery of everyday life, and in so doing she hopes to "discover" herself. There is thus a sense that for some Singaporeans there is a longing to break free from the psychological confines of a small local environment.

For some, this desire to experience greater mobility, and the freedom of both physical space and psychological "breathing-space," is closely related with a desire to experience the uncrowded vastness associated with nature and rustic landscapes, an openness which built-up Singapore lacks. Such sentiments are expressed by The Raw Fish, who write and sing about the desire for freedom, which they associate with the natural elements and rustic landscapes. In one of their songs, they write about a person leaving home and "wander[ing] into the daybreak," which offers a new sense of freedom. Such freedom is also found in open skies, blue waters, and tumble-down bridges. With this newfound freedom, the soul is enriched and enlightened. The Raw Fish also assert that a person who finds such freedom goes from "rags to riches," indicating the personal and intangible wealth that one attains when one is in touch with the physical world and its beauty. The use of nature and rustic landscapes to describe the feeling of freedom is not coincidental; it is a metaphor for the simple values in life which most city people seem to have forgotten. Similar themes are also expressed in the Twang Bar Kings' "Cinnamon City," in which the paradise associated with God's kingdom is said to be attainable when one returns to simple rural values because it is only in such a context that one is able to find freedom away from the emotional and psychological grind of urban living. Such positive portrayals of rustic life are also abundantly expressed in Western country music as Meyer (1973) has illustrated.

*Social engineering in "campaign country"*

Chan (1989/90), in her study of popular fiction written by Singaporeans, illustrates how Singapore is a country with many campaigns, initiated by the government, often for social engineering purposes. At the same time, laws are also enacted to prohibit certain types of "anti-social" behaviour. For example, there are campaigns which attempt to encourage Singaporeans to have more children or fewer children (depending on the population growth rate at particular times), to keep Singapore clean, to flush the toilets, not to chew gum, or not to spit in public. These campaigns are backed by incentives and disincentives. For instance, priorities for children's school registration are used to encourage particular procreation patterns, while fines are popular disincentives for other types of behaviour. This unique and pervasive aspect of Singapore life is captured in a number of songs.

The Wah Lau! Gang's "Singapore, A Real FINE Country!" is an example of one such song, capturing a slice of Singapore life:

I cannot spit, cannot litter  
Chew chewing gum at all  
I cannot fire crackers  
And have myself a ball

If you do your business in the lift  
It's really quite embarrassing  
Don't ever smoke in a restaurant  
It can be quite harassing

Cannot do this ah, cannot do that ah  
If you do, you'll have no money.

In another song, The Wah Lau! Gang takes a humorous look at the effects of the Speak Mandarin campaign on Singaporeans' great passion—eating. This campaign has caused many local dishes, known by their colourful dialect names, to be known by their Mandarin names, making life miserable for food lovers:

I like to eat dough fritters  
I call them *Yu Char Kway*  
But when you ask me [to] eat *You Tiao*  
I go my separate way



*Bak Kut Teh* very tasty  
I love this pork ribs soups  
But when you order *Rou Gu Cha*  
My stomach does three loops.

The lyrics of these songs give listeners the image of a Singapore with many campaigns and restrictive laws. Although the subject is often treated with humour, the songs nevertheless bring home the message that for the average Singaporean, campaigns can have the effect of changing established cultural norms (such as the use of language) to suit a new "culture" which is in the eyes of the government more appropriate. As I have argued elsewhere (Phua and Kong forthcoming), this use of music to encourage certain socially acceptable modes of behaviour is far-reaching, though perhaps a less insidious process than the attempts to arouse loyalty, whip up patriotism, and legitimise the power of the ruling elite through the use of national songs (see also Kong 1995b).

Lyrics, while conveying the image of "campaign Singapore," also play a large part in campaigns. In the courtesy campaign, for example, the message that "courtesy is for free, courtesy is for you and me" is transmitted through a catchy jingle. Similarly, music has also been used by the government to warn young people against picking up smoking. A recent anti-smoking campaign involved the use of a rap music-style jingle and it was accompanied by a video showing that smoking is not a "cool thing to do." This video was aimed specifically at young teens thought to be most receptive to rap music. In this sense, the process of political socialisation using music as a tool can be interpreted in two lights. While the use of music for political legitimisation can be seen as a process of self endorsement (see Kong 1995b), the use of music to promote, *inter alia*, good hygiene and to condemn drug/tobacco use is much more acceptable and indeed desirable.

*"Save the planet!": the influence of global concerns*

Singapore's development over the past three decades has established it as one of the newly industrialised countries. Indeed, it is on the threshold of achieving full "development" status. It is locked simultaneously into the international capitalist marketplace as well as the global network of communications and transcultural forces, and as such is open to a multiplicity of influences. Global influences on local culture are manifest (Kong, forthcoming a), and

one reflection of this is the way in which issues of global concern appear on local agendas as well. This is nowhere more evident than in the appearance of "green" themes in song lyrics, covering issues such as malnutrition, extinction of species, salinization of agricultural land, drainage of wetlands, and depletion of the ozone layer, "all in the name of progress" ("The Earth Report" by Global Chaos). Specific problems are taken up in particular songs. In The Ordinary People's "Hole in the Sky," for example, concern is expressed over the depletion of the ozone layer:

Well there's a hole in the sky  
Up above where the sun still shines  
Hole in the sky  
Nothing's spoken, nothing's said  
So carry on madmen do your bad  
But if there's nothing done in our time  
We'll all be dead.

Corporate Toil similarly deals with ozone depletion in its song "Certain Earth Screams," emphasising the urgency with which action must be taken to protect the earth:

And she screams  
While she bleeds silently  
Ultraviolet rays stings [*sic*] her blue shrouded skin  
Clear like plasticine  
And she screams and screams.

Apart from ozone depletion, songs also express disgust at the slaughter of animals for profiteering. In a song entitled "Imagine If You Will," the group Global Chaos expresses views on this issue:

Unnecessary destruction  
Of unwanted animals  
Poachers, 'collectors'  
Extinction of species on earth.

Killed for their skins  
Saying fur has been morally accepted  
People regards [*sic*] them as beautiful  
By jove! They really are demented.

Yet other songs focus on starvation and famine. In Swirling Madness' "Tormented Souls," for example, the group writes and sings of the food crisis and malnutrition problems:

With crying eyes they plead and  
Outstretched hands they reach  
Their bodies burn with hunger  
Filled with pain and hurt  
Suffering in silence  
Their eyes shed hopeless tears  
Without food or water  
They beg for better days.

This song ends with a verse decrying the fact that while some people starve, others elsewhere are living a life of luxury. This is an indignant protest against the indifference of humans towards the less fortunate:

They suffer in millions  
While we live in luxury  
We laugh into their faces  
We're blind to their plea.

When asked about their motivations for recording songs about environmental destruction and other "green" issues, most of the songwriters-cum-recording artists spoke pointedly about their concern for the environment. The aim in writing these songs is, in the words of a member of Swirling Madness, "to at least bring to peoples' attention the fact that these problems exist, and hopefully, to get them to do something positive" (Interview with Swirling Madness, July 4, 1992). This is laudable, especially since many of these problems do not have immediate personal or local impacts. For example, Singaporeans are not confronted with problems of starvation and malnutrition. Yet, as Singapore moves towards becoming a developed country, there are signs that some Singaporeans are simultaneously developing a more global outlook in their concern for world issues.

## **Conclusion**

What I have illustrated in this paper is that popular culture, and in this instance popular music in particular, is worthy of geographical research attention, even though traditionally geographers have not paid sufficient attention to it. My analysis here illustrates how popular music captures and conveys a sense of place, specifically, a sense of the unique cultural synthesis of Singapore; of what urbanity means, as experienced by Singaporeans; of the distinctive social engineering that takes place in Singapore; and of the way in which global issues are imported into local agendas.

I have tried to show how an analysis of lyrics in pop music offers a handle on a socio-cultural milieu in a particular place. At the same time, it is important to emphasise the point that through such cultural expressions, the character of a society and the sense of place move beyond the unarticulated and inchoate. Indeed, many inarticulations become articulated through what is commonly deemed a frivolous and ephemeral "low" cultural form.

Analysis of music, particularly in terms of its lyrics, rhythms, and instrumentation, also opens a window to our understanding of culture and geography. In this context, I have illustrated that English language music produced by Singaporeans reflect a confluence of global and local influences. This is evident in the injection of varied languages in predominantly English songs and the incorporation of pop, rap, ethnic instrumentation, and other styles within the same song. The songs thus produced are therefore neither plainly local nor totally "foreign." Such music is therefore not a homogenised product, underlining the point that Massey (1993:240) has forcefully made, that

[g]lobalization (in the economy, or in culture, or in anything else) does not entail simply homogenization. On the contrary, [it] . . . is yet another source of . . . the uniqueness of place.

What I have illustrated therefore is that there are local particularisms amidst universalisation. At the same time, I have shown that cultural production, in particular, musical production, works alongside and within broader global and local forces, influencing and influenced by them to reflect and contribute to socio-cultural identities.

Apart from the insights that it brings to our understanding of culture and geography, this paper also draws attention to many

other related research questions that as yet remain unaddressed. First, this paper focuses only on songs with mainly English lyrics. Given the multilingual society that Singapore is, it would be instructive to analyse the ways in which Singapore songs in other languages convey this sense of place. In particular, given that the two major modes of communication are English and Mandarin, an analysis of Mandarin songs certainly deserves attention. While most of the Mandarin songs popular with Singaporeans are not written and produced by Singaporeans but hail from Taiwan and Hong Kong, a distinctive form of local Mandarin music has taken shape in *xinyao*, a shorthand term for “*xin jia po nian qin ren chuang zuo de ge yao*” (“the songs composed by Singapore youths”). As I have analysed elsewhere (Kong forthcoming b), *xinyao* lyrics embody mainly a nostalgia for childhood; youth concerns (young people’s ideals, their aspirations, hopes, frustrations, problems, fears and desires); and social commentaries (the rat race in Singapore and its effects on people; the lack of freedom; delinquency; Westernisation; the development of Singapore as a nation and society; and war and destruction in the world). At first glance therefore, it would appear that the concerns of songwriters using the English and Mandarin media are tangential to one another. This raises questions about how the views and concerns of different segments of Singapore society are evolving, and whether such differences will have deeper implications for social relations. This question deserves fuller exploration in another paper.

Second, I have focused in this paper only on the *production* of songs and the meanings encoded in these songs. I have not discussed the *consumption* of such music. Yet, as Hirschkop (1989:284) suggests (borrowing from Bakhtin), musical texts are to be understood as ongoing social dialogues made in particular social and historical situations, and reflecting those locations. As I have argued elsewhere (Kong 1995a), such “social dialogues” involve producers, gatekeepers (for example, deejays), and consumers, and an understanding of how the musical text is taken up in each “moment” of this culture circuit is important. Even while I have analysed how a group of producers encode their preferred meanings in their music, this analysis must be taken further by focusing on how the resulting text is “mediated” by deejays who may give the songs air time in particular programmes, thus influencing particular audiences, or who may package certain songs together, reinforcing or dissipating messages and impacts. The analysis must then be

taken even further by focusing on how the meanings are decoded by the audience. Such readings may be concordant or discordant with the encoded meanings, and may be incorporated into lived cultures and social relations. Feedback loops may then provide material for the production of new texts or lead to the modification of existing ones. In other words, meanings are transformed at each stage, reflecting the contexts of production and consumption, as well as factors such as the gender, class, ethnicity and religion of those involved (Kong 1995a). Therefore, in developing subsequent research, it is important to give full attention to the rest of the culture circuit beyond the encoded meanings of producers. Specific questions that need to be addressed include, for example, who listens to such music and how they interpret such music.

Such lacunae notwithstanding, my argument remains that geographers concerned with the ways in which cultural forms function as the medium and outcome of everyday conditions will find popular music a worthwhile research area. This is particularly important, given that the geographical enterprise has remained largely a visually oriented one. The senses of touch, smell, taste, and hearing have been neglected as a consequence of the emphasis on "ways of seeing" (Jackson 1989:171). Yet, as Valentine (1993) points out, ways of hearing and ways of smelling, for example, have an ability to structure space differently from vision. For these reasons, "music is integral to the geographical imagination" (Smith 1994:238), and can reconstruct the geographer's terrain of analysis. It is thus deserving of more space on geographers' research agendas.

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