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Limited pidgin-type patois? Policy, language, technology, identity and the experience of Canto-pop in Singapore

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Abstract

This article explores the interactions and tensions arising from a vibrant Canto-pop industry exported from Hong Kong to an interventionist nation-state of Singapore bent on discouraging the use of dialects by its ethnic Chinese population. Aside from highlighting the roles of technological and commercial factors behind the regional music networks, it seeks further to position this contemporary relationship within the larger historical and cultural context. The cultural politics involved here is not just an isolated phenomenon between two different cities. More importantly, the language policies of the Singapore government represent a haunting replication of the perennial attempts by central authorities in China to impose a more standardised linguistic and cultural identity on its dialect-speaking peripheries. This identity is based on not just the court language of Mandarin, but notions of 'Chineseness'. This article goes on to question the extent to which Canto-pop could help foster a more hybridised identity transcending both the current dictates of the modern Singaporean state and the imagined cultural boundaries of a more historically entrenched Sino-centric realm.

Introduction

I underline the government's determination that nobody should use dialects. Indeed wise parents will never let their children speak dialect at all . . . The more one learns dialect words, the less space there is for Mandarin words or English words, or multiplication tables or formulas in mathematics, physics or chemistry. (Speech on 'Mandarin must replace dialects as the mother tongue' on 25 October 1981, by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce 1991)

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies and songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the pure.¹ (Salman Rushdie, Rushdie 1991, p. 394)

'Canto-pop' or popular music sung in Cantonese (a Southern Chinese dialect) is one of the several cultural products that manifest an unmistakably Hong Kong style and identity (Choi 1991, p. 539). While its definitions and developments have been widely discussed (Witzleben 1999, pp. 242–3), less has been mentioned on how the music has been reinterpreted by the countries and cities that it has been exported to. The Cantonese dialect group is a fluid linguistic and social sub-category of Chinese. Its estimated worldwide population of 70 million people (*The Economist*, 30

January 1999, p. 89) concentrated in the main economic metropolises from Vancouver to Hong Kong and Singapore,² makes it a prominent Chinese dialect group. Hong Kong, together with Taiwan, assumed by historical accident the role of transmitting Chinese culture to the Chinese diaspora since 1949 when Communist China closed its doors to the rest of the world.

The spread of Hong Kong's entertainment industry, in particular of Cantonese music to Singapore, became implicated in the Republic's language and cultural policies during the post-war era. Aside from the tensions involved, the interactions between a vibrant regional industry and an equally domineering nation-state that regarded dialects as 'limited pidgin-type patois' (Pan 1989, p. 261) have been reflected in the changing attitudes towards Canto-pop from industry, regulators and consumers. This article examines how such interactions are actually taking place within the historical framework between the Sino-centric realm and its diasporic peripheries in light of the changing geo-political and technological landscapes. More importantly, it seeks to determine whether the resultant cultural network either 'celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling' through the widening of ethnic definitions or perpetuates the 'absolutism of the pure' (Rushdie 1991, p. 394) based on an unchanging core that reinforces unbending notions of 'Chineseness'.

Yuht Kehk and 'Yellow Culture': perception of Cantonese music to the 1960s

The works of music historian Andrew Jones on jazz in Shanghai during the 1930s (Jones 2001) and urban anthropologist Jeroen de Kloet (de Kloet 2001) on popular music in contemporary China have coincidentally underlined several common trends that helped shape the development of music in the Sino-centric realm. Music in the Middle Kingdom since the incursion of the West after the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century has been tied to the notions of 'modernity', 'progress' and 'self-determination'. Linked to these themes are the cultural politics between the core and the periphery. Underlying tensions have remained strong between political and cultural elites who wished to impose a degree of cultural conformity and standardisation on their assertive peripheries which have their own unique regional and linguistic identities.³ Hence, the political and intellectual elites in China from court officials in the nineteenth century to avant garde rock musicians in Beijing today have often perceived the musical expressions from the provinces and the port cities to be regressive, decadent, commercialised and discordant (de Kloet 2001, pp. 35–42). Perhaps the earliest objections to emergent periphery cultures in the modern period were raised in the treaty port of Shanghai which, in spite of its vibrancy, stood for 'cosmopolitan rootlessness and betrayal of Chinese values' (Wang 2001, p. 190). As for Hong Kong, Lee (1996, p. 226) suggested that the (ex-)British colony's threat to Beijing stems 'from its cultural otherness', even though 'it cannot contest any China because it is itself Chinese'. At best, these genres of music were denied official recognition. At worst, they have either been actively discouraged or ruthlessly suppressed.

The harshest moves came from the Chinese Communist Party's pursuit of the policy of *Putonghua* ('common language') based loosely upon the Beijing dialect where 'forcing the South to follow the North' has been the rallying cry and deviants are labelled as 'swindlers' or 'capitalist roaders' (*The Economist*, 30 January 1999, p. 89). Not confined to China, this trend has been again duplicated in the experience

of Cantonese music in the Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore where ethnic Chinese citizens comprise 75 per cent of its population of three million.

The Cantonese musical tradition is only one aspect of the diversity of Chinese music. Throughout history, it has interacted with musical developments in East Asia in a process of cultural cross-fertilisation. Canto-pop may be a phenomenon of the 1980s, but its consumption in Singapore can be traced back to the popular Cantonese opera (*Yuht Kehk* or *Yue Ju* in Mandarin) that had arrived, together with an influx of Cantonese immigrants to the British colony, during the nineteenth century (Lai 1986). Dating back to the Sung Dynasty (AD 1179–1276), Cantonese opera had already a problematic relationship with the dominant discourse. Its performances were completely banned during the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644–1911) for their association with subversive elements.⁴ The ban was also seen by many as part of efforts by the state to wipe out a more independent Cantonese identity that was frequently associated with the rebellious Southern provinces. Cantonese opera was subsequently revived with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in the 1911 Revolution that brought about the end of the Chinese monarchy. Many Cantonese songs that have sprung up since the 1960s from popular ballads to rap tracks have traces or references to the themes of Cantonese opera (Levin 1993).

The scene was given a new boost after 1949 with the exodus of cultural talent and capital from the major Chinese cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou to Hong Kong with the advancement of the communist liberators who had little sympathies for the decadent urban societies. As the capitalist world grew increasingly hostile to China's seemingly aggressive foreign policies, namely from its involvement in the Korean War and its support for revolutionary organisations in the Third World, overseas Chinese began to feel themselves more alienated from the mainland. Until the early 1980s with the opening up of China, communist literature was banned to the extent that even singing songs extolling Mao Zedong would invite arrest from the authorities in Singapore. Ironically, it was also under such circumstances that the British colony of Hong Kong and Nationalist Kuo Min Tang (KMT) controlled Taiwan were given the cultural space to develop their indigenous entertainment industries; these were deemed to be considerably less politically coded. The exports from such industries in turn invited little suspicion from the host countries with substantive ethnic Chinese minorities, and this development was crucial in enabling a thriving Cantonese music to reach a global audience. In spite of its seemingly apolitical content, the cultural imports from Hong Kong were not entirely well received in Singapore. Fearing the large crowds from Chinese (usually dialect based) street opera performances, as well as shabby theatres that had characterised the nineteenth-century Singapore cityscape, the British colonial administrators had proscribed shows outside temple premises and inspections were made to ensure that overcrowding did not occur in proper theatres (The National Archives 1988, pp. 21–8).

During the 1950s–1960s, Singapore, like many newly decolonised countries, was searching for a more independent national identity. For the nationalists who were bent on creating an indigenous 'Malayan culture', certain popular cultural imports like rock and roll were thought to lead to the degeneration of the nation. Meanwhile, those inspired by the concept of 'New China' found the cultural products coming from Hong Kong, and ranging from music to films, to be reactionary and feudal 'Yellow culture', opposed to the 'Red' culture that symbolised Communist China (Jones 2001, p. 6). Hence, it was not surprising to see criticisms of the

apparent lack of censorship on 'sexy songstresses' and promiscuous lyrics from Hong Kong. Another threat was the massive urban redevelopment programmes during the 1970s that were removing the traditional venues where Cantonese opera was being performed (Lai 1986, pp. 30–1).

Nevertheless, Cantonese music in Singapore remained largely unaffected. In fact, its popularity soared with the expansion of the mass media from radio and television to cinema. Such expansion enabled Singaporeans to gain more access to the booming Hong Kong industry. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, popular Hong Kong songstress-actresses were frequently invited to perform at the prestigious National Theatre, the Republic's newly established cultural centre, and were even at times received by senior parliamentarians as well.⁵

The 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' and Canto-pop: opposing developments

The genre, however, faced a more formidable challenge from the bureaucrats of the 1970s and 1980s who saw the continued use of dialects as an obstacle to creating a more coherent and uniform society. Though frequently spoken among the ethnic Chinese population, Cantonese was considered as one of the twenty specific dialect groups under the four major categories of Chinese, Indian, Malay and Others (Kuo and Bjorn 1994, pp. 25–7). Since independence in 1965, the state had been pushing for a bilingual language policy of attaining proficiencies in both English, which was considered as a working technical language, and the other three official 'mother tongues' of the main ethnic groups. The emphasis was placed on a comprehensive language system from the schools to the media. By the 1970s, the widespread use of dialects was held to be responsible for the apparent lack of progress in the promotion of bilingualism among the school population especially for the Chinese community.

This led to a series of measures by the government to 'actively discourage' the use of dialects in the public arena, forming the basis of the launch of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1979. Embodied in slogans like 'speak more Mandarin, less dialect' or 'if you are a Chinese, make a statement in Mandarin', the campaign entailed the active propagation of the use of Mandarin in daily life as well as a deliberate move to curb the use of dialects wherever possible (Pakir 1994, p. 79). In fact, the threat of social stigmatisation was also used by the Prime Minister who promulgated that Chinese Singaporeans below the age of forty 'who speak dialect will be last in the queue (in government departments)' (Barr 2000, p. 235).

The first such step was the removal of popular Cantonese programmes from the television and radio stations that were predominantly controlled by the state. Cantonese television serials and theme songs, as well as music variety programmes accompanying them, were phased out by 1981 to the displeasure of even non-Cantonese Singaporeans. They were not only dubbed in Mandarin, their theme songs and soundtracks were also deliberately removed or replaced with totally irrelevant Mandarin tracks. This was a major blow to the consumption of Cantonese music whose popularity had traditionally been dependent on television theme songs being broadcast on a weekly basis in Singapore. Lastly, another significant setback in the 1980s was the cessation of broadcasting by the Republic's local Mandarin television station of Cantonese drama serials, produced by Hong Kong's main

television station, TVB. The singers of the theme songs to many of these serials had previously become household names (Tan 1986).

Canto-pop kingdom

Ironically, the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' in Singapore also coincided with the rise of the phenomenon of Canto-pop in Hong Kong. Although Cantonese popular songs had been produced since the 1950s, their demand remained limited by an audience and industry with an acute sense of cultural inferiority manifested in the preference for more 'refined' Mandarin songs or youthful American rock and roll (Choi 1991, p. 540). Some of the Canto-pop icons in the 1980s like Kenny Bee and Alan Tam started their careers in the 1970s singing either cover versions of Western popular songs or acting in Taiwanese movies.⁶

The scene was reinvigorated during the late 1970s and the early 1980s by both individuals and industry. By the 1970s, television broadcasting was significantly expanding cultural choices in Hong Kong, giving local cultural production, including music, a wider scope (Chan 1993, p. 451). A similar trend took place in radio stations that were starting to provide more airtime for Cantonese songs by the early 1980s (Choi 1991, p. 542). There was also now interest from established record companies, both local and foreign, including the Shaw Brothers, Polygram, Polydor, EMI and BMG. These corporations were competing aggressively to create and meet the demand for Canto-pop songs in a range of forms from providing promotional products to sponsoring music award programmes. Individual contributions to the scene came from three main groups, namely, those associated with covering soundtracks for television and movie programmes, solo male and female vocalists and group acts. The American-trained composer Joseph Khoo and songwriter James Wong considerably boosted the initial popular demand for theme songs of the widely followed television serials both musically and lyrically.

Singers of theme songs who became household names included Adam Cheng, Lisa Wang and Roman Tam. At the same time, there emerged a generation of more independent artists who were moving away from the traditional television soundtracks. Perhaps the pioneer of this generation was Sam Hui who had produced many tracks not associated with television titles. They included not only love ballads, but also witty rhymes spanning themes from social attitudes to current issues like the high cost of living and water shortages.

The period also saw the emergence of rock bands and dance groups that were no longer content with playing merely a supporting role to the pop vocalists. Among the outstanding examples were the five-piece band *Beyond* and the trio *Grasshopper* who used to be support dancers to Hong Kong's pop queen Anita Mui. With a burgeoning industry and new-found vitality, Canto-pop was set to share its popularity with the rest of the Sino-centric world from the newly opened Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in mainland China, through Cantonese-dominated Chinatowns in every city to those countries with a substantial Chinese population like Singapore.

The rapid spread of Canto-pop continues to dazzle international observers. It seems extraordinary that a place as small as Rhode Island with the population of North Carolina could produce music that the entire USA listens to (Corliss 2001). However, the phenomenon is also considered in a more negative fashion, as 'frantically churned out songs with wistful love ballads and dance floor jingles lacking in

originality' (Hawker 2002). As Philippa Hawker suggests, fans in Hong Kong have shocked the world by actually ranking their pop idols above God (who came in ninth behind poll-topping Kelly Chen) as their most admired personalities. This dominance of Hong Kong cultural exports has become so substantial that one observer labelled it as 'marginal imperialism' where for the first time in capitalism a marginal power in the Third World has created a (cultural) empire and became imperialistic itself (Tzann 1998, p. 125).

Popular but discouraged: Canto-pop in Singapore in the 1980s

Since the 1980s the Singapore government has stopped short of the more extreme measures suggested by enthusiasts of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' to ban any medium that would encourage the use of dialects. While Canto-pop and other dialect music programmes were taken off the airwaves, it was never the state's priority to impose any official ban. The main argument was that the dialects were still an important mode of communication for the older generation of Singaporeans and that any forms of overt sanction would be deemed too harsh and insensitive.

Consumption of dialect literature would therefore not be seen as a threat to bilingual policies. This was based on the assumption that younger Singaporeans would eventually have no use for dialects (Lee 2000, p. 179). Hence, it is not surprising that even the night classes in Cantonese music catering for senior citizens are still available in the government-run community centres. Another aspect of Cantonese that has been given official endorsement is Cantonese opera, labelled by the state as a traditional ethnic performance worthy of official endorsement. Thus, independent troupes or Chinese opera institutions have faced few obstacles from government campaigns in their performances (Lai 1986, p. 45).⁷

The phenomenon of the inroad of Canto-pop into Singapore seems to have been underestimated by a government that continued to cling on to the idea that only older people listened to dialect music. The Canto-pop industry had successfully managed to repackage its icons to appeal to a wider audience, especially teenagers, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds. There was also the belief that dialect music would be made less accessible since the state controlled the main media networks. Again, this belief was soon overridden by the advent of the video-cassette recorder (VCR) and the portable audiocassette player; these technologies challenged the state monopoly by providing the public with an alternative form of media communication. This was seen in the proliferation of VCR outlets specialising in the rental of Cantonese drama serials and music stores. Thus, in spite of the official campaigns, the appetite for Canto-pop continued to soar.

Hong Kong artists like Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui who would have been singing in restaurants, old theatres and nightclubs in the late 1970s, found themselves performing exclusively in large converted conference halls by the 1980s (Soh 1995). Although it was rare for Canto-pop tracks to be publicly aired in major shopping malls and public events, one could not ignore the sheer publicity of Canto-pop stars in both the English and Chinese media, from product endorsements and the release of new albums to stories about their private lives. Two areas in particular bore testimony to the popularity of Canto-pop, namely the vibrant fan clubs that made themselves felt during concerts by visiting Hong Kong stars, and the creation of a separate Cantonese section in the displays of major stores and other music outlets (Soh 1995).

So, the 1980s was a period when Singapore's unsympathetic policies discouraging the use of dialects stood starkly in contrast to the newfound popularity of Canto-pop imported from Hong Kong. Technology, industry and the market had in fact permitted Canto-pop to strike an uneasy relationship with a Singaporean officialdom bent on eliminating the use of dialects. Interestingly, the fear among some circles of the possibility of the universal English language replacing other ethnic languages and dialects has not been realised.

On the contrary, while English is considered the language of the workplace, Chinese Singaporeans have continued to show their preference for Mandarin or dialect for less formalised social settings. Significantly, record sales from Hong Kong and Taiwan accounted for 44 per cent of the \$128 million (US \$86 million) compact discs sold in Singapore in 1994, up from 38 per cent in 1992. Although no figures have been released by the record industries subsequently, it is expected that the regional acts have now overtaken their Western counterparts (Nathan 1994). This development highlights the persistent significance of dialects in Singapore that could not merely be replaced by an official language of Mandarin or other languages imposed from above. It was a realisation of such persistence that set the agenda for a shift in official attitudes towards dialects which would in turn affect the transmission of Canto-pop.

The 1990s to the present: from Canto-pop to East Asian-pop

We should not suppress dialects, but we cannot promote individual dialects because there are too many of them. How dialects develop here depends not just on the evolution of Singapore society, but how much need there is for them in the larger Asian region. And dialects are not going to die in China. (Singapore's Minister for Information and the Arts Brigadier General George Yeo, *The Straits Times*, 9 April 1994)

The relatively poor performance of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) characterised by the loss of four constituencies during Singapore's 1991 general elections (compared to one in 1981 and two in 1984) marked the turning point of the government's bilingual policies (Gobinathan 1995, p. 73). Among one of the reasons cited for the poor results was the appeal of dialects which the opposition candidates used to reach out to their Chinese voters. It was argued that the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' had alienated a large section of the working-class ethnic Chinese who spoke predominately in the various dialects. The resilience of the dialect identity was also evident in the refusal of many parents to heed state pressures to register their children's names in school according to the *Hanyu Pinyin* ('Mandarin pronunciation') versions (Gobinathan 1995, pp. 25–6).

This paved the way for a relaxation of the attacks on the use of Chinese dialects. Such relaxation did not face active opposition as by the 1990s Mandarin was largely perceived to have replaced dialects as the common form of communication for the Chinese, from the household to the marketplace. Close to 60 per cent of Singaporean Chinese children speak Mandarin at home, followed by 36 per cent who speak English, a rise from 23 per cent in 1990. Only about 4 per cent of these children are speaking dialects at home (Singapore Census of Population 2000, p. 3). The focus of the bilingual policy by the 1990s also shifted to the Anglicised section (commonly termed as 'English educated') of Chinese Singaporeans with little inclination to learn their 'mother tongue'.

This changing attitude was reflected in the liberalisation of the television cable networks that permitted the transmission of Hong Kong's TVB's International Cantonese programmes and Music Television to a Singapore audience in spite of protest from some circles (Ong 1995). In the words of a Singapore cable video manager, the relaxation of restrictions on dialect programmes is aimed at 'boosting the knowledge of Chinese culture and helping the young to communicate with their grandparents' (Chin 1997A). Broadcasting of news reports in the various dialects targeted at older Chinese Singaporeans then led to demands from their younger counterparts for Canto-pop songs as well (Er 1997). All such liberalisation, however, created a state of reassessment of the whole premise of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign'. The President of the Chinese Federation of Clan Associations said 'we forget that it has been a sacrifice for those in the older generation. I feel it is time to give back the dialects which were taken away from them' (Leow 1997). This perhaps most appropriately summed up the mood.

Nonetheless, the government was quick to reiterate that it was not giving up on the 'achievements' of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' and that it was neither supporting nor suppressing the use of dialect. Responding to calls to broadcast more dialect programmes in the early 1990s in the mainstream media, the Prime Minister said that audiences should just rent a video for their private viewing instead (Goh 1991).⁸ On the other hand, concerning the music industry, the Arts Minister has recently advised local Chinese singers aspiring to break into the Chinese market to 'throw in dialect, and reach out to China's provinces' (Leow 2002).

Being Cantonese, Mandarin and Asian, at the same time

While Singapore was softening its hard-line position against dialect groups, Hong Kong was at the same time beginning to move out of its staunchly localised linguistic world view. This attitude had been manifested in the Canto-pop industry in the 1980s which paid little attention to appealing to a non-Cantonese-speaking East Asian market. A paradigmatic change began to take shape in the late 1980s affected by larger historic forces and local market conditions. Although Hong Kong residents were aware of the eventual takeover by China, their rude awakening came following the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. Shocked and angered by the brutal suppression of the Chinese student demonstrators by the Chinese government, Hong Kong public opinion began to rally round their Chinese compatriots. Prominent Canto-pop artists were also involved in the rallies, contributing songs to express the mood of the colony (de Kloet 2001, p. 123).

This climate of patriotism spurred the subsequent trend towards producing Mandarin tracks to express solidarity with the motherland. Prior to 1989, patriotic songs, mainly sung by Roman Tam, were part of pugilistic drama serials and were based on an abstract concept of patriotism for an imagined China rather than the Peoples' Republic. The patriotic mood was expressed in a different light by 1997 as Hong Kong artists churned out songs celebrating the return of the British colony to China.

To some extent, the outburst of patriotism by Canto-pop artists was meant to gain the approval of the Communist authorities so that such artists might continue to prosper in the colony after the handover. This was seen in the case of Andy Lau who for a brief moment in the 1990s turned from being one of the four 'heavenly Kings' (the other three were Leon Lai, Aaron Kwok and Jacky Cheung) into a

patriot coming up with tracks about loyalty and pride in Chinese civilisation. Hong Kong also contributed to the preparations for China's bid to host the 2008 Olympics Games in July 2001 when Jacky Cheung was flown to Beijing to sing as part of the performances to drum up support and enthusiasm for the bid.

Politics and patriotism aside, the need to move beyond the colony was also driven by the saturation of the local market. An intense decade of Canto-pop had jaded the Hong Kong audience considerably and stretched the market to the maximum. New ideas and styles were needed for the Hong Kong consumers and new audiences were needed to break the saturation (Chung 1997). Early attempts at breaking into the English-speaking markets were stalled as artists like Alan Tam and Jacky Cheung ended up being poor cover versions of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Mandarin, on the other hand, was linguistically a smoother alternative with the Taiwanese and Chinese markets already waiting. Hence, in no time, many Canto-pop artists began to learn to converse in Mandarin and recorded either Mandarin versions of their Cantonese tracks or made albums completely in Mandarin.

Pop-idols like Aaron Kwok who made his name in Taiwan took the lead while others including Jacky Cheung and Sammi Cheung caught up quickly. Among those who have had great difficulty in becoming fluent in Mandarin is Ekin Cheng who nonetheless managed to produce both Mandarin and Cantonese tracks for the theme songs of the blockbuster movies of 'Stormriders' (*FengYun*) and 'A Man Called Hero' (*Zhonghua Yingxiong*). Perhaps the most outstanding artist of the decade has been the Hong Kong-born Coco Lee, whose trans-national experiences in Taiwan and America have allowed her to release albums in Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Canto-pop's forays into the Northeast Asian markets of Japan and Korea were also evident when the band *Beyond* produced a Japanese edition of their album in appreciation of the support of their Japanese fans. A similar trend was happening in Taiwan and China which was vying for the Hong Kong market, in particular the film industry which is now well established and internationally acclaimed. Various non-Cantonese artists like China-born Faye Wong, Emil Chow and Wang Jie from Taiwan have started recording tracks and albums in Cantonese as well.

What is exciting about the opening up of attitudes in Hong Kong and Singapore is the fact that this has been the beginning of a process of cultural cross-fertilisation and integration of the various genres of popular music in East Asia that were formally handicapped by language barriers. In the case of Singapore, this new trend added vibrancy to the Canto-pop scene for most consumers and provided hope for aspiring stars.

In the first place, the synergies of Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien (another major Chinese dialect in Singapore) genres provided more access and choices for those who would otherwise be turned away by another linguistic medium. As sales figures are not publicly available on a long-term basis, it is difficult to determine whether the consumption of Cantonese songs in Singapore has been reduced in favour of Mandarin versions. Industry sources, however, have pointed to an almost 'parallel growth' between Mandarin and Cantonese music, citing sales of 300,000 for one of Sally Yeh's albums in Cantonese and 500,000 for the version in Mandarin (Levin 1993). Album sales have however plunged both in Hong Kong by about 30 per cent and in Southeast Asia by about 80 per cent since the economic crisis struck after the city was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Observers have attri-

buted the collapse of music sales to a combination of factors, including reduced consumer spending, intellectual piracy, as well as the sudden upsurge of prominent Taiwanese artists in the Singapore and Malaysian market (Lee, S. 2002B).

Another indication of the vibrancy of the scene comes from the ticket sales for Canto-pop concerts in Singapore. Aaron Kwok, who has been playing to full-house audiences in stadium-size venues in Singapore, has continued to attract a capacity crowd of 8,000 in his latest concert in the Republic (Lee, S. 2002A). The more surprising fact was that veteran artist Anita Mui who sang and spoke only in Cantonese in her Singapore performance also drew a capacity crowd similar in size to that of the supposedly multilingual Kwok (Chia 2002).

Hybridity is also evidenced in the way that audiences now have room to explore other dialect versions of the track involved. Hence, a Mandarin-speaking Singaporean fan of Sammi Cheng and Andy Hui would not mind listening to the Cantonese version of tracks to gain a more 'authentic experience' from Hong Kong artists. In local Chinese-dominated karaoke lounges too, participants and audiences are expected not just to be familiar with a mixture of Mandarin, dialect (mainly Hokkien and Cantonese), Japanese and English songs, but to be able to sing them as well. As an executive in a Hong Kong music company puts it: 'Thanks to Karaoke culture, Cantonese music has been most successful at travelling to other Chinese markets and the popularity of Hong Kong idols is passed on to the younger generations' (Levin 1993). In regard to retail trends, consumer fads change periodically between Canto-pop, Mando-pop (Taiwanese popular songs), J-Pop (Japanese) and K-Pop (Korean) demonstrating a high level of cultural fluidity as listeners are not strictly bound by their own linguistic categories.⁹ As such, it may be premature to gauge the strength of the various East Asian genres in the Singaporean market based on only record and concert sales or the rising fortunes of individual acts.

The trend towards fluidity has also affected the layout of the shelves in the retail outlets where the categories of Cantonese, Hokkien and Mandarin tracks have been merged under the general umbrella of 'Asian music', a category also covering Korean and Japanese popular music. In addition, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, Canto-pop was so well entrenched that nightclubs, karaoke lounges and discotheques catering specially for Cantonese songs were being established all over the island. Among the more prominent ones were *Canto* and *97* Discotheques, which appealed to a young adult Chinese-speaking crowd. However, *Canto* and *97* not only played Canto-pop tracks, but also remixes of Mandarin and English popular songs (Lim 1992).

The technology factor has also played a significant part in the spread of Canto-pop, interacting with linguistic policies and impacting on other genres of music in Singapore. The proliferation of the mass market for compact discs (CDs), video-CDs (VCDs) and digital video discs (DVD) has also made Canto-pop albums more readily available to a larger audience as seen in the incessant promotional sales drives taking place in the shopping malls and streets of Singapore. There is also the resurrection of the jukebox in the 1990s, banned in the 1960s as part of the government's efforts to eliminate the 'decadent' rock and roll culture that swept the world in the 1950s. Located mostly in the eating outlets, the jukeboxes are stocked with a wide variety of tracks ranging from the latest hits to old dialect songs.

What is particularly interesting is that the new digital technology has brought about a revival of older Cantonese music since the 1970s as nostalgic Singaporeans, whose old records and cassettes had been worn by time, could purchase the newly

digitalised versions. Another novel feature of the digital technology has been the 'dual sound' system that allows for the switching of the language medium between the original and the dubbed versions, thus giving consumers more alternatives to the Cantonese dialect and enabling them to explore further the music genres.¹⁰ Lastly, the advent of the Internet and the fusion of audio technology with home computers enabled Canto-pop tracks to be either played from disc drives or downloaded online.

As a result, Singaporeans are also seeing their Hong Kong stars more frequently promoting their new albums and movies in shopping malls or cinemas of the Republic. This could be attributed to the fact that Cantonese artists too are more confident of their Mandarin. Andy Lau, for example, has made more visits and held more concerts in Singapore. In the mid-1980s, Canto-pop king Alan Tam spoke in Cantonese to a rather baffled but nonetheless supportive crowd during his concerts and promotions there.

One of Hong Kong's teen heart-throbs in the 1990s, Nicolas Tse, on the other hand, drew wide cheers from the crowd when he tried to reach out to the audience by speaking Mandarin. Such competence in Mandarin is crucial in order for Canto-pop stars to gain a legitimate foothold in the Singapore market. Success here can be seen in their increasing appearance in many official charity shows or celebrity awards. These events, be they organised by charity groups like the National Kidney Foundation or Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), by the media, like Star Search or Radio Awards, or by institutions like the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), play a vital role in making the continued presence of Canto-pop felt. A Hong Kong artist who was permitted to sing one of the popular theme songs from a Cantonese opera album in a recent charity show received tremendous applause from the audience which included a Cabinet Minister (who was not a Cantonese speaker), and donations poured in during the course of her performance (*The Straits Times*, 15 April 2002). Such appearances would have been unthinkable during the 1980s when it would have been impossible for Hong Kong artists familiar only with the Cantonese dialect to perform.

The need for Canto-pop artists to break into new music markets in Singapore by having a competent grasp of Mandarin has become ubiquitous in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. Just as Cantonese speakers like Nicolas Tse need to speak to their Singaporean audience in Mandarin, in Hong Kong, Mandarin speakers like Faye Wong have to communicate in Cantonese to their fans.

Chasing the rainbow to Taiwan and Hong Kong

The regional networks in the Chinese popular market have also enabled aspiring Singaporean artists to move out of their constrained markets to a larger regional context. This has been coupled with the prejudiced perception of consumers that home-grown talent is less credible than that of their foreign counterparts. In spite of high publicity from the media, the more popular local artists could only sell 20,000–30,000 copies of their albums compared to 250,000 by their Hong Kong counterparts (Chin 1996b). An alternative Chinese music scene known as *Xinyao* ('Singapore ballads') or Mandarin songs composed and performed by Singaporean youths based on their local narratives has not been able to capture the domestic market significantly, although its artists received state, media and industry support.

Unlike conventional alternative music scenes, the *Xinyao* movement defined

success in terms of being able to enter larger mainstream markets in Hong Kong or Taiwan or composing songs for the major pop artists in the two cities. Even local artists have admitted that 'given the choice, we would rather our home-grown singers sing these songs. But frankly, it is these overseas stars who will be able to promote our songs, not the local singers yet' (Chin 1994A). In several awards sessions held by Singaporean Radio Stations, the audience were evidently showing more support for their Hong Kong and Taiwanese stars over that of local celebrities (Chin 1994B). Hence, many artists have been given the impression that their status and popularity would only be legitimised if they could manage to attain stardom in a larger regional market.¹¹

The entry to the Hong Kong (and Taiwanese market) has, however, been difficult due to the perception in these two places that Singaporean singers and albums are poorer in quality (Guan 1989). Nonetheless, a number of Singaporean artists in the 1990s did manage to gain regional celebrity status, namely Kit Chan, Mavis Hee, Michelle Saram, Eric Moo, Jimmy Lin, Tanya Chua and Stephanie Sun. One of Hee's tracks in fact topped the Hong Kong Cantonese charts (Sim 1997). Tanya Chua's self-titled Mandarin album sold only 8,000 copies in Singapore but recorded a high of 100,000 copies in Taiwan and managed to break into the Hong Kong Top Ten pop music charts (Seah 1999). What was more astounding was that some of these artists were the first generation of children who grew up with the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign'. Most of them adjusted readily to Cantonese, while others came from families with strong attachment to the retention of dialects.

To underline this pride, Kit Chan had mentioned that her mother, who was indifferent to her Mandarin albums, was elated with her Cantonese release (Chin 1997B). Her mother's statement needs to be seen in the light of surveys indicating that of all the main dialect groups, the Cantonese have kept the strongest hold on their dialect (Lee 2000, p. 6). According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, despite the general decline in the use of dialect, there is still an estimated 36 per cent of Cantonese who converse in dialect at home. This has been attributed to not only the constant influx of Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong and Malaysia, but also their ability to draw strength from the thriving mass media market from Hong Kong, including Canto-pop (Teo 2001).

Transcending the fabrication, re-staging the *chinoiserie*?

The changing positions of Cantonese music in Singapore and its fusion into the larger genre of 'Asian' music has challenged the entire premise of Chinese identity embodied in the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign'. As Hodder has highlighted, 'Ethnicity and Chineseness are convenient fabrications – explanations of something which is perceived to be anachronistic and restrictive, and which therefore serves as a useful opposite which is cosmopolitan and created' (Hodder 1996, p. 260). The continued reception of 'less Chinese' dialect music in Singapore serves to refute the straitjacketed notions in campaign materials that associate 'Chineseness' with simply a proficiency in Mandarin language and the formalistic Chinese arts associated with elite cultural practices. In addition, instead of the binary opposition, it has highlighted the fact that various dialect forms could co-exist with the official languages established by the state.

These trends also show that Singaporean listeners are not just content with the domination of a monolithic bilingual market of English-based American popu-

lar music or Mandarin songs. What is desired is a variety of sounds that serves not just to appeal to different audiences or expressions, but to legitimise their individual and collective experiences as well. In a way, without dominating the market at the expense of other genres, Cantonese music has served to be part of this variety, helping, in particular, ethnic Chinese Singaporeans who have little affinity with the stereotypical definitions of 'Chineseness' prescribed by the state, search for a more luxuriant Asian identity (Ang 2000, pp. 281–300).¹²

In addition, the Hong Kong music scene has also linked the republic to a growing trans-national social and cultural network where Canto-pop is consumed from the Cantonese-dominated Chinatowns to non-Cantonese and occasionally non-Chinese fans in the region stretching from Japan to Indonesia.¹³ Since the 1960s, Singaporean artists have used the music and entertainment infrastructure in Hong Kong as a medium to reach a wider world, while for their Hong Kong counterparts, the predominantly ethnic Chinese republic has served more as one of the lucrative markets for their records. This regional music industry looks set to be increasingly heterogeneous as attempts by traditionally non-Sino-centric players from Thailand and India to be part of the East Asian music market become more vigorous. The post-war pioneers of this trend were Tracy Huang, Teresa Teng and Pan Di Hua who created a trans-national market with their songs sung in Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and even French and Spanish. By the twenty-first century, the trend has been further accelerated by the success of the Thai duo 'China Dolls' with the Thai and Mandarin versions of their releases (Crispin 2001) as well as the rising popularity of Indian Bollywood music in Japan (Power and Mazumdar 2000, pp. 42–8.). The region too has also been trying to develop a more distinct version of Hip-hop based on a more recognisably Asian narrative as seen in the latest collaborations between Hong Kong, Korean and Japanese DJs, known as *Respect for da Asian Chopsticks Hip Hop* (Warner Music, Hong Kong, 2001). By transcending the state-prescribed notions of ethnicity, the consumption of Canto-pop has enabled Singaporean consumers to be positioned in a larger Asian context. In this connection, a comment by George Lipsitz is highly pertinent:

Like other forms of mass communication, popular music simultaneously undermines and reinforces our sense of place. Music that originally emerged from concrete historical experiences in places with clearly identifiable geographical boundaries now circulates as an interchangeable commodity marketed to consumers all over the globe. (Lipsitz 1994, p. 4)

It is, however, too soon to celebrate the sort of hybridity created in the trans-national music network of Canto-pop without some qualification. For musical exchange here has actually been more successful in cutting across nation state borders and cultural policies than it has been in breaking down entrenched cultural and historical traditions within those states. The fact that the production and consumption of Canto-pop is still largely confined to Chinese audiences attests to the insular characteristics of the genre. Peterson observes that music may cater for people who share a common aesthetic based on group identity and centred on the notions of ethnicity and language. 'Such music evokes a particular group identity, but may attract those who may not be the members of the same iconic group' (Peterson 2001, p. 128). Canto-pop has plugged the Singaporean into a group identity that is still largely Chinese or 'East Asian' in general, though not necessarily centred on the political boundaries of contemporary China itself.

The peripheral popular music genres from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and

recently South Korea belong essentially to the same ethno-linguistic traditions based on the Chinese calligraphic script, albeit with differing cultural experiences. In spite of the claims to versatility by scholars, Chinese music, including its variations from Hong Kong and Taiwan, is still meant to 'play some very serious roles in Chinese communities, maintaining important links to the past. It symbolises Chinese identity to the point where many have a hard time believing that non-Chinese could have an equal interest in it' (Samson 2001).

Ultimately, it is this lack of sustained interest by mainstream non-Chinese consumers that makes claims to hybridity in Chinese music premature. In Singapore, the link to the larger Canto-pop industry means little, particularly for the non-Chinese population, namely the ethnic Malays and Indians who continue to follow their respective music scenes from Indonesia, Malaysia and India. These are scenes that also remain alien to most ethnic Chinese Singaporeans. Conversely, the availability of such a wide but separate network has allowed Chinese Singaporeans to ignore closer regional music genres, be they locally produced music or those emanating from the neighbouring capitals of Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Manila. Hence, by riding the Canto-pop network, the Singaporean Chinese chooses to leapfrog from his immediate vicinity to be part of an imaginary 'oriental' cultural sphere.

These sentiments are even supported by some Chinese intellectuals who have stressed: 'The power of (Chinese) popular culture is evident in the large following of the late Teresa Teng and now Ah Mei across the Taiwan Straits and in other Chinese speaking communities. Such shared interests are important in fostering a sense of community' (Leong 1999). However, Wee has cautioned that such positioning actually serves to re-stage *chinoiserie* as a way of re-envisioning a national and a regional selfhood. Echoing Gerald Segal's critique, he considers that 'for Asians to believe that they constitute a single civilisation is a dangerous illusion' (Wee 2001, p. 263). This is to agree with Will Straw's point when he talks about music's usual tendency to reinforce 'social and racial insularity' (Straw 1997, pp. 64–5).

Conclusion: limited hybridities instead of limited pidgin-type patois

In explaining how popular music helps in understanding 'a particular socio-historical moment', Jones observes 'when movement is invoked, it is largely used to denote a dispersion and diffusion in values . . . If not for those movements, popular music would hardly exist in the forms in which we know it'. (Jones 2002, pp. 213–14). In this connection, the rise of the Hong Kong entertainment industry, rapid advances in music technology, growing regional cultural networks, as well as the interventionist language policies of the post-colonial Singapore state are key recent phenomena. As a result, a more cosmopolitan, trans-national and hybrid new 'movement' is apparently reshaping the otherwise historically peripheral cultural landscape as reflected in the Singaporean context. Still, this conclusion could be premature. Canto-pop may have posed an effective challenge to Singapore's 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' and have helped its citizens relate to a larger regional discourse, but these effects have not been felt beyond the traditional Sino-centric world that Chinese music encompasses.

Rather, the new network could have been responsible for shutting out Singaporeans from popular music genres in Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent

which are considered to be non-Chinese and therefore excluded from the mainstream.¹⁴ Hence, while the Canto-pop influence in Singapore may not be a 'limited pidgin-type patois' described by the Singaporean authorities, the hybridities which its trans-national networks have established may only be limited generally to those who call themselves Chinese or East Asians. For the moment at least the promise of a more porous and diverse cultural framework in the region remains latent rather than being an imminent prospect. The combination of ethnically based commercial networks, regional entertainment hubs and advances in audio-visual technologies, not to mention diasporic communities, seems on the face of it to make the perfect formula for a new cultural hybridity. Yet, it is actually this very combination of factors which has confined hybridity, making it much more a local than a global phenomenon, one which still serves to reinforce the cultural identities of subjects shaped by 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation.

Endnotes

1. *The Satanic Verses* continues to be banned in Singapore reportedly for offending the sensitivities of the Muslim community in the Republic.
2. According to the recent census of population on language, there are an estimated 400,000 ethnic Chinese in Singapore who are classified as Cantonese, making them the third largest Chinese dialect group in the republic after the Teochews and the Hokkiens (Leow 2001, p. 43).
3. For example, the Chinese Communist Party has categorised all folk music within the Chinese provinces as 'national music' as part of the effort to dilute strong local identities (Samson 2001).
4. During the mid-nineteenth century, a Cantonese opera performer Lee Mun Mou led an alliance of opera troupes in an uprising against the Manchu government at the same time as the Taiping rebellion from 1844–1860 (Smith 2000).
5. For instance, in 1966 six prominent Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers/actresses made their appearance in the Southeast Asian Arts Festival held at the National Theatre. The Hong Kong representatives included Fung Sor Bor, Ng Fung Kwan and Mah Ying Sing, who were warmly received by enthusiastic fans in Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 20 August 1966). It is not certain whether these celebrities actually performed in Mandarin or Cantonese as the language medium was not mentioned in the media archives, nor were older Singaporeans whom the author queried able to recall. Yet, it is highly probable that Cantonese songs could have been sung by the Hong Kong performers given the fact that Cantonese songs were available during the 1960s in spite of the dominance of Mandarin-based music. It is also possible that given their unfamiliarity with Mandarin, the Hong Kong singers would have communicated with their audience in the Cantonese dialect.
6. Alan Tam and Kenny Bee were once members of a band called The Wynners who played cover versions of English popular tracks during the 1970s.
7. In fact, since the early 1990s, the Chinese Theatre Circle, known to promote Cantonese opera very vigorously in Singapore, has been holding annual international Cantonese opera festivals in collaboration with the government-based community centres.
8. This policy of exclusion has raised some displeasure from Singaporeans like popular music critic Chris Ho who highlighted the inconsistencies in radio programmes where Japanese, Korean and Latin music could be liberally broadcasted, but not Cantonese and Hokkien songs. He also complained that Cantonese opera singers speak in Mandarin the minute they stopped singing, suggesting a self-imposed censorship of Chinese Singaporeans of their own dialects (Ho 2001, p. 60).
9. Nonetheless, the music market in Singapore is still largely separated along ethnic lines when it comes to the consumption of ethnically based popular music. Most mainstream Chinese music fans would, for example, find Malay and Tamil/Hindi music too unfamiliar to venture into (Wells and Lee 1995, p. 31).
10. This dual sound system has ironically been applied only to imported Japanese and Korean rather than to Hong Kong music and other television programmes by the mainstream television channels in Singapore (Liew 2002).
11. But it must be noted that this trans-national venture has not been unprecedented. Several

- Singaporean personalities who followed their dreams of stardom to Hong Kong, like Poon Sow Keng, The Quests, Liu Wenzheng and Roy Li, became huge household names in Hong Kong during the 1960s (Chin 1996A).
12. In fact, an indication of this search was a controversial survey which revealed that about one quarter of the young Chinese interviewed said that they would prefer to belong to another race, mainly Caucasians and Japanese (Lim 1999).
 13. De Kloet had observed that 'in the year 2000, three of the most popular Taiwanese pop stars (Elva, Coco Lee and Lee Hom) either had been born in the US or had grown up there. This might point to the growing symbolic importance of trans-national Chinese identities for the articulation of a specific locality or region (de Kleot 2001, p. 37).
 14. This exclusion does not apply to popular music from the Anglo-American world which continues to command a dominant share of the global market (Wells and Lee 1995, p. 40).

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