

Executive summary:

Prospects of the “Localisation” of Chinese Music in Southeast Asia –
fusion, innovation and development – thoughts on moulding a “New Nanyang Style”

东南亚华乐的“本土化”前景——

融合，创新与发展——对塑造“新南洋风格”的思考

Source of original article: “*Nanyang-Inspired Chinese Orchestral Music*” *Symposium 2006*, edited by CHAN Ming-chi, 50–73. Singapore: Singapore Chinese Orchestra, 2010.

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Abstract

This article discusses Chinese music in Singapore and Malaysia. It makes forward-looking observations regarding the prospects of localisation of Chinese music in Southeast Asia, based on its historical features in the past century and current cultural practices. The authors identify “fusion, innovation and development” as cultural strategies and express their thoughts on moulding a “New Nanyang Style”.

Keywords

Chinese music, New Nanyang Style, localisation, cultural identity, identity of alterity, identity of commonality, composite identity, cultural strategy

Translation notes

[Notes by the translator are marked in square brackets.]

In this translation, “Fujian” refers to the province and “Hokkien” refers to the Southern Min dialect group originating from Fujian. “Guangdong” refers to the province and “Cantonese” refers to the Yue dialect group originating from Guangdong.

Introduction

[This article was presented at the conclusion of the first Singapore International Competition for Chinese Orchestral Composition in Nov. 2006.]

Over the past few days, we have witnessed many excellent award-winning works, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's (SCO) outstanding performance, the international composer community's enthusiasm and Singaporeans' eagerness for "New Chinese Music".

This competition required entries to incorporate elements of "Nanyang music". Although "Nanyang music" is not precisely defined, composers could draw upon Southeast Asia's history and music.

Maestro TSUNG Yeh 葉聰 pointed out explicitly that the SCO should differ from Chinese orchestras in China. Its repertoire must be integrated with local culture, ethnic styles and musical instruments. This new ideal of Chinese music reflects changing times, trends and demands.

1. Between history and reality

Chinese cultural identity blossoms according to a natural process that cannot be artificially expedited or manipulated. Literature, visual art and music have different fates. Compared to Chinese literature and Nanyang art in Singapore and Malaysia, the localisation of Chinese music has been lagging for two main reasons.

Firstly, music is a more integral part of life than literature and painting. Traditional music first "enter the ears" (form listening habits and shape the listener's sense of cultural belonging), then "nourishes the ears" (brings aesthetic pleasure and integrates into the daily lives).

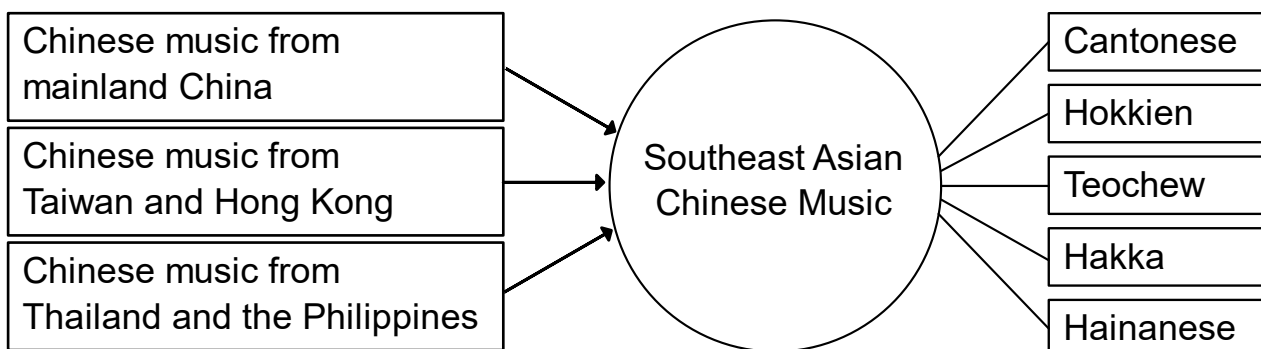
To Chinese immigrants of the five main dialect groups – Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese, traditional music (specific to each dialect group) was deeply engrained in their communities and served as a cultural symbol not easily changed or discarded in favour of localised music.

Secondly, music involves a high degree of technique and craftsmanship. Compositional technique is the foundation of fusion, innovation and development. A "new Nanyang style" can only emerge with enough proficient composers.

Southeast Asia has been nourished by ancient civilisations like China, India, Persia and Arabia, and recently by Western civilisation. Successive Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian influences resulted in multicultural societies and a vibrant Southeast Asian Kulturkreis (cultural circle) that influenced music.

1.1. Briefly tracing the dissemination of Chinese music

Migration is the impetus, carrier and backbone for the cultural dissemination of Chinese music. Since the early 19th century, many people from the Fujian and Guangdong regions migrated to the Nanyang region to seek a new living. Chinese from other places also converged into this great wave of migration, leading to the following sources of Southeast Asian Chinese music:



Music transmits alongside migration and changes together with its related communities. Traditional Chinese music in Southeast Asia underwent the processes of transmission – inheritance – conflict – preservation – interaction – fusion, thereby giving birth to new cultural qualities.

For immigrants, music from their hometown warms their hearts, alleviates their homesickness, unites them with compatriots, and bonds them with their clan relatives. Music and opera thus served as their dominant form of entertainment.

Since the 19th century, many Chinese performers and opera troupes have visited Singapore and Malaysia. Various associations and troupes were founded locally too. However, after the mid-20th century, cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia halted. Chinese music practitioners took great pains to obtain musical materials from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand etc., often dictating music from radio broadcasts or vinyl records.

However, people-to-people exchanges still existed. The “New Chinese Music” model of orchestral performance spread via Taiwan in the 1950s to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and other countries, influencing the start-up of local amateur Chinese orchestras.

After the 1970s, numerous professional musicians from China visited or migrated to Southeast Asia to perform, interact, teach and research, creating a Chinese music boom. They helped to establish Chinese orchestras and ensembles in numerous primary and secondary schools. Chinese associations formed Chinese orchestras and held regular performances and competitions, advancing music education at the amateur and semi-professional level. Professional Chinese musical groups were formed too. Local composers of Chinese music emerged in Singapore and Malaysia while newly-composed Chinese orchestral pieces, music books and scores were introduced from mainland China.

1.2. Characteristics of Singaporean-Malaysian Chinese Music

Chinese music bears deep cultural ties with Chinese people. Chinese historical identity, Chinese nationalist identity, communal identity, national (local) identity, cultural identity, class identity and ethnic identity are seven identity issues of overseas Chinese that are overlapping, complex and variable. Southeast Asian Chinese music reflects Chinese identity in three ways that overlap, transform and compound.

1.2.1. Identity of alterity (特性认同)

The “identity of alterity” stems from the original qualities of migrant Chinese culture, including the distinctive southern Chinese dialects, folk customs, religious activities, and psychology.

Immigrants were devoted to the music and opera of their dialect group. They gathered in cultural venues linked to their geographic and kin ties (including clan associations and temples), organising activities for their communities.

The “identity of alterity” values exclusiveness – not only towards other races – but also towards other communities or dialect groups from the same Chinese race. This reflects both conservativeness and tenacity in Chinese culture.

1.2.2. Identity of commonality (共性认同)

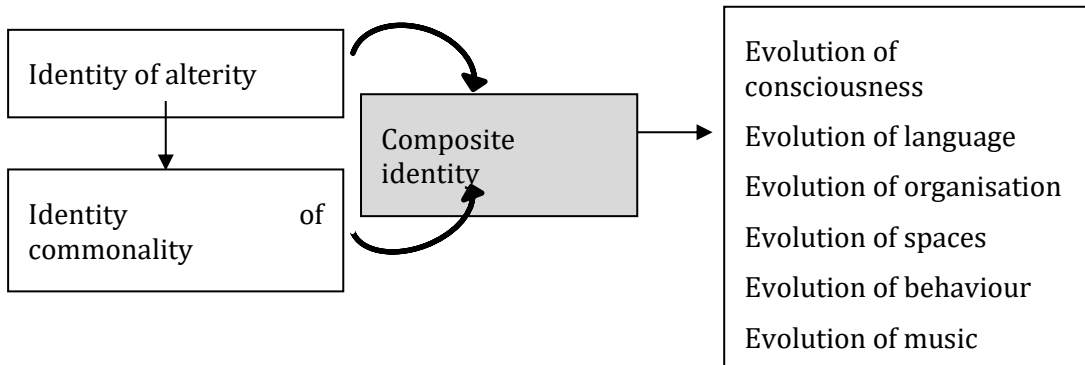
The “identity of commonality” stems from derivative qualities of migrant Chinese culture among second and third-generation local-born Chinese, including multilingualism, a new national identity, identifying as citizens rather than immigrants, social transformations and globalisation.

This is expressed through New Chinese Music, pan-Chinese music, and a gradually emerging consciousness of the localisation of Chinese music. Chinese music gradually entered public schools and concert halls, no longer limited to venues or organisations linked to specific ancestral hometowns.

The “identity of commonality” exhibits cultural openness, far-sighted consciousness and psychological transcendence. For the new generation, Chinese music is no longer patriotism or nostalgia for the motherland or a dialect group’s identity symbol. Instead, it is an indispensable part of the plural culture of Southeast Asia, which inevitably led to a new musical culture seeking “localisation”.

1.2.3. Composite identity

However, the latter identity does not replace the former. Traditional is still in high demand and exerts a strong influence. Chinese identity comprises more than connections with one's ancestral hometown (i.e., "identity of alterity") or the recognition of one's Chinese ethnicity (i.e., "identity of commonality"). Both coexist, forming a composite identity that manifests as the coexistence of musical genres, languages, tradition and modernity. This also provokes thought about the "Singaporeanness" of Chinese music.



2. The prospects of New Chinese Music and its utilisation of Southeast Asian music resources

2.1. Malaysia's experiences and reflections

In the mid-70s to mid-80s, Malaysian associations strengthened contacts, trained instructors and organised activities in the Chinese music scene. Recognising the importance of professional specialisation, the Professional Cultural Center Orchestra was formed in 1988.

Chinese independent high schools, large national secondary schools, art institutes and tertiary institutes have established Chinese orchestras, laying a crucial foundation for Chinese music education and ensuring succession.

The path of Chinese music in Malaysia has been arduous due to difficult social circumstances. On the contrary, Singapore had support by the government, exchange opportunities, and professionally-trained teachers.

2.2. Inspiration by the localisation of Nanyang art

Around 1900, graduates from art institutions in China, Europe, America and Japan brought various painting techniques to the Nanyang region, cumulating in the Nanyang style. To truly "enter Nanyang", the principles of localisation were bound to be raised.

In 1938, painter LIM Hak Tai 林学大 founded the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and proposed the new artistic concept of creating a "Nanyang style", expressed as six main guidelines in 1955:¹

1. Integrate the culture and fashion of various ethnicities.
2. Communicate between Eastern and Western art
3. Espouse the spirit of science and the ethos of the 20th century
4. Reflect the needs of local people
5. Convey the local tropical vibes
6. Bear educational significance and serve social functions

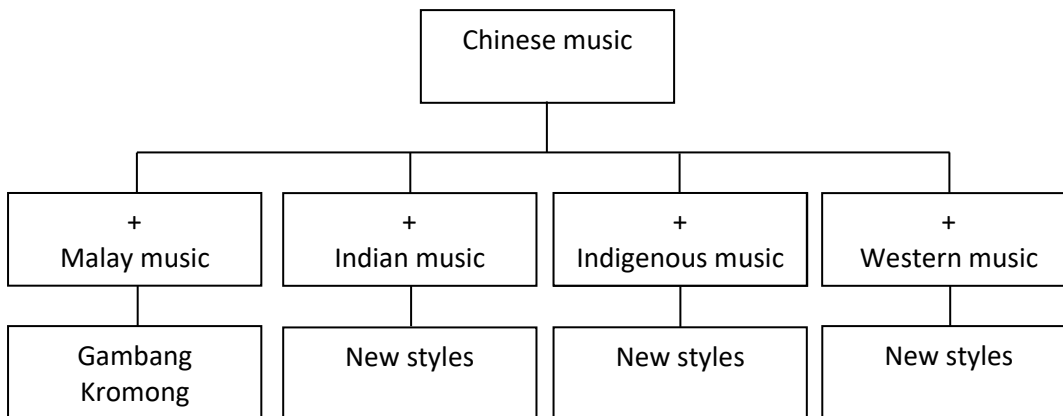
¹ LIM Hak Tai. "Preface." *Journal of Nanyang Youth Art* 《南洋青年美术》. Singapore: Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 1955

Achievements in the localisation of “Nanyang art” has far surpassed Southeast Asian Chinese literature and music. “Nanyang art” in the broad sense has not only aesthetic value, but also symbolic, inspirational, critical, and educational significance.

Learning from the development of Nanyang art, the Chinese music community could likewise outline guiding principles, establish art education and advance artistic technique.

2.3. Key resources of Nanyang music

We must first understand the cultural resources of other ethnicities to select, absorb and integrate them into the construction of a new cultural entity. A landscape like the following will be formed in future:²



Singapore’s national culture and societal framework is based on the interactive coexistence of various ethnic groups, forming a cultural identity belonging to all citizens.

Southeast Asia has diverse ethnic groups, languages, beliefs and intriguing histories. Its rich musical resources – including that of the Chinese – are worth utilising by composers.

2.3.1 Cultural elements

Historical texts include literature, poetry, folklore and religious texts.

Folk customs include rituals relating to birth, wedding, funerals; worshipping deities and ancestors; praying for harvest or rain; worshipping musical instruments/deities/masters; as well as festivals, labouring and social activities.

2.3.2 Musical elements

2.3.2.1 Musical genres

The Malay-Indonesian ethnic group mainly has the following:

- Dances: Ronggeng, Zapin, Hadrah, Keroncong
- Poetry: Pantun
- Theatre: Makyung, Menora, Wayang kulit (shadow puppetry)
- Folk music: Gamelan, Angklung, Dangdut
- Various ethnic folk dances, labourer dances, social dances etc.

The Chinese ethnic group mainly has the following:

Opera: *Min Ju* 闽剧 [Minnan opera], *Yue Ju* 粤剧 [Cantonese opera], *Qiong Ju* 琼剧 [Hainan opera], *Han Ju* 汉剧 [Hakka opera], *Gezai Xi* 歌仔戏 [Gezai opera], *Mu’ou Ju* 木偶剧 [puppet opera], *Jing Ju* 京剧 [Beijing opera], *Gaojia Xi* 高甲戏 [Gaojia opera from Fujian], *Nanguan Xi* 南管戏 [Taiwanese Nanyin]

² The fusion of a main culture with various other ethnic cultures derives a new type of culture. For example, Indonesian Gambang Kromong is a product of Chinese music fusing with Gamelan.

opera], *Puxian Xi* 莆仙戏 [Putian opera], *Liyuan Xi* 梨园戏 [Liyuan opera from Quanzhou city], *Fujian Shifan Xi* 福建十番戏 [Shifai opera from Fujian], *Jin Ge* 锦歌 [Hokkien operatic singing], *Yue Qu* 粤曲 [Cantonese operatic singing], *Xiqin Xi* 西秦戏 [Xiqin opera from Haifeng county] etc.

Folk music: *Quanzhou Nanyin* 泉州南音 [literati chamber music from Quanzhou city], *Chaozhou Xianshi Yue* 潮州弦诗乐 [Teochew medium-scale string music], 细乐 *Xi Yue* [Teochew small-scale string music], 箏乐 *Zheng Yue* [Teochew Guzheng music], *Guangdong Yinyue* 广东音乐 [Cantonese music], *Jiangnan Sizhu* 江南丝竹 [Silk and bamboo music from the Jiangnan region], *Han Diao* 汉调 [Hakka music], new Chinese orchestra music etc.

Folk song: *Kejia Shan Ge* 客家山歌 [Hakka hill songs], *Fujian Guofan Ge* 福建过番歌 [lit. “songs of travelling overseas to Nanyang”] etc.

The Indian ethnic group mainly has the following:

- Recitations of the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*
- *Dhrupad* (heroic narrative songs)
- *Thumri* (romantic songs)
- *Bhajan* (religious songs)
- *Dhamar* (dance songs)
- *Bharatanatyam* dance
- Instrumental music
- Religious chant etc.

2.3.2.2 Musical instruments

The Malay-Indonesian ethnic group has various metallophones, gongs, bamboo shakers, drums and flutes, some adopted from Arabia.

The Indian ethnic group has various wind, plucked string, bowed string instruments and drums.

The indigenous ethnic groups have musical bows, xylophones, metallophones, flutes, ocarinas, drums, gongs, plucked string instruments and mouth organs.

2.3.3 Classification of resources

2.3.3.1 Timbral resources

Human vocal sound production can produce extraordinary timbres in combination with different languages.

Musical instruments and their numerous playing techniques produce rich timbres too.

2.3.3.2 Tuning resources

Besides the three main global tuning systems [equal temperament, just intonation and fifths tuning], special region-specific tuning systems exist in Southeast Asia.

Chinese music is mainly pentatonic with auxiliary major or minor second intervals. Multiple tuning systems coexist in actual performances. Distinctive non-tempered tuning systems and melodic modes are found in traditional music such as Teochew Guzheng music.

Perso-Arab tuning systems, which use three-quarter-tone intervals, can be heard in Southeast Asian Islamic music.

Indonesian Gamelan music is based on two non-equal-tempered scales, the *slendro* and *pelog*.

The ancient Indian tuning system of 22 *śruti*-s is described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

2.3.3.3 Rhythmic resources

South(east) Asia has unique rhythmic resources like the Indian *tāla* in music and Gamelan *gongan*.

Chinese rhythmic forms include the simultaneous occurrence of fast and slow rhythms and rhythmic patterns with phrases of increasing or decreasing length.

2.3.3.4 Melodic resources

Melody types include Hindustani and Carnatic *rāga*-s, tied to *rasa* (emotional essence) and Indian philosophy.

In Chinese folk music, *shengqiang* 声腔 [opera singing style] and *qapai* 曲牌 [fixed melody] are core melodic types. There are also techniques in variation, ornamentation and modulation.

In Malay-Indonesian folk music, polyphonic stratification results in unique melodic overlapping that is neither harmony nor counterpoint.

3. Composition and prospects of New Chinese Music

Singapore and Malaysia already possess conditions and opportunities for a new Chinese music culture belonging to Southeast Asia. The “Singaporeanness” of Chinese music in Singapore is no longer an illusion.

3.1. Regarding composition

Firstly, many New Chinese Music composers have more extensive backgrounds (such as Western education) than traditional Chinese music practitioners.

Secondly, Chinese music has shifted from “quantity” to “quality”, having gone through several stages such as:

- Copying traditional music
- Transcribing and arranging traditional music
- Importing New Chinese Music from the mainland
- Fusing traditional Chinese music with traditional Southeast Asian music
- Composing original pieces rooted in tradition.

Pluralism is already being expressed through localisation.

Thirdly, many Chinese music composers have experience incorporating local styles that can serve as reference.

The following thought processes can be applied to the composition of New Chinese Music:

3.1.1. Integration of tuning systems

Many tuning systems in Southeast Asia (involving microtones) can be pitch resources. While instruments with fixed pitches play equal-tempered parts, others could play flexible pitches.

3.1.2. Integration of techniques

Synthesising different methods of organising melody, rhythm, harmony and instrumentation, Chinese pentatonic melodies could be combined with Gamelan *gongan* rhythms, instruments of different ethnicities could play together, etc.

3.1.3 Integration of styles

Multiple stylistic elements (Malay-Indonesian, Chinese, Indian, Western and indigenous) could occur simultaneously in a musical work to form a composite style, as opposed to the successive display of different styles.

3.1.4 Integration of cultures

Folk literature, legends, myths and rituals are representative of an ethnic group’s psyche and aesthetics. Composers can use such resources from other ethnic groups to create cross-cultural works.

3.2. Regarding strategy

The localisation of New Chinese Music should be based on the following principles:

3.2.1 Academic positioning

“Localisation” is key to the composition of New Chinese Music. Related concepts such as “Nanyang style”, “Nanyang music”, “New Chinese Music”, “Southeast Asian music”, “Nanyang historical records”, “Nanyang musical resources”, “Nanyang style in Chinese music” etc. require academic justification.

Issues about Chinese music’s resources, historical factuality, transmission, associations, performances, aesthetic demands, cultural psychology, etc. require research, as well as the local music of Southeast Asian ethnic groups.

These academic undertakings garner recognition for New Chinese Music, answer questions posed by society, satisfy compositional needs and lay a solid theoretical foundation

3.2.2. Priority to composition

Without musical pieces composed, no other musical activities can take place. The localisation of Chinese music is not a theoretical but a practical issue that can only be realised through composition.

3.2.3 Practical applications foremost

With composition as the basis, large quantities of real-life arts activities are crucial for New Chinese Music to enter people’s ears and hearts and become part of the social consciousness.

Uninterrupted performances, promotion, broadcasting, competitions and publishing are crucial for the success and maturity of localised New Chinese Music. Arts administrators (i.e., social activists and economists for music), professional audio-visual media practitioners, printing-press media practitioners and high-profile music critics are needed too. When all these are in place, considerable results can surely be achieved.