

Hua Yue :
The Chinese Orchestra
in Contemporary Singapore

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Summary

Hua Yue: The Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore

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The purpose of this study is to construct a comprehensive and authentic picture of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore by piecing its history and identifying the social characteristics and relationships within Chinese Orchestras (COs) in Singapore. Specifically, the dynamic interaction of the structural characteristics and the social processes within and without the COs, as well as its impact on the musicians, the orchestra and the quality of their work are analysed. This thesis shows that the formal structures, roles and tacit rules of interaction have not enabled COs in Singapore to produce music as a collective successfully and harmoniously. The disunity within the COs can be attributed to several factors identified in the research process. At the individual level, many of the professional CO musicians perceive that they are working in an oppressive environment characterised by excessive work with little creative stimulus and pay. Even CO musicians at the amateur level, especially school CO musicians, are not fulfilled creatively due to the absence of a nurturing learning environment. They lack enjoyable performance opportunities and suffer from stressful preparations for concerts and competitions. The CO musicians' unhappiness is also exacerbated by high levels of competitiveness and cliquishness within the COs. So instead of a unified CO, each CO is divided into micro-communities that are at odds with one another. Finally, external forces such as governmental agencies, schools and the general public exert a considerable influence over the existence and the development of these COs. Because of their focus on results, prestige and image, they have fostered an environment that is antithetical to the cultivation of love of CO among CO musicians at the amateur or professional levels.

Hua Yue – The Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore

Thesis Outline

Preface xvi

- A. Background to this Study xvi
 - 1. My Background in the CO xvii
- B. Note on Romanisation and on Chinese Terminology xx
- C. Acknowledgements xxi

1. Introduction 1

- A. My Research Subject Matter and Method 1
 - 1. Research Topic 1
 - 2. Research Method: Fieldwork and Research 1
- B. Multicultural Ethnomusicology and the Native Researcher-Practitioner Approach 4
 - 1. Multicultural Ethnomusicology 4
 - 2. Rationale of Choosing Multicultural Ethnomusicology as Research Paradigm 5
 - 3. Being a Native Practitioner-Researcher: Advantages and Disadvantages 7
 - a. Advantages 7
 - i. Relationship with the CO Community as an Established CO Musician 7
 - ii. Ease of Access to Information 9
 - iii. Familiarity with Language and Terminology 9
 - iv. Motivation of Social Purpose 10
 - b. Disadvantages 11
 - i. Susceptibility to Subjective Bias 12
 - ii. Ethical Concerns 12
 - iii. Identity Conflict between my Roles as Native Practitioner and Ethnomusicological Researcher 14

| | |
|---|----|
| iv. Barrier of Seniority in Access to Information | 14 |
| v. Over-familiarity with CO environment | 15 |
| vi. Negative social aspects in fieldwork | 16 |
| C. Structure of Dissertation | 17 |

Section I – Historical Development 20

II. Historical Development of Chinese Orchestras 21

| | |
|---|----|
| A. Introduction | 21 |
| B. History of the Modern Chinese Orchestra | 23 |
| 1. Origins | 23 |
| a. Beginnings of the Modern Chinese Orchestra | 24 |
| 2. The Formative Years | 28 |
| a. Cultural Revolution and Impact on Chinese Orchestras | 35 |
| b. The Revival of the Chinese Orchestra | 36 |
| 3. Creating the New Wave | 40 |
| a. The Chinese Orchestra Today | 41 |
| 4. Chinese Orchestras Beyond Mainland China | 44 |
| C. Conclusion | 47 |

III. *Hua Yue* – The Chinese Orchestra in Singapore 49

| | |
|--|----|
| A. Introduction | 49 |
| B. Background Information | 49 |
| 1. The Government and Society of Singapore | 49 |
| a. The Musical and Cultural Setting in Singapore | 52 |
| b. Music Education in Singapore | 56 |
| C. The Chinese Orchestra in Singapore | 58 |
| 1. Historical Background | 58 |
| a. British Colonial Days (1826-1942) | 58 |
| b. The 1950s: Formation of Chinese Ensembles, Precursor of the Chinese Orchestra | 61 |
| c. The First Chinese Orchestras in Singapore: Political and Non-Political Challenges | 64 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 2. Formative Years | 66 |
| a. 1960s: Early Government Patronage and Cultural Exchanges of Chinese Orchestras | 67 |
| b. The First Chinese Music Competition | 67 |
| 3. The Period of Stabilisation and Growth | 70 |
| a. Establishment of COs and Emergence of Full-time Chinese Musicians | 70 |
| b. Influence of Professional Musicians from Overseas on CO Music Scene in Singapore | 71 |
| c. Accessibility and Impact of Chinese Orchestral Recordings | 72 |
| d. Government Assistance | 73 |
| 4. The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra | 74 |
| 5. The People's Association Chinese Orchestra | 79 |
| D. Contemporary Society | 88 |
| 1. The Singapore Chinese Orchestra | 89 |
| 2. National Chinese Music Competition and Graded Examinations | 102 |
| a. National Chinese Music Competition | 102 |
| b. Graded Examinations | 103 |
| 3. Amateur Chinese Orchestras – School and Non-School Chinese Orchestras | 104 |
| a. School Chinese Orchestras | 104 |
| i. Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra | 105 |
| ii. CO as ECAs and CCAs | 106 |
| iii. Impact of Competitions and Examinations on School Chinese Orchestras | 107 |
| b. Non-School Chinese Orchestras | 108 |
| i. Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra | 109 |
| ii. Singapore Broadcasting Centre Chinese Orchestra (City Chinese Orchestra) | 110 |
| iii. Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra | 111 |
| E. Conclusion | 112 |

Section II – Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore 113

IV. Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore 114

- A. Introduction 114
- B. 4.1 - Formal Structures, Roles and Tacit Rules of Interaction 119
 - 1. Formal Structure and Roles 120
 - a. Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) 120
 - b. Amateur and School Orchestras 123
 - c. The Amateur and Professional Divide 126
 - 2. Tacit Rules of Interaction 127
 - a. Definitions of *Guanxi* and *Ganqing* 127
 - b. *Ganqing* between Equals 129
 - c. *Ganqing* in Hierarchical Relationships 130
 - d. Rituals of Respect for Seniority 131
 - e. Utilitarian Ramifications of *Guanxi* and *Ganqing* 133
- C. 4.2 - Motivation and Agenda of Individual Musicians 139
 - 1. Pursuit of Creative Growth as Musician 139
 - a. Professional CO Musicians 140
 - i. Impact of Diminished Musicians' Creative Impulse on SCO 142
 - b. Amateur CO Musicians 144
 - i. School CO Musicians 148
 - 2. Pursuit of CO as a Livelihood 152
 - a. Throsby's Extended Creativity Models and Its Problems 152
 - b. Inadequacy of Salary of Professional Musicians 155
 - i. Supplementary Income 1: Teaching Schools and Private Students 156
 - ii. Supplementary Income 2: Repairing and Sales of CO Instruments 160
 - iii. Supplementary Income 3: Playing Gigs 161
 - c. Some Conclusions on the Tension between Economic and Creative Stimuli 162
 - 3. Pursuit of Reputation and Prestige 163

| | |
|--|------------|
| a. Professional Musicians | 164 |
| b. Amateur and School Musicians | 166 |
| i. Pursuit of CO for CCA points | 167 |
| D. 4.3 - Social Relationships in the Chinese Orchestra | 169 |
| 1. Hierarchy and Respect | 169 |
| a. Impact of Good and Bad Examples of Authority | 169 |
| b. Relative Power Disparity between Musicians from Different Orchestras | 172 |
| 2. A Competitive Culture | 173 |
| 3. Existence of Cliques | 175 |
| E. 4.4 - Impact of External Forces on Chinese Orchestras | 179 |
| 1. Professional Chinese Orchestras | 179 |
| a. Government and Related Agencies | 179 |
| 2. Amateur and School Chinese Orchestras | 183 |
| a. The Ministry of Education | 183 |
| b. The National Arts Council | 185 |
| c. School Administrative Leadership and Competitions | 186 |
| d. Singapore Youth Festival Central Judging | 188 |
| e. Graded Examinations | 189 |
| 3. The General Public and the COs | 193 |
| F. Conclusion | 196 |
| V. Conclusion | 198 |
| A. Introduction | 198 |
| 1. Summary of Thesis | 198 |
| 2. My Reflections on the Research Findings | 200 |
| B. Being Researcher - Native Practitioner and Implications | 202 |
| C. Applications of My Research Study and Future Research | 205 |
| VI. Appendix | 209 |
| VII. Glossary | 211 |
| VIII. References | 222 |

List of Illustrations

Maps

- 3.1 Location Map of Singapore 50

Figures

- 2.1 Chinese Orchestra Seating Plan 1 43
 2.2 Chinese Orchestra Seating Plan 2 43
 4.1 Power Structure of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) 119
 4.2 Power Structure of Amateur and School Orchestras 122

Photos

1. With Goh Ek Meng, March 2007, Singapore ix
 2. With Yu Liangmo, May 2007, Beijing ix
 3. Interviewing Toh Koon Swee, March 2007, Singapore x
 4. Peng Xiuwen (Quek 2002:330) x
 5. Early Singaporean Chinese Ensemble (Goh 1998:2) xi
 6. Taorong Performance (Goh 1998:7) xi
 7. The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (Goh 1998:37) xii
 8. Zheng Sisen (Quek 2002:288) xii
 9. Li Xueling (Quek 2002:76) xiii
 10. Ng Tai Kong (Quek 2002:76) xiii
 11. Ku Lap Man (Quek 2002:290) xiv
 12. Hu Bingxu (Quek 2002:168) xiv
 13. Qu Chunquan (Quek 2002:345) xv
 14. Yeh Tsung (Quek 2002:84) xv



1. With Goh Ek Meng, March 2007, Singapore



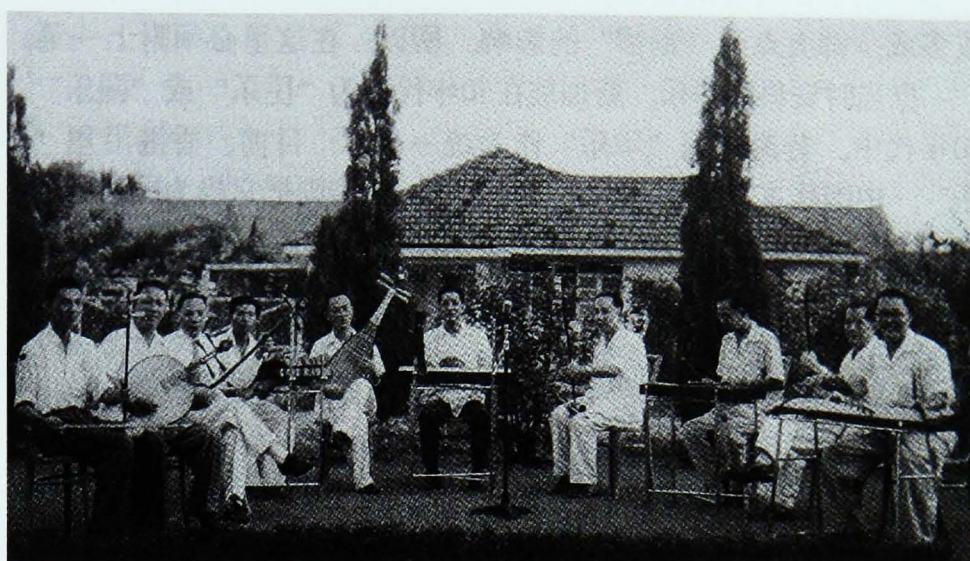
2. With Yu Liangmo, May 2007, Beijing



3. Interviewing Toh Koon Swee , March 2007, Singapore



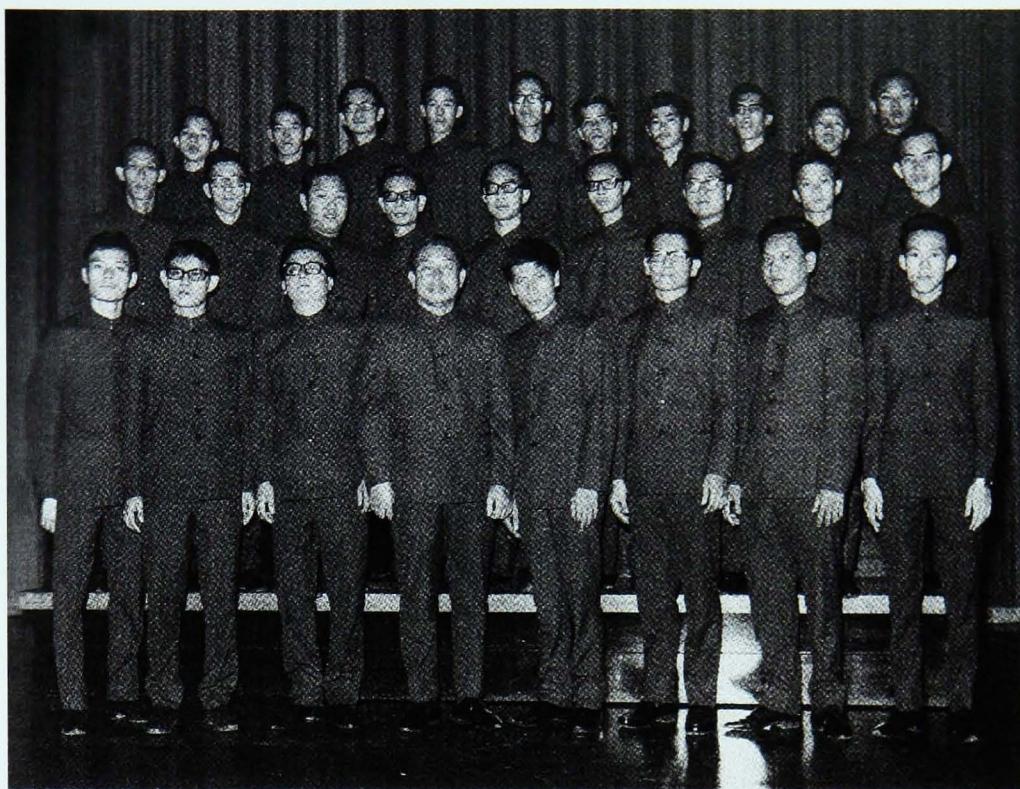
4. Peng Xiuwen (Quek 2002:330)



5. Early Singaporean Chinese Ensemble (Goh 1998:2)



6. Taorong Performance (Goh 1998:7)



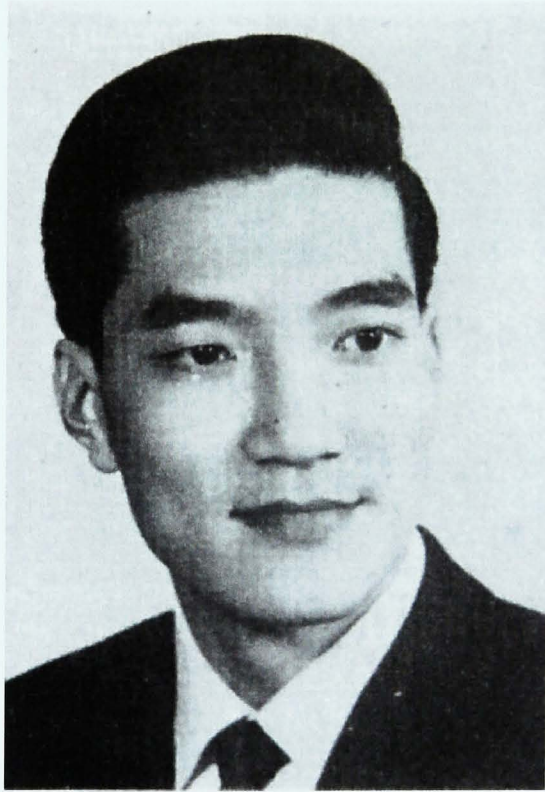
7. The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (Goh 1998:37)



8. Zheng Sisen (Quek 2002:288)



9. Li Xueling (Quek 2002:76)



10. Ng Tai Kong (Quek 2002:76)



11. Ku Lap Man (Quek 2002:290)



12. Hu Bingxu (Quek 2002:168)



14. Qu Chunquan (Quek 2002:345)



15. Yeh Tsung (Quek 2002:84)

Preface

Background to this Study

The subject of this dissertation is the history, characteristics, relationships and interactions of the Chinese orchestral community in Singapore. The Chinese Orchestra (CO) is a product of political reforms in China, as well as the interaction between the phenomena of Westernisation, modernisation and globalisation. Notwithstanding its history of less than 80 years, the CO has experienced phenomenal growth in the past decade. The concept of the CO has spread from mainland China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Malaysia, Singapore, and even to Western countries such as the USA and Australia, spawning hundreds of thousands of practitioners in Asia and beyond.

Chinese orchestras, as with their Western counterparts, are now differentiated into amateur and professional outfits and have become propagated widely in schools, clan associations and arts troupes. So popular are COs nowadays that concerts featuring thousands of musicians are put up frequently as a spectacle to impress audiences with their sheer size.

In Singapore and Malaysia, the CO is termed *Huayue*, literally “music of the Chinese race”, a designation that aptly encapsulates the perception of the CO as representing the music of the Chinese people in multiracial Singapore. Elsewhere, the CO is referred to differently.¹ Interestingly, the most common word used today to refer to the CO among Singaporean practitioners, themselves mostly students and youths from an ethnic Chinese background, is the abbreviation “CO”, not *Huayue*. The anglicised acronym used to describe the CO reflects Singapore’s multi-lingual and multicultural environment. It also reflects the popularity and acceptance of an art form over which Singaporean practitioners now claim ownership. Thus, this music genre has been assimilated into the cultural fabric of the society of Singapore.

¹ In Taiwan, the CO is termed *Guoyue* (National Music); in Hong Kong, *Zhongyue* (Chinese music) is used; and in China, the typical term is *Minyue* (National Music). Together with Singapore’s *Huayue*, the four common terms form the word *Zhonghua Minguo* (literally the Chinese Republic). The terms also suggest the significant impact of the political context in shaping the CO; this will be explored in greater detail throughout the thesis.

My Background in the CO

As with most other Chinese music practitioners in Singapore, I had my first encounter with Chinese orchestral music at the age of 12 when I joined a Chinese orchestra as an Extra-Curricular Activity (ECA) in my secondary school. In Singapore's education system, an ECA is deemed compulsory for all students to provide for a holistic education. I first joined the CO under the influence of my friends who were impressed by a performance that my school's CO had put on during our Extra-Curricular Activities' Selection Day.

While in the orchestra, I was assigned to play the *liuqin*, and later on, the *pipa*, an instrument with which I did not have the slightest acquaintance at the time. As with most other Singaporean children, I had little knowledge of Chinese culture, and even less understanding of Chinese music. My prior exposure to music learning was limited to a short course in piano and organ at the Yamaha Music School near my house and the music lessons in my weekly school curriculum. The latter comprised Kodály's systemised singing and occasional recorder playing.

In the ensuing four years of my secondary education, through my avid participation in the CO, I slowly grew to love the *pipa* and the CO as a genre of music. At the age of 15, I attended private lessons with a *pipa* tutor, which helped me to improve in my playing of the instrument. My participation in the CO gave me a better understanding of Chinese culture more widely and of my roots as an ethnic Chinese Singaporean. Yet considering the absence of any such prior cultural understanding and my preceding "Westernised" Singaporean identity, my growing love for the CO and its accompanying Chinese traditions initially came as a surprise to me. My avid participation in the CO led me to embrace the world of the arts.

Following my graduation from secondary school at the age of 16, my academic results and extra-curricular participation earned me a place in a prestigious junior college in Singapore. However, I gave up my place at the junior college in order to study the *pipa* at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, based on the recommendation of my music tutors in Singapore. While in Beijing, I was introduced to a new soundscape and a myriad of possibilities with an extended technique and new repertory. I was also introduced to methodical practice and the strict system of Chinese music education in China.

Being young and alone in a foreign country, I experienced culture shock that led to self-doubt of my abilities and interests. While most of my classmates in the conservatory entertained visions of having a strong international performing career, I could not envisage myself being a performer all my life. Feeling homesick, I gave up any notion of being a professional performer and headed back to Singapore.

Back in Singapore, I enrolled in a Mass Communications programme at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. While engaged in this field of study, I continued to pursue my passion for the *pipa*. I participated in various national music competitions and won many awards for my *pipa* performances. As a result of my awards, I represented Singapore at various cultural events overseas.

While I enjoyed performing at the time, I still did not think of pursuing music as a career. It was only in my final year at the polytechnic when I received a grant to write a book that I re-discovered my initial passion for Chinese music and the *pipa*. With the encouragement of my supervisor at the polytechnic, I decided to write a book about the *pipa*. Apart from detailing my own experiences as a musician, the book, *Impressions of a Pipa Player*, also contained interviews with 23 of the world's foremost *pipa* players. These interviews were completed when I travelled to China again, through an attachment programme secured by my polytechnic with the Central Conservatory, where I attended lessons. I seized the opportunity to do interviews with established *pipa* players regarding their experiences and perspectives, and observed *pipa* performances and interactions between players. From my interviews with the masters, I learnt about their struggle to achieve success in this field. More specifically, through my interviews with them, I realised the importance of passion in music-making, which enabled each of these musicians to withstand untold suffering and hardships throughout their careers. In spite of facing anything ranging from abuses to death threats during the Cultural Revolution, they persevered to accomplish their dream of mastering the *pipa*. Their perseverance left an indelible impression on me and it was a powerful testimony of their love for the *pipa*.

Driven by my natural affinity towards Chinese music, I was motivated to learn and excel in everything related to it during the writing of this book. I was reminded of the fact that the *pipa* and my participation in CO not only gave me an outlet to express myself, but also fostered enduring friendships with my fellow musicians who shared my passion and drive for Chinese music. I derived tremendous pride from my excellence in the playing of the *pipa*, which had given me a sense of recognition and esteem. In my celebration of my

love for the *pipa* in the writing process, I recognised that Chinese music and the *pipa* had played a significant role in shaping my development not only as a musician, but also my identity as a young man. Most significantly, I realised that my love for the *pipa* extended beyond its music and its performance to include its theory, history, literature, cultural emplacement, and its dedicated promoters, advocates, and teachers. To put it simply, I really enjoyed writing and being involved in every aspect of this music.

After the publication of that book, I decided to embark on projects that promoted public awareness of the CO and its music. Tapping into my mass communications academic background, I became an activist for Chinese orchestral music. I promoted Chinese music to non-practitioners through performances and wrote articles that were published in the newspapers in defence of Chinese orchestral works. I also wrote reviews and gave lectures and talks to students about the CO and its music. My activism also coincided with the expansion of my portfolio of performances over time. I performed Chinese orchestral works regularly and found a niche in contemporary chamber work.

In 2003, I was commissioned by The Teng Company, an award-winning Chinese music ensemble, to write a second book. I decided to write about the CO. There was a dearth of literature on this genre, and I saw this project as a golden opportunity for me to promote the CO to the general public. Completed in 2004, *Qi: An Instrumental Guide to the Chinese Orchestra*, provided a comprehensive documentation of the CO's instruments, including a discussion of the most current development and reformation of the instruments themselves, their repertory, their construction, and of advances in performance technique.

After delving into the instruments used in the CO in my second book, I wanted to continue my exploration of the CO by addressing another critical component of the Chinese Orchestra – its social environment. More specifically, I was interested to study the characteristics, the relationships, and the dynamic interactions that occur within Chinese orchestral communities. This subject-matter would become the basis of my current thesis.

Note on Romanisation and on Chinese Terminology

While the *pinyin* system is most widely accepted in Chinese scholarship, it cannot be fully operative in this dissertation due to Singapore's multi-ethnic heritage and diverse ancestry, as well as its complicated dialect system.

For this dissertation I have opted for the use of statutory names for Singaporean names and places in Singapore, which have been put in place by the Singapore government. Statutory names are official names that are chosen by the individuals for use. These names are used in passports, identification cards, and bank accounts; they aid the government in coherent identification.

The names can take the form of English, *pinyin*, dialect names, or a combination, depending on individual preference. Dialect names, in this instance, follow a system similar to the Wade-Giles system of romanisation, usually without the use of the hyphen. For example, the *pinyin* name of a Singaporean Chinese music veteran is Wu Yiming; however, his statutory name would be Goh Ek Meng, with an added space between “Ek” and “Meng” due to his preferred use of his Teochew dialect name. As with standard Chinese names, family names are written first and then followed by personal names. The presence of English names behind, or in front of, surnames and given names depends on their placement in the statutory name.

For names and places of mainland Chinese and of China, the *pinyin* system will be adopted. If I am unsure of an interviewee's statutory name, the *pinyin* system would also be used. The *pinyin* system is also adopted with regard to musical terminology, instruments and repertory. Singapore, as with China, uses simplified Chinese characters for all official documents. Similarly, all names, repertories and groups are presented in simplified Chinese characters, alongside statutory or *pinyin* information and their equivalent translations, if required, in the glossary. While *Huayue* is the commonplace term used to describe the Chinese orchestra in Singapore, the corresponding term of *Minyue* is used to describe the Chinese orchestra in China. Both refer to the same concept of the Chinese orchestra. The acronym “CO”, used in short for Chinese orchestra, is a common term used among most Chinese orchestral musicians to describe the Chinese orchestra in Singapore.

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1. Introduction

My Research Subject Matter and Method

Research Topic

In this thesis I have decided to focus my study on the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore – a familiar ethnomusicological environment that is home to me. Being a Chinese musician in Singapore, I am aware of the fact that Singapore is among the countries that have the highest number of COs in the world. There was a sudden surge in the number of COs and Chinese music learners in Singapore during the 1970s to 1990s, often referred to by the local Chinese musicians as a “Chinese orchestral boom”. While I was still a secondary school student, there were mega orchestras that had memberships of 500. In fact, in 2000, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) staged a concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium featuring over 1,000 performers.

Intrigued by this phenomenon, I wanted to find out how the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore could have developed so progressively and rapidly by tracing its socio-cultural development over time. In addition to tracing the evolution of the CO from its inception in mainland China to its contemporary state all over the world, I wanted to incorporate my own experiences and utilise my social network as a Chinese orchestral practitioner to piece together a comprehensive perspective of the “Chinese orchestral boom” specifically in Singapore. My work would thus situate the unique development of the Chinese orchestral music scene within the evolving social and cultural context in Singapore from the perspectives of diverse individuals in the local Chinese orchestral scene.

Research Method: Fieldwork and Research

As musicological literature in Singapore is very scarce and under-developed, there is very little literature on the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore. Consequently, I have

relied heavily on fieldwork for most of my research and findings in this dissertation. The fieldwork was done primarily through participation-observations and in-depth interviews.

Participation-observation, according to Stock (2004a:31), offers an effective means of enabling individuals to engage in their own environments by providing a “demanding but absorbingly human means of research”. Such an experiential approach requires one to open oneself to the process of questioning one’s tradition beyond the scope of familiarity; this is especially the case for someone with the perspective of a native practitioner. As a result, my point of view is neither “free nor individual” (Rice 1994:308); rather, it is influenced by my interaction with my tradition – the Chinese orchestral tradition. With such an approach, I was aware of the fact that I would be challenged to adopt a dynamic and evolving perspective of my findings, which takes into account my dual roles as a native practitioner and a researcher. (More will be explained later in **Multicultural Ethnomusicology and the Native Researcher-Practitioner Approach**.)

Therefore, upon my return from residency at the University of Sheffield after commencing my ethnomusicology programme in 2005, I established myself as a participant-observer at various amateur COs in Singapore. To obtain a contrast to my observations as a Chinese music performer participating inside an orchestra, I felt that I also needed to adopt the more distanced view of an outsider who was conducting research on the orchestra. With the kind assistance of the SCO, I was permitted to conduct my observations of the SCO and the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO) in which I did not participate as a musician. I observed the above-mentioned orchestras for a period of three months and then continued participating and observing in various other amateur orchestras for 11 months. My participant-observations were formally recorded day by day for a period of 14 months. During this period, I participated in numerous performances and concerts, both as part of the audience and as a performer.

To supplement observations gathered from my fieldwork, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, formal and informal observations, and participant-observations were conducted from 2005 to 2007 with 126 Chinese orchestra musicians (of professional, amateur and student level, and including retired musicians), arts administrators, instrument dealers, historians, and pioneers from Singapore and China, which included a few Chinese musicians from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Macau. The number of male and female musicians interviewed were of an equal ratio and musicians from the various sections of the

orchestra: strings, winds and plucked strings, were also interviewed proportionately. Fewer percussionists were interviewed because their section was comparatively smaller than the rest of the Chinese orchestra.

Interviews and observations were done both formally and informally. Formal interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated, and formal observations were written down. Informal interviews were done during rehearsal breaks and more casual settings and environments, for example: CO gatherings and meals that occurred after rehearsals. The material for these informal interviews was written down at the first available opportunity, with informal observations done in the same way. Reflections on day to day observations were recorded in a fieldwork logbook and throughout the interview process, notes were also taken on body language, tone of voice of interviewees and non verbal communication.

My attachment to the SCO and the SYCO gave me the opportunity to chat with musicians before and after practices. Most orchestral members, in both the amateur and professional orchestras, had already known about me before my period of observation and were forthcoming in providing me with valuable information. Besides my activity in Chinese orchestral concerts, I was also active as a teacher of the *pipa*. My training of many young *pipa* players for competitions and examinations also provided me with invaluable insight into my students' perceptions of the CO. Ultimately, interviewing such a diverse range of individuals yielded a broad perspective on what has been happening in the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore. Pictures were taken of some of the interviewees to further document the fieldwork process.

Apart from my fieldwork investigation in Singapore, I travelled to Shanghai and Beijing in April and May 2007 where I visited major conservatories and musicians to collect valuable information on the history of the CO, which provided background to my discussion of the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore. These sources of information were mostly in the form of interviews, books, periodicals, newspaper articles, speeches, and reports covering a wide range of topics from Westernisation to Chinese music history. I consulted them to extract the appropriate and integral background and theoretical materials to situate my work within the field of ethnomusicology and the CO. With regards to information on the local music scene, I dug up historical records on the CO in the form of newspaper articles, speeches, annual reports of arts groups, programme booklets, recordings and concert reviews. Although there was little musical scholarship and analytical discourse regarding music in Singapore and these sources of documented literature did not provide a

coherent and consistent picture, they provided me with some supplementary materials concerning the cultural background and the historical development of the CO in Singapore. My challenge in this research thesis was thus to piece together a rich and coherent picture of the Chinese orchestral landscape in Singapore by integrating my fieldwork findings with the secondary literature.

Multicultural Ethnomusicology and the Native Researcher-Practitioner Approach

Multicultural Ethnomusicology

Since I was a *pipa* player with extensive experience playing in COs in Singapore, I occupied the roles of an established practitioner in the CO, as well as that of an indigenous scholar who was studying his own culture's musical tradition and musical context. I thus fell under the category of a native researcher-practitioner.

At one level, my research in this area may seem to replicate the typical indigenous musical scholarship found in China, in which Chinese music scholars immerse themselves in the study of Chinese music, specifically the documentation, transcription, archiving and musicological analysis of Chinese music. However, I wanted to go beyond this conventional research paradigm to take into consideration the underlying social interactions that take place within and around the orchestral environment. More specifically, I wanted to capture and analyse the interactions between the CO musicians, the administrators and external agencies, and determine how these socio-cultural interactions shape the performances of the various COs and the overall development of the Chinese orchestral scene.

In seeking to incorporate these sociological aspects of music, I went against the research practices of many teachers at the conservatories in China. During my studies in China, I found that research methodologies in the field of Chinese musicology did not address the sociological side. In my opinion, this stance has resulted in a poverty of valuable research information in an important area of the CO – the social processes and interpersonal dynamics of the social environment.

Looking for ways to develop a more sociological view of music, while incorporating actual musical experiences of myself and others, I began to encounter writings by Western ethnomusicologists who discussed ethnographic experiences in the field alongside musical documentation. I saw that my previous assumption about Western ethnomusicology (that it concentrated purely on the description of the musical features of traditional genres) was incorrect. Among these readings, I was most inspired by J. Lawrence Witzleben's (1997) article, "Whose Ethnomusicology? Western Ethnomusicology and the Study of Asian Music". More specifically, I was drawn to his discussion of a rich and dynamic conception of ethnomusicology that addresses the complex and ever-evolving interaction between musical products and sounds, on one hand, and the performers and the audiences, on the other. This constitutes a move away from the prevalent "tendency to treat ethnomusicology as a divided field in which writers either analyse sounds or analyse social and cultural features of music making" (Seeger 1992:89 in Witzleben 1997:235). Essentially, a comprehensive study of a particular musical form derived from a culture needs to be situated within its unique social and cultural context. It is influenced and shaped by the performers who are in turn affected by their environment within and without their musical environment. As Alan Merriam (1964:35) puts it succinctly: "The music product is inseparable from the behavior that produces it" (cited in Witzleben 1997:235). In his discussion, Witzleben puts forth his belief that scholarship on music by Chinese scholars can be complemented and enriched by incorporating the anthropological components of Western ethnomusicology. He suggests that the field of ethnomusicology would be enhanced by a movement towards the concept of *multicultural ethnomusicology* that encompasses all the aforementioned elements: the study of musical elements within the social and cultural contexts that have created the musical products.

Rationale of Choosing Multicultural Ethnomusicology as Research Paradigm

I have chosen to adopt the research paradigm of *multicultural ethnomusicology* as a particularly apt research approach for my research study for several reasons. In stark contrast to traditional scholarship in Chinese music, this research approach allowed me to incorporate my experiences and perspectives as a native practitioner and researcher, as well as those of others in this field. Instead of studying the CO as though it were a static entity, I wanted to explore the dynamic and unpredictable underlying social processes that go into

the making of Chinese orchestral music and shape the unique trajectory of its development. For instance, its current shape and form in China differs decidedly from that in Singapore. Such differences clearly demonstrate how the development of music and musical expression is ultimately influenced by social and cultural factors that go beyond inherent musical properties.

By utilising this research paradigm, I am contributing to the decades-old endeavour by ethnomusicologists to define the realm and the practice of scholarship in the field of ethnomusicology. Such an endeavour has taken place in response to the constant development of diverse approaches utilised by musical scholars studying music in various cultural contexts (Merriam 1977; Witzleben 1997). At the same time, by basing my research on the music of my own cultural tradition in my own musical environment, I am perfectly aware of the fact that I am going against a conventional Western conception of ethnomusicology as a specialised study in the “musics of other countries or other ethnic groups” (Witzleben 1997:223). This definition, as Witzleben (1997:222) points out, refers to a Western researcher “studying the music of a culture other than his or her own”. Because of the prevalence of this tradition within the field of Western ethnomusicology, indigenous scholars who choose to do their fieldwork in their indigenous culture have not been given sufficient credit for the value of their work. The general perception is that these scholars have not taken on the genuine challenges of dealing with a foreign cultural context and traditions. In other words, they are perceived to have taken an easy way out that deviates from the essence of the study of ethnomusicology (Witzleben 1997:223).

Through my work, I hope to challenge this limited perspective in two primary ways. First, I intend to show that indigenous music scholarship conducted by a native practitioner-researcher can contribute significantly to the quality of ethnomusicological research in the particular musical tradition under research by bringing in knowledge and information which may be privy only to a native practitioner-researcher. Second, my indigenous music scholarship has more than its fair share of challenges that pushes a native practitioner-researcher to examine the issue from perspectives that may escape the researcher from a different cultural background. I will explore each of my arguments in greater detail in the following section.

Being a Native Practitioner-Researcher: Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

To begin with, I do want to point out the fact that the concept of researching one's own culture is, by now, neither new to ethnomusicology nor anthropology. Studies like those in *Anthropology at Home* (Jackson 1987:1-15; Dragadze 1987:154-63; Cheater 1987:164-79; Mascarenhas-Keyes 1987:180-95) have advocated such research, claiming cost efficiency, relevance, and stronger familiarity with the subject-matter and the field as a few of the advantages of such an approach.

Relationship with the CO Community as an established CO Musician

The aforementioned advantages of native research are applicable to my work. One of the ways in which my role as a native researcher-practitioner enhances my research in ways that are not available to a researcher from a different cultural tradition stems from my established relationship with the COs in Singapore. Starting with my participation in various amateur COs as a *pipa* player since early 1997, I have been an active participant of the Chinese orchestral music community in Singapore. My decade-old participation in this community has provided me with invaluable experiential background information of the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore.

Even after my enrolment in Sheffield's graduate course in 2005, I have remained actively involved in the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore. Thanks to Sheffield's remote-location scheme of study, I have been able to pursue my studies mostly in Singapore, travelling back to Sheffield occasionally for supervision. As a result, it has been possible to juggle my dual identities as performer and researcher effectively, while continuing to engage in Chinese orchestral and Chinese music performances onsite in Singapore.

In a community that places a tremendous emphasis on reputation and status,¹ I have, as an established practitioner, carved an important niche as an established CO practitioner with a high standing in the CO community. Unlike an outside researcher, I am thus in a privileged position to elicit information from the subjects of my research study. The years

¹ See a more detailed discussion of these themes in Chapter 4.

of learning to play the *pipa* and gaining membership into an orchestra would not be possible for an outside researcher with a limited timeframe for conducting their research study. As a consequence, I was less subject to suspicion and to tests to prove my sincerity (a common trait in Chinese-oriented societies) as my years in the Singaporean Chinese orchestral scene provided a track record of my identity. Moreover, my reputation as a *pipa* performer in Singapore was a guarantee that I would use information given to me ethically and professionally for my dissertation. This confirms Witzleben's (1997:223) observation: "the cultural outsider may face questions of both credibility and entitlement" – factors that essentially cut him off from contacts and sources, which could undermine the quality of his research. As a result of being already in the field for many years, I naturally claimed cultural insiderness and an "emic" (insider) identity (my status as a Singaporean CO musician) when I adopted a research topic concerning COs in Singapore.

My insider status also translated into considerable ease in approaching and obtaining interviewees because I had had prior interactions with many and others had known of me for some time through my work; some of these individuals are my good friends. Access to interviewees in the field of CO is not easy as it may appear. For example, in an interview with Toh Koon Sui,² a Chinese music veteran and instrument technician,³ I was told that he only agreed to the interview with *me*. When someone with less "clout" outside of the Chinese music community wanted to talk to him, he had flatly rejected the interview. I found out from Toh that a researcher from the National University of Singapore had called him a few days earlier to request an interview on instrumental repair. He rejected her request flatly simply because she was an "outsider" who was not a part of the Chinese orchestral community.

Moreover, my practitioner's identity put most of my interviewees at ease about my motivation and agenda in doing this thesis. They had tremendous faith and trust in the integrity of my research work based on their knowledge of my existing performing and teaching status. Most interviewees I approached were usually willing to be interviewed and appear to have no suspicions when being interviewed by me presumably due to my track record. Additionally, because of my status as an established *pipa* performer, I could get rare and private information from my interviewees without much difficulty, especially in

² Toh Koon Sui, personal communication, 6 March 2007, Singapore.

³ Also known as a *shifu* or *qinshi*, the term is used to describe skilled instrumental technicians and carries a certain amount of social respect in Chinese communities.

informal settings when my interviewees were mostly more relaxed and comfortable about sharing their insights.

Ease of Access to Information

Likewise, my status as an established practitioner allowed me quicker and easier access than a normal native researcher. Being at the heart of the Chinese orchestral scene, I was kept in the loop about the latest happenings in the Chinese orchestral community in Singapore. Through my various interactions with my interviewees, I was able to amass the most current ideas and news on repertory, technique and people. Moreover, because of my background as a native practitioner, I was also able to tap into my extensive background knowledge and prior experiences in my community, thus saving me time and expenditure in looking for suitable interviewees. The same advantage applied to my research of secondary documents. Because of my continuous involvement in this field, I was already familiar with the literature and the likely sources of information that would be relevant to this study, thus saving me time and effort.

Familiarity with Language and Terminology

Another advantage of my native researcher-practitioner status was my familiarity with the language and terminology used among Chinese orchestral musicians during my interactions and interviews with them. My insider experiences in the COs in Singapore provided me with the tools to decode messages, meanings, and terms commonly utilised by CO musicians in Singapore today. Due to Singapore's multi-lingual environment in which I grew up, I could effectively code switch from English and Singlish⁴ when talking to younger CO musicians, to Mandarin Chinese when talking to mainland Chinese CO musicians, and to dialect when speaking to the older generation of Singaporean CO musicians. I was also familiar with the Chinese orchestral terminology used by these musicians.

Because of my bilingualism and my ability to converse in dialects, I was able to transcribe interviews simultaneously into English after they were completed. Such translations, though not difficult, were sometimes problematic as they were colloquial, with

⁴ Singlish is an English-based Creole language, native to Singapore.

no English equivalents for certain phrases and meanings and actions in some fieldwork experiences. I have used the *pinyin* (see **Note on Romanisation and on Chinese Terminology**) version of the word or phrase and an English translation when such instances occur. Such ease in working with multiple languages and decoding them would not have been the case for a non-native researcher.

Motivation of Social Purpose

Moreover, as a native practitioner and now a researcher, with both “credibility and entitlement” (Witzleben 1997:223), I feel that my research is driven by a larger social purpose with the following objectives:

- a) to promote CO as an international genre of music; and
- b) to speak up on behalf of Singaporean CO musicians who are often underrepresented and unknown in the global scene.

As explained by Daniel Sheehy (1992), applied ethnomusicology that begins with a sense of purpose can extend beyond the advancement of musical knowledge. More specifically, he highlights the fact that when ethnomusicological endeavours are “guided by a sense of social purpose”, researchers can “expand the potential of ethnomusicological skills and minimise counter-productive perceptions of barriers between academic and applied work” (Sheehy 1992:335).

Hence, I hope that through the advantage of my native researcher-practitioner status, I can be a purposeful voice for this growing community with this thesis. My thesis can constitute a start in addressing the significant absence of literature on the Singapore music scene in general and can hopefully contribute to Singaporean musical discourse. More specifically, it could serve as a springboard to allow for further research into the CO, especially from anthropological and sociological viewpoints (which are still inadequate), within the music landscape of Singapore. I would also hope that this dissertation could pave the way for a greater amount of open-minded musical discourse in Chinese musicology, with a special emphasis on the CO music scene in Singapore.

In fact, during my interviews with the CO musicians in Singapore, many were supportive of my work and hoped that I would be a voice for the community. One such Chinese musician remarked when she found out about my research, “You need to *‘chi yang*

feng' (eat more of the west wind)⁵ and you can come back and help us... you'll have more social say in that way". While some warned me about the dangers of studying the underlying social interactions within the COs, most musicians gave me their support. Many musicians were hoping that I could graduate with a qualification which would allow me to play a prominent role in the fields of administration and organisational management, which are typically run by non-musicians. Since non-musicians lack the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the music priorities of the musicians, they are not very sensitive or respectful of the work and aspirations of the musicians. Thus, with a Ph.D. degree in this area, I would have the "paper qualifications" to make a change in the actual work environment of the musicians and the overall Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore.

Disadvantages

Nonetheless, it is also important to point out that the native researcher-practitioner approach did not always mean that my research work was accomplished with ease, compared to an outside researcher. In fact, doing research as a native practitioner also raised interesting concerns that challenged me to constantly evaluate my dual identities as a native practitioner and researcher throughout my interactions with my interviewees and my analysis of the research topic. By choosing to explore this topic with such an approach, I had to be constantly monitoring my twin roles as a native practitioner and researcher. In his work, Timothy Rice (1994:6) highlights the need for "productive distancing" for those born into the cultures that they study in order to achieve an "explanation and critical understanding of their own cultures". Stephen Cottrell (2004:16) goes further by describing the state of self-induced schizophrenia between the insider ("emic") and outsider ("etic")-selves he faced when he embarked on his native research.

Like Cottrell, I, too, had to take steps back to view the bigger picture and move between my subjective and the objective processes of thought in order to maintain objectivity and credibility as a researcher. Because of my years of involvement in COs, I possess many subjective opinions and pre-conceived notions as a native practitioner, which I had taken for granted; in other words, I did not really evaluate their validity. However, as a researcher who had to maintain an objective "ethnomusicological self", I found that I had to

⁵ The term "eating more of the west wind" implies that one should be influenced by the West. Within the context of that sentence, the musician had meant for me to study overseas, in the West.

be aware of the impact of the subjectivity of my preconceived notions on my research analysis.

Susceptibility to Subjective Bias

There were times throughout my research where I questioned my objectivity and had to check with others to make sure that I was unbiased in my evaluation of the situation. For instance, I knew many performers in one CO with whom I had worked on previous occasions. In contrast, I was unfamiliar with their counterparts in another CO, having had no prior direct interaction with them. In a competition involving both orchestras, I thought that Orchestra X had performed much better than Orchestra Y. However, concerned that my opinion could have been influenced by my friendships with many of the performers in Orchestra X, I had to ask a few other Chinese orchestral practitioners who were neutral to both orchestras to verify my findings. As it turned out, they agreed with my evaluation. However, the instance shows that being both native researcher and practitioner requires a degree of vigilance and constant self-reflection in order to protect the integrity of the research.

Ethical Concerns

All researchers who work with people have to confront the potential for conflicts of interest. Jane Davidson (2004:72) points out, “[A]nalyzing music as social behaviour means analysing how people engage with music and with one another at individual, group, and societal levels, and that in turn means that ethical considerations cannot be ignored”. Ethnomusicological research, in particular, must take into account these ethical considerations because so much social behaviour as music is analysed and many practitioners discussed. Stock (2004a:29) emphasises the responsibility of the researcher to the individuals under investigation, saying that they need to be acknowledged by “the ethnomusicologist and any other music researcher interested in speaking about ‘other’ people.... [The researcher] faces a potentially complex web of ethical pressures and agendas” that add to the complexity of the research process.

For instance, where ease of access might be an advantage for the native researcher-practitioner, with interviewees having no qualms about offering information about

themselves, the researcher then bears the onus of ensuring that these research findings do not, in any way, bring harm to others. In my work I have held strongly to the viewpoint of Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1999:543-44) when she proposes:

It is clear that solutions to ethical dilemmas must be local and contingent, sensitive to both the particular tradition and the individuals involved; such situations require constant vigilance by the researcher and open discussion during the research process and afterwards. As we seek to redefine music scholarship, we need to anticipate the potential impact of our work on the individuals who, whether in the archive or in the field, have shared their music with us.

There were times when I had to set boundaries on what information should be reported and what should be withheld. On many occasions, during the course of my research and the writing of this thesis, I have had to reflect deeply on various fragments of information, deciding which to retain in my thesis and which to withhold in order for me to maintain relationships among the musicians, including myself. Bearing in mind that I would return to the field as a practitioner after the course of this work, and face the very people who would read my interpretations of their comments, it was even more imperative that I remained impartial, objective, and ethical. From an ethical standpoint, I also did not want to cause harm to any interviewees who had provided me with information that could have compromised others or themselves. At the same time, I still sought to balance these ethical concerns with the need for truthful ethnographic fieldwork in an attempt to maintain academic integrity.

To keep ethical solutions “local”, “contingent”, and “sensitive”, I decided that interviewees who have requested anonymity will not be identified in this thesis. Moreover, interviewees who provided me with information that might potentially cause harm to other individuals or groups will also not be identified. It has been a common occurrence during my fieldwork for interviewees to pause midway to add disclaimers like, “Don’t write that down”, “Don’t say I said that”, or even “You must remember to keep it [the information] an absolute secret”. Such disclaimers often provoke the thought that if the information were so secret, it should not have been given to me. At the same time, I realised that my “emic” identity and my reputation as a *pipa* player had led many of the interviewees to trust me as an insider, thus revealing information about themselves or others which might have been compromising or damaging. Given the nature of their statements, they may not have offered such information to an outsider-researcher. Equally, I was wary of being used as a tool by interviewees seeking to spread gossip about others or to vent personal grievances.

Accordingly, I had to use my background knowledge and experience with each interviewee to sift through the information carefully and to consider how far it could be presented in this thesis.

Identity Conflict between my Roles as Native Practitioner and Ethnomusicological Researcher

Another identity conflict that I faced was between my identities as a *Singaporean* musician and as an ethnomusicological researcher. During an interview, both verbal and non-verbal interactions took place, but I subsequently experienced some difficulties in explaining what I had just witnessed or participated in in proper terms appropriate for my research work. My awareness of these difficulties made me realise that I had taken for granted many of the coded interactions practised unknowingly by CO musicians. I recognised that it would be essential for me to explain some of my fieldwork notes so that the non-Singaporean reader could understand the meanings and the significance of these interactions that were evident to me as a Singaporean CO musician. Essentially, I had to step back to evaluate my writing as a researcher to ensure that what I had written was clear, approachable and not too colloquial.

Barrier of Seniority in Access to Information

A barrier that I faced in my role as a researcher, which could not be circumvented by my role as a native practitioner, revolved around the issue of seniority. In spite of my insider identity and status, as well as my high social standing achieved through my track record of work, I occasionally faced problems as a *young* musician – a fact that I could not change.⁶ As a young Chinese musician (despite my years of involvement in the Chinese orchestra), older and senior interviewees sometimes found it hard to reveal information or answer debatable questions as it was deemed inappropriate for someone of a younger age and generation to pose them. These interviewees were particularly unwilling to address questions regarding their reputation, seniority, and economic status.

In spite of this obstacle, I was still able to get the opportunity to interview them, even though my challenging questions elicited diluted and often, confused answers. Regardless, I always got answers, as it would have been deemed discourteous to outwardly

⁶ This aspect will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 4.

reject any interview question from a fellow CO musician without a valid reason. I observed that this usually happened if the interviewee was one who commanded a relatively high reputation and seniority, as such interviewees often had more years of experience and therefore more information to protect.

Over-familiarity with CO environment

As an established native researcher, the process of learning about the CO in Singapore might have been done so long ago that I ran the risk of overlooking valuable information and interactions that might be apparent to an outsider researcher who engaged in the process of learning about the CO from the start. As a result, I might have missed out perspectives that might be apparent to a non-native researcher. As a native researcher who has had an earlier engagement in this learning process, there have been times that I took for granted crucial issues and learning points, only to be alerted to them by other researchers, largely due to my over-familiarity with the CO scene in Singapore. To circumvent this, I have had to constantly check with other researchers that my findings were articulate and holistic.

Another challenge revolved around the interviewees' perceptions of my dual identities as a native practitioner and researcher. Because of my daily involvement with Chinese music as a teacher and as a performer in COs, "fieldwork" was also an integral part of my professional and personal life. I felt that I could not draw firm boundaries between my roles as a native researcher and as a native practitioner. My two roles overlapped, regardless of whether I wanted to approach my "interviewees" as a researcher or not. I found myself constantly reflecting and reasoning with myself as I interacted with other Chinese musicians, even in informal interactions when I had not supposed myself to be doing fieldwork.

In addition, most Chinese musicians who knew me in Singapore viewed me as the *pipa* player, the "practitioner", rather than as an ethnomusicologist (researcher). When many interviewees conversed with me, they often digressed from the main topic to discuss topics that pertained to the *pipa*, thinking that I would have a stronger interest in what they had to say if they mentioned my instrument. However, at the time, I was attempting to gather data for my research; thus, I had to take a longer period of time to complete interviews in order to accommodate the sidetracking taken by most interviewees to accommodate me in the first place. Asserting my role as a researcher would have risked

losing my advantages as a native practitioner who could elicit information from my interviewees. Thus, I had to accept the fact that in some instances it would take me longer to obtain the information that I wanted for my thesis.

Negative social aspects in fieldwork

While most interviews were positive, there was a sense of hostility from some interviewees who felt that I was putting myself on a pedestal by writing about them as a native practitioner as I was considered by them to be in the same position as they were. Some interviewees could not identify with my role as a researcher and this resulted in their reservation of information regardless of my credibility as a native practitioner-researcher.

Additionally, while most of my fieldwork interviews were encouraging and affirmative, there were a handful of musicians who did not respond positively to my identity as a researcher, and felt that a musician should concentrate on playing and not be preoccupied with such academic matters. This could be a result of professional jealousy as replicated by Faulkner's (1973a) works on symphony orchestras, but nonetheless, when faced with such situations, my priorities as a musician and my interviewees' scepticism about my dual identities as practitioner and researcher became a challenge and I had to work carefully and with sensitivity around and with some of these musicians.

Also, as a result of my research, while writing about the social problems of others, I was also embroiled in a few political battles of my own, where I was accused of disrespect and insubordination to my elders (more of this issue will be covered in Chapter 4). While this was a painful learning experience for me, both socially and as a researcher, such negative social impacts as a result of my native researcher status enriched my analysis of events, and my writing of this thesis. Nevertheless, considering these obstacles, I still felt that I obtained more information than would have been possible by another researcher who was not a part of the Chinese orchestral scene.

Structure of Dissertation

This thesis is a product of my fieldwork and research of secondary literature, which delve into the historical, educational, and social environments of Chinese orchestral musicians in China (as background) and more specifically in Singapore. It is not my intention to debate the nature of the CO as a musical genre; rather, my aim is to put together observations of the underlying social processes that characterise the interactions of the members of the COs in Singapore. Largely an anthropological study of the contemporary community of Chinese orchestral musicians in Singapore, this thesis places its foci on the identities and behaviours of CO musicians in contemporary Singapore within the larger social and cultural context of the Chinese music environment in Singapore. The findings of this study are further situated within a background discussion of the historical development of the Chinese orchestral scenes both in China and in Singapore, thus enriching the context of my exploration of the contemporary CO in Singapore.

After the present Introduction (Chapter 1), the thesis comprises two major sections, followed by a Conclusion (Chapter 5):

- Section I: Historical Development (Chapters 2-3)
- Section II: Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore (Chapter 4)

Section I addresses the historical development of Chinese Orchestras in China and Singapore. Chapter 2, “The Historical Development of Chinese Orchestras”, begins with a condensed history of the development of the CO as an artistic concept. Through a literature review derived from both the disciplines of Chinese musicology and Western ethnomusicology, I trace the development of the CO in China from its early stages to its contemporary states. Interviews with mainland Chinese music veterans help to fill in missing pieces in this history by giving personal insights into the situations and circumstances (both within and without the Chinese orchestral environment) which have contributed to the unique trajectory of the development of the CO music scene in mainland China. The discussion highlights the different perspectives and historical values held by musicologists, conductors, and musicians from insider and outsider perspectives. This chapter will thus give essential background information for my analysis of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore.

Chapter 3, “*Hua Yue: The Chinese Orchestra in Singapore*” offers a detailed look at the evolution and growth of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore, noting the involvement of governmental agencies, schools and community centres in the CO music scene. Considering the political and socio-cultural impacts on the development of the CO in Singapore, this chapter first provides a concise understanding of the distinctive characteristics of Singapore society relevant to the thesis. Next, it traces the history and development of the COs in Singapore by interlacing the various disparate stages of Singaporean history and the case studies of specific COs from both professional and amateur arenas. This history is pieced together by using literature from concerts, the media, reviews, interviews, speeches, books and articles as well as interviews with Chinese orchestral musicians in Singapore, which supplement and enrich the discussion by compensating for the general lack of literature regarding this topic in Singapore. Most importantly, this chapter provides the larger context for understanding and analysing my research findings on social processes within COs in contemporary Singapore.

Section II deals with the current social processes of the Chinese orchestra in contemporary Singapore. Chapter 4, “Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore”, presents findings gathered from my participation and/or observations of amateur and professional COs, along with formal and informal interactions with CO musicians in Singapore. The purpose of this chapter is to offer an insider glimpse into the dynamic interactions that take place within the environment of the different types of COs in Singapore. This chapter is divided into the following sub-sections: 4.1 Formal Structures, Roles, and Tacit Rules of Interaction of the COs in Singapore; 4.2 Motivation and Agenda of Individual Musicians; 4.3 Social Relationships in the Chinese Orchestra and 4.4 Impact of External Forces on Chinese Orchestras.

Beginning with a discussion of the structural characteristics and tacit rules that are designed to enable CO musicians to collaborate effectively with one another, Chapter 4 reveals the positive and negative aspects of these components in enabling the COs to produce outstanding performances. It further shows how the seemingly stable structural organisation of the orchestral entities is often challenged, or even undermined by certain fundamental realities. Specifically, individual CO musicians have their own creative and economic interests, as well as their ambitions, which may or may not correspond with the collective nature of the orchestra. Moreover, the types of social interactions that actually take place in the CO environments suggest that the orchestral environment is more a contested and conflict-driven environment than one marked by harmony and collaboration.

Finally, a discussion on the influence of external forces on the development of COs in Singapore presents the voices of the CO musicians who are affected by the over-emphasis on the culture of competitions and the system of examinations and reveals the agenda and motivation of the external forces that are promoting an environment that is not necessarily conducive to the cultivation of a genuine interest in CO music.

Chapter 5, “Conclusion”, comprises reflections on my research process, starting with a discussion of the unexpected deviation of my research from my original intentions. To me, the greatest challenge in persisting with and completing this thesis was the revelation of the many negative aspects of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore. Initially intended as a celebration of the CO community in Singapore, with its impressive mega-concerts and the sheer number of operative amateur COs, this thesis ended up an exposé unveiling many underlying problems within this musical community. Knowing that this exposé could be hurtful to the CO community of which I am part, I seek to reaffirm my love for the CO community in Singapore in Chapter 5 by putting forth my thesis as a necessary first step in addressing many of the hidden problems that plague the CO music scene. This chapter will thus present suggestions for how the CO musicians within this community can improve the status of the CO in Singapore. Moreover, I put forth suggestions for further research, which could build on the work undertaken in this thesis.

Section I – Historical Development

2. The Historical Development of Chinese Orchestras

Introduction

To understand the cultural underpinnings behind the CO as it has developed in Singapore and the cultural identity it holds today, it is important to first examine the development of the CO in China. This examination is derived from library research, as well as interviews with my network of contacts, including fellow performers, teachers, and other professionals in this field both in mainland China and Singapore.

Library research involved the collection, organisation and translation of news articles, essays and related literature from Chinese into English. As the CO has a relatively short history of less than 80 years, there is little established literature about this topic in either Western or Chinese languages. Further hampering the growth of literature is the fact that the CO as a concept has been evolving at an extremely rapid pace, and has been characterised by the continual invention, adoption, modification, and elimination of instruments, as well as constant changes of repertory. The CO only became more stable and consolidated in the 1980s. Finally, the dearth of literature in this area can also be partially attributed to the particular political and social circumstances that have shaped the formation and growth of this musical genre. This made it inconvenient for the Chinese musicians themselves to question, criticise, and analyse the genre without incurring possible adverse consequences.

Therefore, to bolster my library research, I also conducted interviews with CO veterans, professionals and students in China. This research approach allowed me to gain the latest and most updated information on the growth and development of the CO in contemporary society directly from those who are actively involved in the actual practice of the CO. Their input enabled me to go beyond a historical examination of the CO in China to incorporate an ethnological component that takes into consideration the interaction between the CO and the people involved in the field.

In this chapter, I give an overview of the history and the formation of the CO, exploring its inception and growth. I present the initiatives taken by dedicated Chinese orchestral musicians undertaken in creating and developing this musical genre from scratch. Moreover, I assess the effect of political events, particularly the Cultural Revolution. Finally, I briefly describe the current state of the CO in mainland China and the development of the musical genre in other locations overseas.

History of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

Origins

The concept of orchestras and group ensemble playing was prevalent throughout China's ancient past. From the existence of the court orchestras of *yayue* and *yanyue* to the regional folk ensembles of the common people, group performance formed an integral part of music-making throughout the various strata of Chinese society.¹ Music before the 1920s² was classified broadly in accordance with the various functions it served, including that of ritualism, procession, and entertainment. It is also important to note that owing to China's development in foreign trade and commerce and the silk route since the Han Dynasty, China's music and instruments have been constantly shaped by foreign influences (Han 1979:2).

Excavations of tombs have provided concrete evidence of the existence of orchestras of various sizes in ancient China. For example, in the excavation in 1978 of Marquis Zeng Houyi's tomb in present Hubei, relics were found of a large bell and drum orchestra from over 2000 years ago. This orchestra used *bianzhong* (a set of elaborate pitched bronze bells) and *jiangu* (ancient drums) as its primary instruments (Zhao 1994:404-05).³ The finds of this excavation proved that large-scale orchestras were already in existence in ancient China, and that they had relatively advanced music making systems and instruments. While such orchestras usually catered to the rich and the influential, religious orchestras and folk ensembles such as *sizhu*,⁴ *nanguan* (Southern wind music),⁵ and Taoist music ensembles,⁶ among other group musical activities, were simultaneously developed and enjoyed by the common folk (Liu and Yu 2004:406-07; Yuan 2000).

¹ Further reading and research about China's ancient orchestras can be found in Yang (1981), Qiao (1999), Sun and Zhou (1999) and Liu (2001).

² The New Culture Movement of the 1920s, cumulating into the May Fourth Movement, came from the fall of the Qing dynasty and resulted in a movement of intellectuals blaming the cultural heritage of China for its many wrongs. The movement brought interest in Western music and caused the re-evaluation of Chinese culture.

³ For more information, refer to Falkenhausen (1993).

⁴ *Sizhu* ensembles comprised of instruments that were made of bamboo and silk; hence, they were also called Silk and Bamboo Ensembles. Their music-making was largely based on improvisation and free-range ornamentation over a skeletal melody. It was from this form of ensemble that the modern CO was developed. For more information, refer to Witzleben (1995) and Jones (1995).

⁵ *Nanguan* is an instrumental ensemble popular in the south of China. For more information refer to Yeh (1988) and Jones (1995).

⁶ Taoist music was used for religious ceremonies. For more information, see Yuan (2000) and Verellen (1995).

According to Tsui (2002, following also Han 1979), in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, China had become politically and economically weak, following repeated humiliation by Westerners and the Japanese. In the face of this development, many Chinese intellectuals perceived the necessity for modernisation and advancement, and deemed that Westernisation held the key to China's progress. Chinese intellectuals at the time held the belief that the Western value system was superior to that of Chinese culture. This perception would lead to the creation of the modern CO – the integration of Western orchestral practices with traditional Chinese music and musical instruments.

Western music was presented by the heavily Western-influenced Chinese elite to the Chinese commoners as a culturally and scientifically advanced system of art, largely due to the technological and economic power the West had over the rest of the world. This in turn translated to Western music and harmony being held as a symbol of progress and advancement. Western music was deemed to be “artistically and technologically advanced”, while “Chinese music was antiquated and stagnant” (Tsui 2002:228). This perception was further bolstered by Japan's Meiji Restoration⁷ that showed the successful assimilation of Western influences into the Japanese way of life. It was further supported by China's May Fourth Movement,⁸ with its supporters encouraging rapid Westernisation as a form of modernisation.

Beginnings of the Modern Chinese Orchestra

The inception of the modern CO could be attributed to the ideas of Cai Yuanpei, the then-president of Peking University and a strong advocate of the May Fourth Movement. He put forth the notion that the best attributes of Western music could be used to compensate for Chinese music's weaknesses. His proposal triggered a series of discussions about the problems of Chinese music, which culminated in the formation of the Peking University Music Society in 1919 (Tsui 2002:228).

⁷ China had lost to Japan in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895 and many Chinese had felt a great sense of shame, having lost to a nation geographically and demographically much smaller than China.

⁸ The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement that began as a response to the insult imposed on China by the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. It gradually brought about an ideology of Chinese nationalism and a re-evaluation of Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism.

The Society provided instruction in Western and Chinese musical instruments. In 1922, the famous Chinese musician, Liu Tianhua, joined the faculty as an instrumental tutor in the *erhu* and the *pipa*. Experienced in the violin and trumpet, Liu reformed the *huqin*, a folk fiddle, by applying violin techniques to its performance and composing for the instrument. The changes elevated the *huqin*'s status from that of a folk instrument to a concert instrument, which could be used in concerts and staged performances. Liu improved the make of the *huqin*, reconstructing its sound box and design, expanding its musical and dynamic ranges, and wrote new repertory for it.⁹

In 1927, Liu incorporated Guoyue Gaijinshe (Institute for the Improvement of Chinese Music) and founded its official periodical, *Music Magazine (Yinyue zazhi)* (Wang 2001:28). One of the institute's initiatives was an instrumental ensemble. The instrumental ensemble was a unique, extended *sizhu* ensemble, which had group instrumentation with more than one player per instrument (for example, groups of *erhu* or *pipa*) playing together. Such a practice was unheard of in traditional *sizhu* ensembles, which usually boasted only one player per instrument. Liu scored for this ensemble, notating note values, ornamentation, tempi, and dynamics, thus moving toward the Western practice of notation and parts, and away from the oral traditions – the way music was transmitted in the past (Tsui 2002:229). Through his actions, Liu was pushing forth a new ideology of Westernising and modernising the CO.

Nettl (1978:10), in *Eight Urban Musical Cultures*, points out differences between Westernisation and modernisation, noting that:

[Westernisation] is used simply to describe the absorption of Western elements into a non-Western music. Most obvious are the introduction of Western instruments, harmony, and notation, as well as the technologies of recording and broadcasting.

while,

[M]odernization is the process whereby, through similar additions, a music retains its traditional essence but becomes modern — that is, part of the contemporary world and its set of values. The motivation is opposite to that mentioned above for westernisation; the traditional music is changed in order to remain intact in the modern world, not in order to become a part of Western civilization (*ibid.*).

⁹ For more information see Liu and Yu (2004).

With the CO, an evolution of both principles mentioned was in effect. The initial ideology of the pioneers of the CO was to embrace Westernisation as a form of modernisation and advancement, using Chinese traditional music as a root culture and Western music to further enhance its practicality and status. Hence Western elements and instruments were absorbed into the CO with the purpose of making Chinese traditional music advanced in a Chinese cultural context and without it becoming a part of Western civilisation. Nettl (1985:58) presents the example of an Iranian experimental orchestra that had embraced Westernisation to show that Iranians could do anything with Iranian music that had been done with Western music. This motivation was different from that of the CO, which was focused on musical modernisation. However, both countries used Western music as a benchmark and platform from which to develop modernised orchestras. Moreover, when they were created, neither had a repertory; instead, special music had to be composed for them.

The pursuit of such an ideology also took place elsewhere in Shanghai where Zheng Jinwen founded the Datong Society of Music in 1920. Although originally set up to develop the ancient music of *yayue*, the society also embarked on the improvement of Chinese traditional instrumental music and, following the example of Liu, engaged in reinventing and upgrading folk instruments.¹⁰ In fact, the society's members took their exploration further by researching orchestration for Chinese ensembles (Wang 2001:33).

By the beginning of the 1930s, the Datong Society had an orchestra that consisted of 30 members and four sections: bowed strings, plucked strings, winds and percussion. Datong's Liu Yaozhang composed the first Chinese large ensemble piece, *Chunjiang huayue ye* (Spring Blossoms on a Moonlight Night), by basing it on the *pipa* solo, *Xiyang xiaogu* (Flute and Drum at Sunset) (Wang 2001:33). The work, orchestrated in a Western fashion, used traditional folk styles and instruments. The work paved the way for other adaptations of traditional pieces:

The Datong music society was established and consisted of musicians like Wei Zhongle, Qin Pengzhang, and Sun Yude. But many of the members then were amateur musicians who had an avid interest in traditional Chinese music. While the members had a strong ideology, not many had the musical abilities to realise it... there was a lot of trial and error going on. Qin, for example, held a day

¹⁰ Some instruments that the Datong Society invented include: *zhonghu* (the baritone fiddle), *zhuiqin* (the bass fiddle), and *erjie di* (the adjustable two-node bamboo flute). The latter two instruments are no longer used today.

job in a record company... many of Datong's members all had day jobs and relied on their passion to spur them on.¹¹

As Datong and Liu's Institute carried out its activities, other similar music clubs and ensembles, spurred by a similar ideology, were set up. This included the Zhengfeng Guoyueshe in Nanjing, Baixue Guoyueshe, and Shaoguang in Beijing (Tsui 2002:228-29). These music clubs were the first "orchestras", or large ensembles, which spurred the growth of the modern CO.

At the same time, it is important to highlight the fact that even before the Cultural Revolution in 1949, the proliferation of these Chinese orchestral music entities were "not so much experimental groups for the purpose of competing with their Western counterparts as institutions to encourage communal labour and music-making in a socialist society" (Nettl 1985:59). Thus the development of Chinese orchestral music, from the very start, was shaped and influenced by a politico-social agenda, while it was being musically innovative and pushing the frontiers of Chinese music.

For instance, in a bid to arouse people's pride in their national identity, the Broadcasting Company of China based in Nanjing decided to capitalise on the initiative and the activity of the Chinese ensembles and music societies by incorporating Chinese folk music in this new formation within its programming. In 1935, a group of Chinese musicians including Chen Jilue, Gan Tao, Hu Liezhen, Gao Yi, Qiao Jifu, and Gao Ziming formed a Chinese music ensemble – China Broadcast Chinese Ensemble – within the broadcasting company. Two years later, when the broadcasting station moved to Chongqing, the broadcasting company brought along the ensemble (Tsui 2002:229).

In his account of the development of the China Broadcast Chinese Ensemble, a Chinese music veteran highlights the highly-politicised environment of the Chinese orchestra at the time:

The seeds of the formal Chinese orchestra began in Chongqing. Politics was heavily involved in this: the broadcast ensemble was a folk ensemble under the Kuomintang, with many nationalist party members in it. All the musicians called it *guoyue*¹² then... It was started by the nationalists and it was meant to unify the various peoples and minorities of China. As there were many regional folk ensembles in China, the nationalists wanted to create a "super" ensemble that could play most genres

¹¹ CO veteran, formal interview, May 2007, China.

¹² The term *Guoyue*, means national music, named after the nationalist cause.

of folk music and inevitably unify the people. This ensemble was also to serve as a means for the preservation of all folk music... This ensemble was to be able to play in small groups, as well as in a large orchestral fashion. It would be able to play large orchestral works and folk ditties; in a sense, it was really a “super orchestra”.

When the nationalists later fled to Taiwan,¹³ this ensemble was divided. Half went to Taiwan and the other half stayed in China. The many who fled were afraid of the communists; as a result, the ensemble in Chongqing disbanded. Later, the Communist government wanted to form such an ensemble at their Beijing headquarters. About ten members from this original Chongqing ensemble went to Beijing to be part of the Central Broadcast Chinese Orchestra, and among these few members was Peng Xiuwen.¹⁴ This happened in 1951.¹⁵

The Formative Years

When the communist government took control of China in 1949, the government used various art forms to spread political messages and propaganda. The experimental Chinese music ensemble was one such art form. In 1952, the Chinese Ministry of Culture in China decided to form professional Chinese orchestras that would later develop into the modern day COs. Its first creation was the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra that same year, followed by the Central Song and Dance Chinese Orchestra and the China Broadcast Orchestra in 1953; the China Film Orchestra in 1956, the Ji’nan Qianwei Military Chinese Orchestra in 1956, and the Central Chinese Orchestra in 1960 (Liang 2004:104).

Professional Chinese orchestras then usually numbered seven to ten in size, with the largest consisting of only 20 musicians. In 1953, the Central Song and Dance Ensemble started a CO with an initial membership of 18. The following year, the orchestra increased its membership to 27. In 1953, the Central Broadcasting Centre started the Central Broadcast Chinese Orchestra with an initial membership of over 30 members, the biggest of all the ensembles at that time (Piao 2003:223). Yu Liangmo, the retired assistant conductor of the China Broadcast Orchestra recalls this orchestra’s inception:

Zhang Jingde, the then Vice-Chair of the Arts Department of the Central Broadcast Station in Beijing, wrote a report, stating that he wanted to form an ensemble that had two arms reaching out, one to the east and one to the west. Zhang was greatly influenced by the ideals of the Datong music

¹³ The nationalists had lost to the communists in a civil war that lasted from the 1930s to 1949.

¹⁴ Peng Xiuwen who passed away in December 1996 was later to become the conductor of the Broadcast Chinese Orchestra and a central figure in the development of the modern CO.

¹⁵ Chinese music veteran, formal interview, May 2007, China.

society. He wanted to create an ensemble that could combine all the folk ensembles together, a super ensemble that could play *sizhu* music, Cantonese music, Taoist music... all types of music.... This was unheard of at that time. I joined the ensemble in 1953 and I was one of the younger musicians roped in to be part of the pioneer batch of this “super ensemble”. In Beijing, the orchestra recruited some folk music enthusiasts. However, the broadcast station wanted to create a large folk ensemble, similar to that of an orchestra. In order to do so, they needed new blood and more members. There was a massive recruitment exercise. From the north, the broadcast station recruited a few wind players; from Suzhou, they recruited the many Taoist musicians who were excellent drummers and flautists; and from Shanghai, they recruited *pipa* players for they were famous for their *sizhu* music. Zhang himself became the concertmaster of this ensemble and the broadcast station provided all the funding.¹⁶

Apart from professional orchestras, numerous amateur COs were also formed in schools, factories, and farms during this period of time, with encouragement in the form of funding from the Chinese government (Piao 2003:223).

For the most part, these Chinese instrumental ensembles played folk repertory and arranged pieces. It was the Broadcast Chinese Orchestra – the largest of the COs – that spearheaded the first modernised CO, creating a model that is used by all COs today. According to Gao’s (1959) description of a performance in 1942, the Broadcast Ensemble, while in Chongqing, had already adopted Western symphony orchestral practices. In the words of Gao (1959:86-7):

The orchestra of about 20 sat in a fanlike arrangement, facing the audience; the musicians had music stands and followed a conductor who used a baton. Inspired by the arrangement of the Western orchestra, the Broadcast Ensemble was divided into the four sections mentioned at the beginning of this article: winds, plucked strings, bowed strings, and percussion.

In 1952, a touring performance of neighbouring communist Russia’s *balalaika* and folk orchestras had particularly impressed Chinese musicians who were amazed at the Russian orchestras’ intonation and instrumentation (Tsui 2002:230-31). This, in turn, spurred Chinese musicians to question their folk ensembles’ lack of proper instrumentation and intonation. Besides instrumentation, the modern CO was also compounded with problems with its small range of available musical works. Facing these challenges, various musical ensembles organised themselves and divided their tasks in various areas to resolve these difficulties. Yu recalled steps that the Broadcast Chinese Orchestra took:

¹⁶ Yu Liangmo, formal interview, 7 May 2007, Beijing.

Once we were all recruited into the broadcast orchestra, we were faced with gigantic problems.... First, there was a lack of instruments that allowed us to form an orchestra and secondly, as our instruments were all not diatonic, much less chromatic, we could not play together! The *pipa* then had only 13 frets; how were we going to play anything with the Taoist musicians who could play many of the semitones that we couldn't and vice versa? Also, Zhang Jingde who wrote the proposal for the Beijing Broadcast Orchestra wanted a large ensemble, but we had nothing to play. The whole ensemble of about 30 of us was activated and we were all split into three groups to form a fully-fledged orchestra.

The first group was in charge of orchestral affairs. This group handled all the administrative responsibilities for the ensemble. The second group dealt with resource development. This group collected resources from the various folk musics all round China to provide the needed materials for us to play. The third group was responsible for instrument improvement. It was in charge of inventing and repairing instruments. This group of people was tasked with increasing the range of the current folk instruments and improving the various instruments' timbre and texture of sound to make it more "blendable". They also had the task of improving the tonal quality of the current folk instruments.

One of our members, Wang Zhongbing, invented the *ruan* (plucked lute), dividing it into alto and bass sections, as there were no bass equivalents available among the plucked stringed instruments. The *yangqin* (Chinese dulcimer) player, Yang Jinming, reformed the *yangqin*, allowing it to be fully chromatic and resonant. The *sheng* (mouth organ) and *suona* (Chinese shawm) were both expanded into soprano, alto, tenor, and bass variants. This was done with consideration to the many symphonic pieces that had reed and brass instruments. The *sheng* took the equivalent of reed instrumental parts, while the *suona* took the place of brass instruments in the Chinese orchestra. Among other instruments for which the orchestra was responsible were the *paigu* (pitched drums) and the *yunluo* (pitched gongs).

However, we still had problems with the bass section of the orchestra and so we invented the *gehu* (bass fiddle). Regardless of our efforts, we still could not come up with a prototype as good as the cello and bass. We tried using the *matouqin* (Mongolian horse-head fiddle), but its sound was too weak; in the end, we just ended up using the cello and bass.

For our work, the orchestra was awarded the "scientific prize" by the Chinese government for innovation. A lot of time and effort was spent on instrumental reform and we worked with all the major instrument factories to produce our instruments. It was really like a revolution of Chinese music. The Broadcast Orchestra organised an instrumental exhibition where we displayed three-stringed *erhus* and four-stringed *sanxians*!¹⁷

¹⁷ The *erhu* is a two-stringed fiddle, while the *sanxian* is a three-stringed lute. The words *er* and *san* found in the prefix of both words mean 'two' and 'three' respectively. As such, the statement is ironic.

Many of our instruments were not successful. They were found to be either poorly-designed or did not produce the required sound qualities suitable for the Chinese orchestra. However, a few like the *zhonghu* and *ruan* are still kept today.¹⁸

The reform of the various instruments allowed the Broadcast Chinese Orchestra to reach larger pitch ranges and enabled it to play complex harmony and counterpoint. Intonation was also standardised and most instruments were extended until full chromatic scales could be played. Pieces that were played at that time included works that were re-arranged from traditional folk ensembles for the orchestra, as well as new compositions. Early works for the CO included Cantonese folk songs like *Hantian lei* (Thunder in Drought) and composed works like He Luting's *Senji de ma* (Horses in the Forest) and Peng Xiuwen's adaptation of Liu Teshan and Mao Yuan's *Yaozu wuqu* (Dance of the Yao People).

Changes and innovations were not solely limited to the reforms of instruments and compositions. During this period of innovation and initiative, the musicians in the orchestra also experienced the effects of these changes, as they were required to undergo retraining. Chen Yin, grandson of Broadcast Orchestra pioneer Chen Jilue, and a principal musician with the Broadcast Orchestra recalls:

The orchestra didn't have trained conservatory graduates whom they could pick from to join the orchestra then, and many of the musicians who were recruited needed training in western music. The orchestra took to training their musicians themselves and invited teachers to teach theory, aural, and harmony. Orchestra members were also sent to different parts of China to collect folk music for the orchestra, which was eventually to be rearranged for the orchestra to play.¹⁹

In total, the CO, through all of its changes and reforms, differs from the traditional Chinese ensemble music in the following ways. Gao Ziming (1959:86-87) highlights them:

1. The modern ensemble had four sections: Wind instruments, Plucked Stringed instruments, Bowed Stringed instruments, and Percussion. This was unlike traditional ensembles that did not divide instrumentation distinctly into sections and did not have sections with instruments divided into soprano, alto, tenor, and bass ranges.
2. Music that was written for the CO followed Western concepts of harmony, counterpoint, time signatures, and theory.

¹⁸ Yu Liangmo, formal interview, 7 May 2007, Beijing.

¹⁹ Chen Yin, formal interview, 18 May 2005, Beijing.

3. Sight reading and learning by score, instead of improvisation and learning by oral transmission, was the *modus operandi*.
4. The presence of a conductor was required, unlike the traditional Chinese ensemble that did not have a conductor.
5. Pieces were scored in cipher or Western bar-staff notation, with ornamentation fully transcribed, including dynamic markings. Western musical terminology in Italian and French was also used in Chinese orchestral pieces.
6. A Full Score with parts was used.

As an artistic organisation supported by the government, the Broadcast Chinese Orchestra developed quickly:

The Broadcast Orchestra then had a performance every week and it was very popular among the masses. Everyone wanted to watch the orchestra perform.... As a child, I remember watching the orchestra in awe. The orchestra played mostly solo or small folk ensemble work at that time and not full orchestral works as not many were available.²⁰

Yu further points out:

Full orchestral works then took the form of pieces adapted from early Chinese compositions of Western symphonic work. For example, we took He Luting's *Senji de ma* (Horses in the Forest) for symphony orchestra and adapted it for the Chinese orchestra. Based on these compositions, we expanded the ranges of the instruments accordingly. In 1956, in the first-ever (and last) China Music Week,²¹ the orchestra played its first full orchestral performance. It played He Luting's *Senji de ma* (Horses in the Forest) and Peng Xiuwen's adaptation of the *Dance of the Yao People* among other works. The composer He Luting hated Chinese music, but he came to watch our performance. Our performance was wildly successful, and the broadcast station, following our successful performance, confirmed that our orchestra was here to stay and promised more financing. Before the concert in 1956, Peng Xiuwen and Zeng Xun were proclaimed conductors of this orchestra. I was made assistant conductor alongside wind player Liu Sen, and also assumed the post of sectional leader of the plucked stringed section.

In 1957, at the 5th International Friendship Festival in Moscow, the orchestra made its debut abroad. The orchestra won a first prize in the competition category and that was when we showcased the first modern Chinese orchestra to the world.²²

²⁰ Chen Yin, formal interview, 18 May 2005, Beijing

²¹ The China Music Week was intended as a government-initiated music festival to showcase Chinese, Western, and other musical ensembles for seven days. The festival, however, occurred only in 1956.

²² Yu Liangmo, formal interview, 7 May 2007, Beijing.

Li Guanghua, Head of the Department of Chinese Instrumental Music at the Central Conservatory in Beijing and once a musician with the Central Chinese Orchestra affirms the Broadcast Orchestra's fame at that time:

With its brand of innovative performances, the Broadcast Orchestra had an excellent reputation and was immensely popular. No one had seen such an orchestra before and no one had seen such a large group of folk instruments on stage playing simultaneously. Their orchestra's concerts were always full and people were always excited. It also helped that the Broadcast Orchestra provided music for many radio and television shows. At that time, radios were the only form of entertainment and because of this, the orchestra received especially wide exposure when compared to the other orchestras like the Film Orchestra. There were definitely more radio listeners than film goers. It was also the Broadcast Orchestra that spearheaded the sense of prestige among many young conservatory graduates, in joining a Chinese orchestra. In that era, if you could get into a good orchestra, like the Broadcast Orchestra, it was an indication that you had the potential to develop and excel as a Chinese musician.²³

In spite of its popularity and success, another Chinese music veteran recalls that the reformed modern CO, while receiving much praise, also had its detractors who were quick to criticise the modern CO's formation:

There were detractors at that time, from the China Film Orchestra, which comprised members like Liu Mingyuan and Wang Fandi. Their orchestra played folk ditties and *sizhu* music and their orchestra was smaller than the Broadcast Orchestra. They ridiculed the Broadcast Orchestra as the "lousy version of a symphony orchestra", and the Broadcast Orchestra members in turn ridiculed them in turn for being old-fashioned. In the end, the Film Orchestra adopted the Broadcast Orchestra's Chinese orchestral model.²⁴

From the initial stages of the 1960s until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, to differentiate the reformed modern CO from other Chinese ensembles, the terms 新型民族乐队 *xinxing minzu yuedui* (new modern Chinese ensemble) or 综合性的民族乐队 *zonghe xing de minzu yuedui* (combined Chinese ensemble) were used to describe this particular art form (Piao 2003:223). The orchestra in the 1960s had become standardised, with stringed instruments forming the core of the orchestra. Besides the Broadcast Orchestra, the Ji'nan Qianwei Military Chinese Orchestra started a series of instrument explorations and modifications. Its members added instruments like the *liuqin*

²³ Li Guanghua, formal interview, 6 May 2007, Beijing.

²⁴ Chinese music veteran, formal interview, May 2007, China.

and primarily developed its orchestra's wind and percussion sections by introducing variations of the alto and bass *suona* into the modern CO (Tsui 2002:230-31).

While instruments were constantly being developed and reformed in the 1950s and early 1960s, compositions for the CO were not developing as rapidly as solo compositions for Chinese instruments. Composers were not familiar with this new genre of music. Few professional composers were willing to write for the modern CO because of its relative newness and lack of artistic integrity, despite its popularity and support by the government. Compositions and arrangements for the CO during this period of time were deemed to be amateur and the COs were constantly trying to imitate the soundscape created by symphony orchestras (Liang 2004:111).

Since Han's (1979) scholarship on the CO, it has been widely acknowledged among Chinese music researchers²⁵ that the CO is a westernised Chinese folk orchestral tradition where "westernisation... led to the extension of the orchestral range and to a standardisation of instruments" (Tsui 2002:229). Buchanan's (1995) research on Bulgarian modernised folk orchestras is similarly reflective of the CO's evolution. She writes about the institutionalisation of traditional music that has produced:

A contemporary national music style grounded in centuries of custom but aspiring to the values promoted by Western classical music, resulting in a confrontation between older musical values and Western ideals of music professionalism (Buchanan 1995:390-91).

Peng Xiuwen, who wrote and adapted numerous pieces for the orchestra, was a strong advocate of the CO, and argued in favour of the CO in response to comments of the orchestra being a copy of the Western orchestra or the Russian *balalaika* orchestra. In his last interview before he passed away, he was quoted as saying the following:

When we first put the Chinese Orchestra together – creating the China Broadcast Chinese Orchestra, we did not start out by placing the Western orchestra on the table as a blueprint... Our decision to configure four sections for the ethnic orchestra was a natural one; it was based on the innate qualities of the instruments themselves.... I am not surprised by such observations, nor do I think them very correct. The reason why I am not surprised is that people are subject to preconceptions. If history had run in a way that meant that the Chinese orchestra existed before the Western orchestra, then the preconception would have been reversed. Just because the Western orchestra has a longer history and

²⁵ See also Stock (1996), Tsui (2002), Xue (1994), and Liang (2004).

came into being before our ethnic orchestra, many would choose to believe that ours is a replica of the Western orchestra, or of the *balalaika* orchestra.²⁶

In spite of the difficulties and criticisms, the CO grew rapidly with the help of substantial governmental support, both financially and politically.

Cultural Revolution and Its Impact on Chinese Orchestras

Yet, ironically, politics and the government, both of which had a strong role to play in the development of the CO, would also be the same entities responsible for its virtual demise. In 1966, the Cultural Revolution²⁷ erupted in China. As a consequence of this radical political change, much of China's traditional music, literature, and art were destroyed as they were deemed "old ways of thinking" by the new Chinese government. Many Chinese musicians, skilled workers, and intellectuals were sent to labour camps out of fear that they would lead political uprisings against the ruling government. COs were dismissed by the order of the government, and conservatories and universities stopped all entrance examinations. Subsequently, Chinese orchestral development came to a halt. A Chinese orchestral veteran recalls:

Anyone who had ideas was accused of opposing the government. Anyone who had an outstanding talent or ability was deemed a threat to the government. As a result, I was "volunteered down" to work. I headed down to the villages, with friends, to Changzhou. Another leading Chinese orchestral conductor was with me. The work was compulsory and I, an artist, worked as a labourer for a year. I was no different from a beggar while digging trenches all day. My hands were all numb with sores. They used to bleed profusely and I was in much pain. When we woke up, we worked and ate the cores of corns and willow leaves. I was so thin that I could see my cheekbones fully. When I went back home, I had forgotten how to play [my instrument]. I could not even open my hands to its full length because I had done so much shovelling. My hands were just gripped in the same position. My mother just cried and cried. I know that I was sent down to the villages because of my involvement in the Chinese orchestras and my ability to play.... It was a period of time where people criticised you if you ate well. Everyone believed in eating together, living together, working together. The whole country was thought of as a machine and you were something that they just used. After this

²⁶ Translated from *The Story of Hugo Records* (Yi 2002:152).

²⁷ The Cultural Revolution, lasting ten years from 1966 to 1976, was a struggle within the Communist Party in China that led to the destruction of China's antiques, historical sites, and traditional culture. The revolution was a campaign to rid China of its "liberal bourgeois" elements. Much of China's historical reserves, antiques, and culture were destroyed as they were thought to be at the root of "old ways of thinking". See Clark (2008) and Pietrusza (1996) for more information.

experience, I was not scared of anything anymore. I re-learnt my instrument and used my past experiences to remember everything again.²⁸

Li Guanghua along with Wang Huiran, former conductor of Ji'nan Qianwei Military Chinese Orchestra, also recounted their experiences with the Cultural Revolution:

I was also “sent down” to work for a period of time. I went to an area near Mingshan and I had to do a year of labour. I grew vegetables and was the representative for vegetables in my team. Society was a mess at that time... everything was a mess.²⁹

The Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 left a great impact on me as at that time... musicians were not allowed to perform. There was a severe punishment for secretly practising the arts during the Revolution. In 1977, after the Cultural Revolution, when the radio played its first programme, it played Chinese music and one of my compositions was among the songs. Everyone was listening to the radio because we were just liberated. At that point, I was so moved that I cried.³⁰

The 10 years of damage almost destroyed the musical genre of CO. After the “Gang of Four”³¹ was dissolved in 1976, the CO did not immediately regain its former standing; orchestral composition resumed again in the late 1970s, but only very carefully. Orchestral pieces written during this period were composed for revolutionary and political purposes, and carried Communist slogans and ideology. Nonetheless, many composers also used these government-sanctioned pieces to articulate the dissension among workers and peasants and to capture the social turmoil of this period through the use of allegory (Liang 2004:112).

The Revival of the Chinese Orchestra

From the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1980s, orchestras that were dismissed because of the Cultural Revolution started to revive and formally took the term *Minzu Guanxian Yuedui* (Orchestra of National Instruments).³² By this time, instrumentation had more or less been standardised and COs were considered a linkage to China's traditional musical culture, following the effects of the Cultural Revolution (Piao 2003:224-25).

²⁸ CO veteran, formal interview, May 2007, China.

²⁹ Li Guanghua, formal interview, 6 May 2007, Beijing.

³⁰ Wang Huiran, formal interview, 23 March 2005, Singapore.

³¹ The “Gang of Four” was a group of four communist party leaders who were blamed for many of the atrocities committed during the Cultural Revolution. They were arrested and removed from their positions in 1976.

³² *Minzu* in this usage means “of the people”, in this case it would refer to the Chinese people and an orchestra that was built on this premise was a national one. *Guanxian Yuedui* meant “orchestra”; hence, the full translation of “*Minzu Guanxian Yuedui*” would be an “Orchestra of National Instruments”.

In 1979, the China Musicians' Association organised the National Music Composition Conference and Competition to initiate and promote Chinese compositions in symphony orchestras and COs. Participants at the conference who were Chinese musicians suggested that the compositions of Chinese ensembles be split into three categories: full-scale Chinese orchestral works written for orchestras with an envisaged membership of 60-80 people, medium-sized orchestras numbering 30-60 musicians, and chamber orchestras and ensembles numbering two to 30 musicians. Instrumentation for the orchestras was standardised for large and medium orchestras, which greatly aided the CO's progression as a musical group (Liang 2004:114-16).

The National Music Composition Conference and Competition was constituted as the driving force for the development of new compositions for the CO. Under the purview of the three categories, numerous works were created for both full orchestras and chamber ensembles. The compositions in turn fuelled the growth of Chinese orchestral music's popularity and by 1983, at the Third National Music Composition Conference and Competition, chamber works submitted for entry totalled 211 pieces (including solos and duets) and full orchestral compositions from all districts and cities in China added up to over 1000 pieces. Chinese instrumental music competitions and Chinese orchestral competitions were also initiated, leading to a rapid increase not only in the standards of Chinese instruments, but also the number of Chinese instrumentalists. Composers also started realising the potential of the CO for film music and many wrote for the orchestra to be used as background music for movies (Liang 2004:114-16).

The 1980s saw the COs increase in their performance standards and the rising trend in composing Chinese instrumental concertos broke the silence of the once-feeble Chinese orchestral scene. By the mid-1980s, there was a "concerto-fever" with over 30 *erhu* concertos composed and performed, along with more than 100 *guzheng* concertos. Even recently-reformed instruments like the *zhongruan* also had concertos. The concertos boasted movements that greatly increased the playing skills of musicians back then by requiring soloists to be virtuositic and sensitive to accompaniment. Piano reductions for concertos were also in fashion (Liang 2004:117).

The concept of the concerto was an external musical concept, not indigenous to Chinese music, but a showcase of Western culture that had been assimilated into the CO.

Chinese musicologist, Liang Maochun (2004), criticises the concertos composed during that period, stating that many of the Chinese instruments were still underdeveloped and that some instruments, when worked into the CO, lacked tonal quality, volume, and technique. Concertos of that time were said to be “simple, far-fetched, with most melodies being similar and lacking in musicality” (Liang 2004:117-22).

Nonetheless, Liang also acknowledges the fact that the concertos created a flourish amongst musicians and audiences, which ultimately renewed interest in the Chinese orchestral genre after its near demise during the Cultural Revolution:

In the 1950s, compositions primarily for small and medium-sized Chinese orchestras were composed and the Chinese orchestra was in its infancy. In the 1960s and 1970s due to the disturbance and interferences of Cultural Revolution, the Chinese orchestra faced problems of revival; after the long term of silence, there was rapid development in the 1980s and the most important development was the improvement done in full orchestral pieces (*ibid.*:125-26).

In the mid-1980s, following a discussion with Peng Xiuwen and Qin Pengzhang, Piao Dongsheng initiated the establishment of a Chinese music organisation that was to comprise conductors, composers, music researchers, and musicians to allow for the efficient exchange of ideas and increased research into the CO. Amid the renewed interest in the CO and the increase in the number of learners, the Chinese Orchestral Association³³ was set up in 1986 to unify Chinese orchestral musicians. Piao is currently the association’s Chairman (Piao 2003:33-34).

Conservatories were also actively involved in contributing to the revival of the Chinese orchestral genre in the 1980s. Before the Cultural Revolution, conservatories had already established departments teaching Chinese instrumental music. The Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing had established its Chinese Music Department in 1950 and the Shanghai Conservatory followed suit in 1956 (Li and Zhao 2000:ii). Students were not required to play in COs and were taught solo repertory on their respective instruments. Professional orchestras then recruited their own students, auditioning and training young musicians to become future members of the orchestra. This in turn supplied a constant stream of “new blood” for the professional orchestras. The Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, for example, recruited young musicians to train them in their respective instruments and to turn them into full-fledged members in their orchestra. Many of the orchestras at that time did

³³ “民族管弦乐队学会” meaning Minzu Guanxuan Yuedui Xuehui (Chinese Orchestral Association) was the official term used for the association.

not trust the conservatories or music departments to produce good music students. A CO veteran recounts:

The conservatories at that time had Chinese music departments, but were of a lower standard than the professional orchestras. The Central Conservatory's Chinese musicians were not up to standard then and we laughed at them. Of course, the situation now is a different matter altogether.³⁴

Following the Cultural Revolution, conservatories started re-establishing their music departments and all major conservatories saw an excess in the supply of students following the 10-year lapse. Competition for places was stringent as they were low in supply, compared to the high demand for conservatory admission. To meet the need for teachers, conservatories hired numerous folk musicians, as well as musicians from professional orchestras, to become full-time or adjunct faculty members. Yu Liangmo and Wang Huiran, both orchestral musicians initially, held adjunct positions at various conservatories.

With China gradually opening up to the rest of the world, as well as the infiltration of Western music practices into the conservatories, Chinese instrumental departments started regulating and organising their teaching methods in order to create a "scientific" and precise musical pedagogy. Using the Russian system as a role model, Chinese instrumental departments emphasised technique and technical proficiency by embracing Western training methods such as etudes, rudimentary exercises, Alexander technique, kinesics, and scales among other pedagogical exercises (Piao 2003:228-9).

Blacking (1973:33) notes that as the "growing complexity of cars, airplanes, and many other machines can be related to their efficiency as means of communication, it is often assumed that technical development in music and the arts must likewise be a sign of deeper or better expression". As such, Chinese musicians viewed speed, clarity, precision, tonal quality, and technical complexity as important characteristics in the performance of the reformed folk instruments. Increasingly, due to the conservatory's improved teaching methodology and technique, graduates could easily find jobs in professional orchestras, education, and various facets of performance, which supported such technical advancement. The most stellar students were usually retained in the conservatory to become faculty members to teach a younger generation of musicians, while in constant pursuit of perfecting Chinese instrumental pedagogy.

³⁴ CO veteran, formal interview, May 2007, China.

Creating the New Wave

In 1982, the Central Conservatory started the China Youth Chinese Orchestra, the student CO of the Central Conservatory and the first professional student CO (Li and Zhao 2000:iii).³⁵ Soon, other conservatories also started their own COs and initiated the CO as an academic module, making it compulsory for all Chinese instrumentalists in the conservatories. As such, conservatories throughout China constantly conduct research in a bid to perfect performance in the CO and increase standards for Chinese orchestral music. Conservatory orchestras were showcased in festivals and performances throughout mainland China and on the international platform. The conservatory orchestras were also pivotal in the commissioning and premiering of new work, research into the Chinese orchestral sound and instrumental timbre, and more importantly, the provision of professional musicians to COs throughout the world.

During the early 1980s, a group of young and talented young composers, trained by the conservatories, started writing avant-garde Chinese orchestral and ensemble music. This group of composers was known as the “New Wave” and they included people like Tan Dun, Chen Yi, Qu Xiaosong, Zhou Long, Chen Qigang, among others. These composers, in their grounding in the Western tradition, absorbed various contemporary compositional techniques and used folk music as the basis for developing their compositional style. Tan’s early work for the CO, *Xibei zuqu* (Northwest Suite), used native folksongs and extended contemporary techniques on Chinese instruments to create sounds and textures previously unused in the Chinese orchestral repertory.

In the mid-1980s, many of them studied in Europe or the United States and wrote extensively for Chinese instruments. These “New Wave” composers did not care to improve the “national style” of Chinese music or to compose music with nationalist themes, like their Chinese music predecessors. Instead, “most of them display[ed] a growing conviction that the aesthetics of Chinese music ought to be accepted in international circles and become an integrated part of international music.... The problem, [for the composers was],... not how to create a ‘national’ Chinese music, but [to best use] China’s treasures... to have the widest impact on new music in the future” (Chan 2002:351).³⁶

³⁵ The Chinese Orchestra was incorporated into the conservatory syllabus for musicians majoring in traditional instruments. As musicians who entered the conservatory were trained and considered to be professionals, the conservatory’s orchestra was China’s first professional student orchestra. The conservatory and orchestra musicians were paid for engagements and were frequently featured in recordings and television broadcasts.

³⁶ See also Japan Federation of Composers (2002) and Chan (2002) for more information.

The Chinese Orchestra Today

Since the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the CO has been standardised in its instrumentation to encompass four concrete sections: Bowed Stringed, Plucked Stringed, Wind, and Percussion. Each section with the exception of Percussion accounted for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts. Each section was, therefore, able to survive as an individual ensemble and all four sections could also be combined together to form a full orchestra.

The standardised sectioning of instruments spawned the creation of smaller ensembles such as bowed stringed ensembles (consisting of instruments exclusively from the bowed stringed family), plucked stringed ensembles, and wind and percussion ensembles. Though two separate sections, composers found wind and percussion ensembles to be complementary to each other, and have often written for the two sections as an ensemble in itself. This is despite the fact that there are exclusively wind ensemble pieces and percussion ensemble pieces. These smaller ensembles of the CO were self-contained chamber orchestras. Works for these ensembles were usually programmed into Chinese orchestral concerts for variety and to showcase the CO's capability for chamber work. The modern CO today consists of:

Bowed Stringed Instruments

高胡 Gaohu (Soprano Fiddle)

二胡 Erhu (Chinese Fiddle)

中胡 Zhonghu (Alto Fiddle)

Cello

Bass

板胡 Banhu (Operatic Fiddle; used only occasionally)

Plucked Stringed Instruments

柳琴 Liuqin (Soprano Lute)

琵琶 Pipa (Lute)

扬琴 Yangqin (Chinese Dulcimer)

中阮 Zhongruan (Alto Lute)

大阮 Daruan (Bass Lute)

三弦Sanxian (Three-stringed Lute)

箏Zheng (Chinese Zither)

箜篌Konghou (Chinese Harp)

Wind Instruments

笛子Dizi (Chinese Flute)

笙Sheng (Mouth Organ; soprano, alto, tenor and bass variants are used)

唢呐Suona (Chinese Shawm; soprano, alto, tenor and bass variants are used)

管Guan (Reed Pipe; soprano, alto, tenor and bass variants are used)

巴乌Bawu (Reed Flute)

排箫Paixiao (Panpipes)

埙Xun (Ocarina)

Percussion

排鼓 Paigu (Chinese Tom-toms)

大鼓 Dagu (Chinese Bass Drum)

钹 Bo (Cymbals, usually categorised by pitch differences)

锣 Luo (various shaped and sized gongs, usually categorised by pitch)

木鱼 Muyu (Wooden Blocks)

Chimes

Bells

The instruments are placed in a fan-like shape around a conductor, a layout akin to that of the Western symphony orchestra. There are two current conventional seating plans for the CO (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). These plans are not absolute and orchestras regularly make variations to them. The common characteristic in all seating arrangements is that stringed instruments are placed at the front of the stage, while wind and percussion instruments are placed at the back. This is in consideration of the tonal characteristics of the wind and percussion instruments being louder in volume.

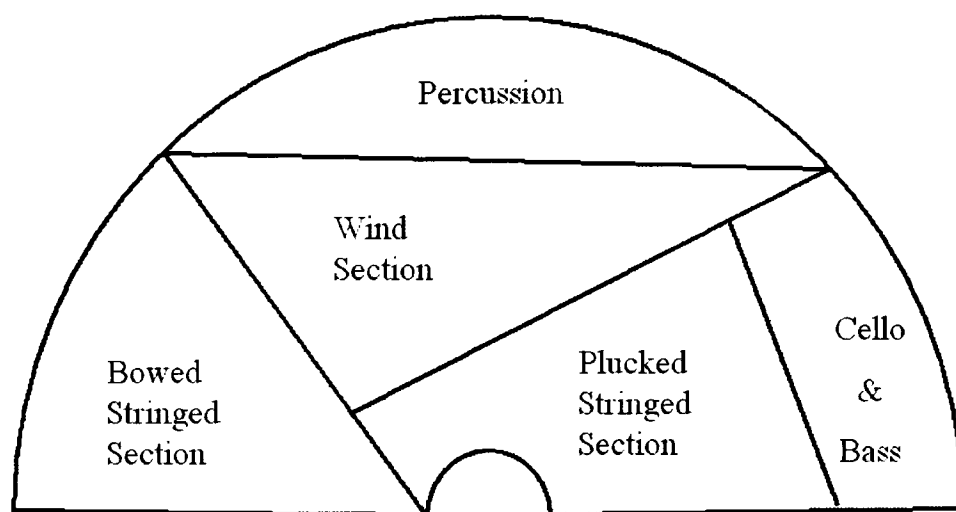


Figure 2.1 *Chinese Orchestra Seating Plan 1*

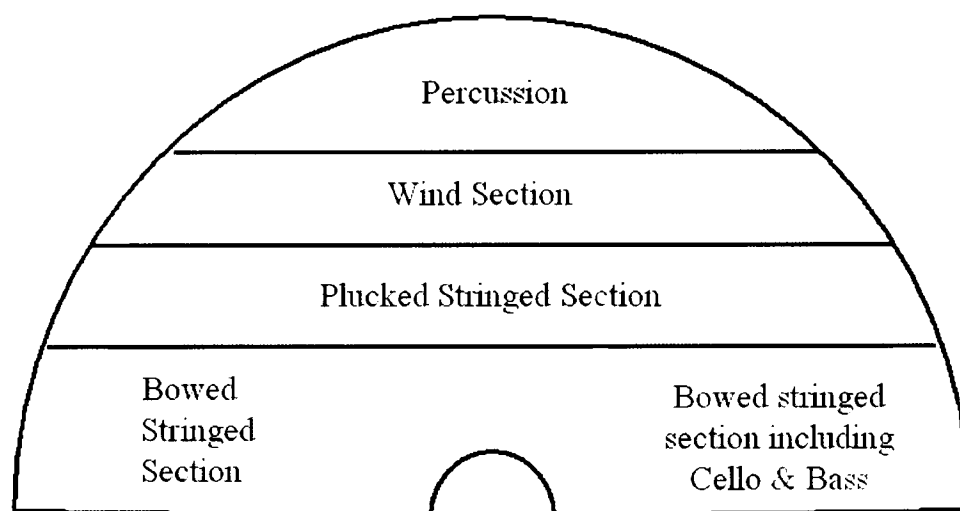


Figure 2.2 *Chinese Orchestra Seating Plan 2*

In a Full Score, instruments are scored and grouped according to their section – beginning with the wind section, followed by the percussion section, the plucked stringed section, and finally the bowed stringed section. Within each section, the instruments are arranged from their highest to lowest pitch values. The human voice or concerto instrument, if used, is scored in between the group of plucked stringed instruments and the group of bowed stringed instruments. The rationale for the positioning of the instruments on a full score is derived from the past, where bowed stringed and plucked stringed instruments used silk strings (strings used today are usually made of steel). Traditionally, these instruments were collectively known as *sixian* (silk stringed) instruments. As these were all stringed instruments, their sound quality and volumes were deemed to be closer. The bowed stringed

instruments form the foundation in COs and correspond to the different viols in a symphony orchestra. Due to their importance, they are grouped together at the bottom of the full score where they can be read easily. Plucked stringed instruments, sharing the common silk string tradition, are hence grouped above the bowed stringed instruments. Wind and percussion sections, both possessing instruments with generally loud volumes, are logically grouped together in a full score, instead of between stringed instruments.

Chinese Orchestras beyond Mainland China

Since the 1990s, the Chinese orchestral genre has become a cultural fixture in many overseas Chinese communities and has been widely accepted as one of Chinese culture's high art forms which was accessible to modern society. Overseas, Chinese orchestras thrived, especially in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Malaysia, and even Japan. Exchanges between overseas COs and their mainland counterparts have become frequent since the 90s, with the overseas communities looking to China for the latest developments in Chinese orchestral music.

Besides China, Taiwan has the largest number of professional COs, including the Taiwan National Chinese Orchestra, the Kaohsiung City Chinese Orchestra and the Taiwan Experimental Chinese Orchestra. Taiwan also has professional music institutions where Chinese instrumental and orchestral music is taught and researched. Since the late 1980s, China and Taiwan have instituted exchange programmes in which Taiwanese musicians from orchestras and ensembles can exchange information and opinions on Chinese orchestral development, thus increasing the standard and the number of Taiwanese compositions for the CO. Taiwanese COs have been lauded for their tight ensemble work and sight reading abilities, but have been generally criticised by other Chinese musicians for their lack of technique and tonal colour development when compared to mainland COs.³⁷

In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra is considered a first-class orchestra and one of the strongest in the world.³⁸ With a professional management organisation and 85 musicians, the orchestra gives hundreds of annual performances and constantly commissions new works (Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra n.d.). Through the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra's commissions, the body of Chinese orchestral works has

³⁷ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January 2006, China.

³⁸ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore

grown. Due to Hong Kong's political, financial, and geographical place in the global arena, it has been deemed to be the bridge of communication between China's orchestras and the Chinese diaspora, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when China was closed from the rest of the world. Amateur orchestras have been active in Hong Kong, with many COs having exchanges with their counterparts in mainland China. The Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra is also renowned among the Chinese orchestral circles for paying some of the highest salaries to Chinese orchestral musicians in the world.³⁹

The Macau Chinese Orchestra is the most recent of the professional COs on the international circuit and was developed under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture (Macau Chinese Orchestra n.d.). Considered a rising CO, the Macau Chinese Orchestra has been poaching talented musicians from major conservatories, luring musicians with their high pay. Salaries for Macau Chinese Orchestra's musicians have been tipped to become comparable to, if not higher than, Macau's neighbouring Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra.⁴⁰

Malaysia's Chinese orchestral activity has been stagnant for long periods of time despite its long history, due to political reasons.⁴¹ COs are most active in Penang, where more Chinese communities are located than any other parts of the country. In the 1999 Malaysian Chinese Music competition, it was recorded that there were 45 participating COs. This is an achievement, considering the political suppression of Chinese orchestral growth.

Singapore's Chinese orchestral activities are similar to those of Hong Kong, but its amateur activity is larger and more influential in scale.⁴² Although Singapore has only one professional orchestra, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO), it is home to over 150 amateur COs. The SCO is a national institution; within two years of its establishment, the orchestra toured Beijing, Shanghai, Taipei, and Taizhong. As with Hong Kong, the SCO is also responsible for commissioning new compositions and increasing the current body of Chinese orchestral work and it models its administration system on the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra.

Nonetheless, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra is still considered a lesser version of the Hong Kong Chinese orchestra by many Chinese orchestral musicians for several

³⁹ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore

⁴⁰ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore

⁴¹ Chinese communities in Malaysia do not have equal rights as Malays and Muslims in Malaysia.

⁴² SCO administrator, informal interview, February 2006, Singapore.

reasons. First, the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra is a more established entity, having gained recognition for its accomplishments earlier than its Singaporean counterpart. Many Chinese musicians and critics I spoke to feel that the SCO lacks the depth, co-ordination, and sound quality achieved by the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra. The current artistic direction and the harsher working conditions of the SCO have been largely blamed for its lack of achievement.⁴³ The SCO is a major topic in the following chapter on the CO music scene in Singapore.⁴⁴

⁴³ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore.

⁴⁴ SCO administrator, informal interview, February 2006, Singapore.

Conclusion

Thirty years since the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese orchestral genre has continued to thrive and expand. The Central Chinese Orchestra and the China Broadcast Chinese Orchestra, two of China's foremost COs today, have held concerts internationally, and have grown to a strength of about 100 professional musicians and 85 professional musicians respectively since year 2000. According to records based on graded examinations and Chinese orchestral participation in 2000, in China alone, there were an estimated hundred thousand people learning the *guzheng*, 70,000 to 80,000 people learning the *erhu* and 40,000 to 50,000 people learning the *yangqin* (Piao 2003:224).

Moreover, CO has spread to various Chinese communities abroad and experienced phenomenal growth in numbers. By the end of the 1990s, there were about 30 professional COs around the world. During the same year, there were over one thousand amateur COs worldwide, with China possessing 600 to 700 COs alone. This number was followed by Singapore that had almost 150 orchestras, and then Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia possessing close to a hundred COs each (Piao 2003:224).

Today, the CO possesses its own unique sound. Its initial problems of blending and instrumentation have been resolved through the years. Nonetheless, there continue to be deficits that need to be addressed. Piao Dongshen notes that despite the stabilisation of the basic instrumental structure of the CO, performing techniques on the CO's instruments and pedagogy are still lacking and thus, require further research. More importantly, the CO needs to solve the problem of a lack of good compositions and look into the expansion of its repertory (Piao 2003:224-25).

Yet, in view of the fact that this art form has had a history of less than a hundred years, the CO has come a long way. The majority of Chinese embrace it proudly as a traditional art form and as an organised display of China's traditional musics. Chinese throughout the world do not consider it as a reformed orchestra or a copy of the Western orchestra. Rather, the CO has evolved in a dynamic fashion over the tumultuous decades in response to the complex social and political developments of its contemporary society. After all, the Chinese orchestral genre was first developed by the contemporary society of the 1940s and 1950s to adapt and follow the cultural needs of modern society; and as

modern society has developed, the CO has evolved too, akin to Nettl's (1985) ideology of modernisation to become a part of contemporary culture.

The rapid growth of the CO, an art form fuelled by the demands of modern society, shows that just as identified folk music was an integral part of the popular culture of Chinese society in the past, the CO now occupies the same role in current Chinese society. The CO has become a symbol of national music for China, with the Chinese government frequently sending professional COs on tours to international performing venues like Vienna's Musikverein and New York's Carnegie Hall to showcase China's cultural heritage and act on behalf of the Chinese government in cultural diplomacy. As such, the CO is regarded as a classical form of art that transcends social class and status to represent the Chinese people both mainland and abroad.

3. *Hua Yue* - The Chinese Orchestra in Singapore

Introduction

In this chapter, I present background information about the emergence and development of the CO in Singapore. This chapter offers a concise discussion of the historical, political and social characteristics of Singaporean society, which have influenced the formation of the Chinese orchestral music landscape in Singapore. The subsequent chronological discussion of the development of selected professional and amateur COs in Singapore also offers further contextual information on the CO in Singapore. This latter information provides the larger context in which I situate my identification and analysis of the social processes present among the musicians within COs in Singapore in Chapter 4.

Considering the fact that the trajectory of the development of the CO in Singapore, as with its counterpart in mainland China, has been heavily influenced by the larger political and social forces, it is important to present contextual information about Singaporean society. Thus, this chapter begins with a concise overview of the attributes of Singaporean society, which have influenced the Chinese orchestral music scene in Singapore.

Background Information

The Government and Society of Singapore

Located at the southern tip of the Malayan peninsula, Singapore, the smallest country in Southeast Asia, is a multicultural society (please refer to fig 3.1). Of its current population of 4.8 million, 75.2% are ethnic Chinese (themselves of several distinct linguistic and cultural communities), 13.6% are Malays, 8.8% are Indians, with the remainder of the population consisting of minority groups including Arabs, Jews, Thais, Japanese, and Eurasians (Singapore Department of Statistics 2006:4). There is a large number of foreigners in Singapore, as shown in a recent report by Singapore's *Singapore Business Times*, whereby foreigners made up 22% of Singapore's population (Anon. 2008), with the

Ministry of Manpower reporting in 2006 that foreigners accounted for three in ten of Singapore's workforce (Ministry of Manpower, n.d.).

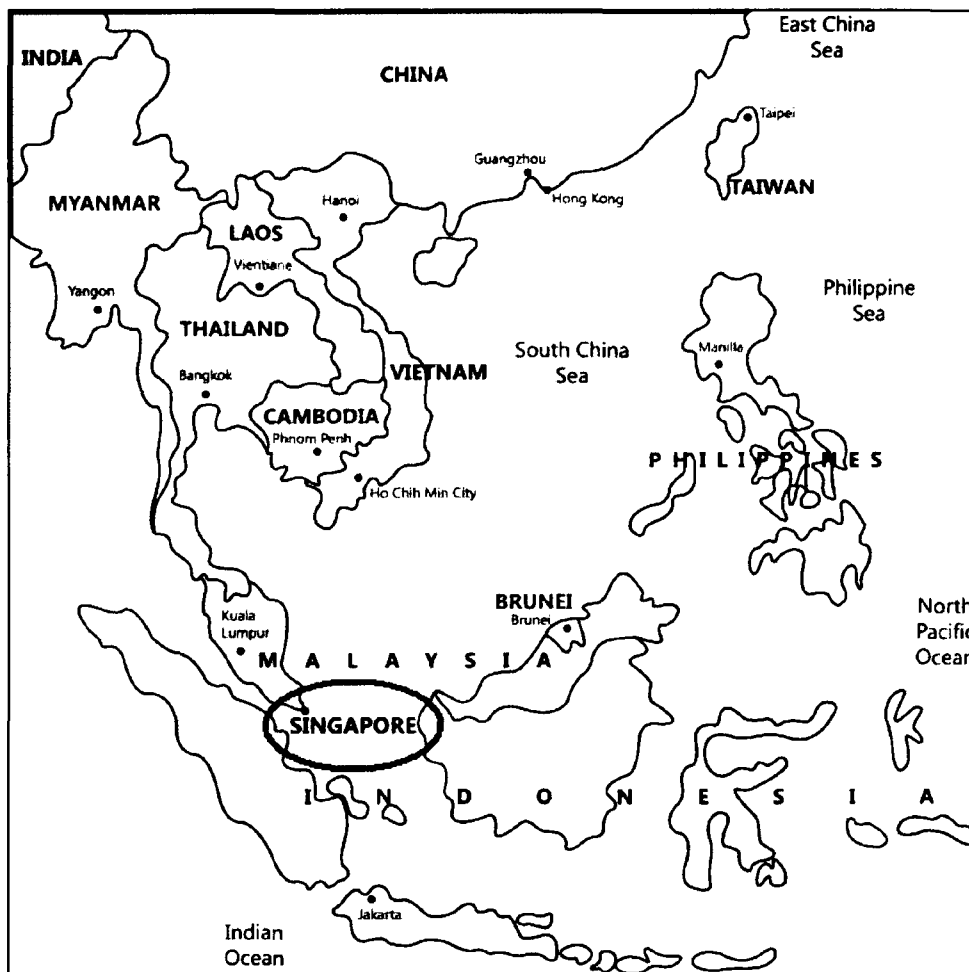


Fig 3.1 *Location Map of Singapore*

Singapore became independent in 1965 when Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, took the bold step of separating from Malaysia in the wake of racial riots in 1964. Because of this history, the maintenance of racial harmony has been a central priority of the Singapore government to this day. To ensure the survival of this tiny island nation with limited natural resources, Lee led the development of an economy that relied heavily on financial trade and industrialisation. The success of his economic strategy is testified to by the fact that Singapore has a current Gross Domestic Product per capita of US\$48,520, currently ranked sixth in the world (World Bank, n.d.).

To accomplish this feat, the Singapore government has always occupied an all-pervasive role in every sphere of Singapore society. Since Lee's time, the People's Action

Party (PAP) has been the only party governing Singapore. Hu (2005:471) offers a concise comment that aptly encapsulates the impact of the Singapore government on the society:

Singapore is a multiethnic society, with political influence institutionally from the West and culturally from the East.... Confucius' socio-political ethnics that celebrate patriarchy and hierarchy have greatly influenced Singapore's socio-political value system. Singapore's patriarchal rule is characterised by the government's absolute authority and its parental benevolence.

Over the years, the policies formulated and enacted by the governmental administration have reflected its conservative status. Reputed to be extremely strict in law and capital punishment, the Singaporean government is well-known throughout the world for its rigid policies, censorship and restriction on the freedom of speech, all in the name of economic development and the preservation of social harmony (Hu 2005). Yet, in spite of the widespread praise it has received for being an “economic miracle”, its lack of corruption, and its cleanliness, the Singapore government has also contributed to the impoverishment of the cultural landscape in Singapore in its bid to promote economic development and racial harmony (Abisheganaden 2005:269). The government has embarked on a single-minded pursuit of a policy of racial harmony through language policies, education, and integration. Whether intentional or not, some of these policies have led to the dilution of the various cultures of its people over the generations.

For instance, as English was commonly used in economic sectors, as well as being perceived as a neutral language among the various ethnic groups in Singapore, the government instituted a policy in 1966 through which English became the national language. What this meant in practice was that English became the language of instruction in all subjects at all schools in Singapore, relegating each of the native languages to the role of a second language. The students' exposure to their native language became limited to the time when it was taught as one of the subjects (Kuo and Chua 1991). Another policy that further eroded the cultural heritage of Singapore was the “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, instituted in 1979. With the objective of integrating the Chinese people, the use of diverse Chinese dialects was discouraged in favour of the use of one common Chinese language – Mandarin Chinese. Finally, the government's housing policy that requires various ethnic races to live alongside each other in its subsidised housing (Housing and Development Board n.d.) may also have prevented the cultivation of a strong racial and cultural heritage within the different ethnic groups.

Since Lee Kuan Yew's time, one could say that Singapore's neo-Confucian values are also interwoven with multiracialism and multiculturalism, along with Western practices and ways of working (Hu 2005). This combination of disparate cultural elements, along with the governmental policies in the name of economic development and the preservation of racial harmony, has led to a technologically-modern yet culturally conservative society which places emphasis on the values of patriarchal respect and subservience to authority.

Many Singaporeans today who belong to the third, fourth, and fifth generation of migrants identify themselves as Singaporeans, rather than as migrants. Because they did not live through the Second World War and the Japanese Occupation, they know and value little of their heritage and ancestry.¹ However despite this, many traditional practices that have been passed down and put in place by Singaporean forefathers like *feng shui* and ancestral worship are still practiced by Singaporeans today.²

The Musical and Cultural Setting in Singapore

Due to the absence of a strong local heritage, culture, and indigenous art forms, and its constant emphasis on economic growth, Singapore has sometimes been labelled a "cultural desert" (Abisheganaden 2005:216, Quek 2002:289). Early churches were considered the pioneers of music in Singapore. The many Christian missionaries and migrants who came to Singapore before the war were educated in Western music and were thus, given tremendous support to develop and perform music due to the strong advocacy of the church leaders for "serious music" (Abisheganaden 2005).

In 1935, the Education Department, under British rule, appointed a "Master of Music" to introduce Music as a subject in schools. The introduction of music as a subject allowed for the development, structuralisation, and popularisation of music in Singapore (Abisheganaden 2005:270). In 1948, grade examinations organised by the Associated Board of The Royal Schools of Music were held for the first time in Singapore and sparked an interest in Western instrumental performance, particularly in the piano. Then, the

¹ I, for one, have no inkling of where my ancestors came from and my heritage as I have always identified myself as a Singaporean Chinese, rather than by my Chinese ancestry. Even my parents do not see the need to trace their ancestors in China and have little knowledge of their Chinese heritage, despite being Chinese in race.

² *Feng shui*, literally translated as "wind" and "water" is the ancient art of Chinese geomancy. This practice was almost eradicated during the Chinese Cultural Revolution as it has been described as one of the "old ways of thinking". See Rossbach (1983) for further reading.

government established the Ministry of Culture (that is currently known as the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts) and provided the first form of governmental support for culture, arts, and musical activities in 1959.³

Yet, in spite of the establishment of the Ministry, Singapore's emphasis over the next few decades was still placed on employment creation; the development of a skilled work force; the provision of housing; the accumulation of national capital; and the attraction of foreign investment. The government's prioritisation of the economy meant that the well-being and the improvement of cultural matters were relegated to the sidelines (Ting, Leong, and Tan 1990:97). Thus, it was not until 1979 that the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), Singapore's first nationalised music organisation, was established. However, it is important to note that the SSO was set up in order to reflect Singapore's inroads into first-world status.⁴ Still, its establishment set the stage for the establishment of other government-funded arts groups like the Singapore Dance Theatre and much later, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO).

However, despite the existence of the SSO, the government's support for the arts remained scant. Various arts groups such as the National Theatre Performing Arts Ensemble and the Singapore Chamber Ensemble arose and quickly died due to a lack of funding. In a working paper, Tatsuko Takizawa (1987:28), a visiting Japanese researcher in the 80s Singapore, commented on the wide discrepancy between Singapore's economic position and the state of its arts:

Instead of promoting social structure toward education of sentiments or productivity of arts, priority is given to a structure of economic development.... It is understandable that Singapore has become a key position in world economy because of its strategic geographical location. It should also strive to become a key position culturally too.

Singaporean sociologists Eddie Kuo and Chua Beng Huat also recognise the impact of the prioritisation of economic development above the promotion of an arts culture in Singapore in their book, *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore* (1991:7-8):

³ The emergence of such a Ministry only happened after Singapore became self-governing.

⁴ Singapore Symphony Orchestra musicians, informal interviews, August 2006, Singapore.

Cultural development... had to abide by the dictates of the logic of the economy. The promotion of a disciplined work force was, therefore, given precedence over the promotion of ethnic culture from the very outset of independence, and remains so today.

The absence of a significant professional music scene in Singapore means that there have been few publications on this topic. Only a handful of writings such as Lee Tong Soon's (2008) *Chinese Street Opera in Singapore*, Benjamin Ng's (2002) "Japanese Popular Music in Singapore and the Hybridization of Asian Music" and Frederick Lau's (2005) "Morphing Chinese Music Clubs in Singapore" have addressed aspects of Singaporean music culture.

In his writing on the Singapore section of *The Musics of Asean*, Joseph Peters (1995:193) highlights the omission of the music of Singapore from the discussion of music in the Southeast Asian region, but simply attributes it to the size of the nation:

Very little has been written about the music of Singapore, the reason for which is sometimes hard to explain or understand, especially from a musicological angle.... Many ethnomusicological treatises on aspects of music in the Southeast Asian region have been churned out. Singapore seems to have been by-passed. Perhaps, it was its diminutive stature on the world atlas which caused it to be overlooked.

Another reason for the dearth of literature on the music of Singapore is cited by Miller and Williams (1998) in the *Garland Encyclopaedia of Music*. According to these writers, Singapore is "a kind of cultural stew, its music(s) is (or are) difficult to define, and require(s) attention to questions of cultural change and interaction" (Miller and Williams 1998:27). Based on this interpretation, it would seem that Singapore is a place of hybridised music. Singaporeans are familiar with and exposed to various genres, periods and styles of music as varied as jazz, bagpipes, *karaoke*, brass bands, and religious music (Lee 1998:524-525), and are influenced by popular music, especially music that is produced by the West, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea (Ng 2002:1-6; Takizawa 1987:19). Usually generalists, most Singaporean musicians have yet to become adept at any one form of music to become specialists. This aforementioned reason could account for the absence of a uniquely Singaporean music culture.

This deficit – the seemingly absent or insignificant music culture in Singapore – ultimately caught the attention of the Singapore government. In 1989, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, chaired by the late Ong Teng Cheong, the ex-Singaporean

president and a strong advocate of the arts, produced a report that led to a flurry of governmental initiatives to support the arts. The report included a comprehensive slate of recommendations to make Singapore a culturally vibrant society by the turn of the century. Moreover, it paved the way for the formation of the National Arts Council (NAC), the National Heritage Board, the National Library Board, and various other infrastructures including the multi-million dollar Esplanade performing arts centre and national museums. Nonetheless, the report was later criticised for only leading to the development of the “hardware” for culture and the arts. What was necessary, but absent in the report, was the discussion of the instilling of a sense of aesthetics and an interest in heritage among the people (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2000:12-13).

Nonetheless, the 1989 report was still significant in establishing the institutional entities that were exclusively devoted to the cultivation of the arts in Singapore. One of these institutions, the NAC, was established in 1991, as a statutory board under the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts to oversee the development of the arts in Singapore. The council provided support and awards for artists, offered funding opportunities, and took charge of the Singapore Arts Festival, first formed in 1975 under the purview of the then-Ministry of Culture.

Thus, the 1990s saw an increase in and dedicated interest on the part of the government to elevate the status of the arts and culture in Singapore. In 1996, under the directive of the then-Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, the SCO, the second national orchestra, was inaugurated as a private company. At the time, the government had finally decided that the orchestra had gained enough experience and expertise to develop into a fully fledged orchestra. In 1998, the NAC also established the first National Chinese Music Competition held in December of the same year, with the main goal of identifying talent in Chinese music (National Arts Council 1998:01).

Under the initiative of Goh Chok Tong, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts released the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000, with the aim of positioning Singapore as a key cultural centre in the globalised world (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2000:4). The report showed the increasing vibrancy in cultural sectors between 1989 and 1998. More specifically, the number of performing arts activities (music, dance, theatre and interdisciplinary art) increased by 150% and ticketed attendance to these events increased by 46% (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2000:16).

The researchers behind the *Renaissance City Report* in 2000 further proposed the development of a strong arts and cultural base through the exposure and education of students in the arts. Moreover, they recommended that the government should develop flagship and major arts companies to groom talent. These policies were designed to instill a sense of aesthetics in the people in the long run.

The culmination of these governmental arts initiatives in the 1990s was the establishment of a national arts centre in September 2002, the Esplanade. This multi-million dollar arts project by the government contained various state-of-the-art galleries, performing arts venues, an arts library, a shopping district, and featured year-round arts festivals and events.

Music Education in Singapore

The NAC also addressed education in the arts in order to cultivate the next generation of students to create, produce and appreciate music. Since 1993, the NAC has partnered artists to create arts education programmes with the aim of bringing the arts to schools and making the arts accessible to students. The schools have also established music, drama and art programmes that allow students to take them as examinable subjects within the core curricula (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 2004:4).

In addition to the school curricula, schools also promote student participation in the arts through Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs).⁵ Performing arts (including participation in a CO) constitute one of the categories of the CCAs offered in schools. Not all schools choose to offer the CO as an activity and CCAs are not compulsory at a primary level. At the secondary school and pre-university school levels, CCAs are compulsory and students are required to participate in a single core CCA where they will be assessed throughout the length of their secondary school or pre-university education. Tertiary institutions in the form of polytechnics and universities also encourage such activities beyond academia as well. Many students join such activities with the primary aim of boosting their portfolios and gaining extra credit.

⁵ CCAs were previously known as Extra-Curricular Activities (ECAs).

Comparing student participation between 1997 and 2002, a report by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (2004:19) indicated that there was increasing interest in arts-related activities among students. All activities saw an increase in membership and participation, with the CO genre showing the greatest increase of 89.5% since 1997.

Although progress has been made, the writers of the report commented that “the arts are an integral part of education in our schools, but not core” (*ibid.*:4) and proposed the setting up of the Singapore School of the Arts to provide pre-tertiary education in the arts and a development path for students who show early aptitude in the arts. The school began enrolment in 2008 and is the only institution that offers arts education as the core curriculum at the pre-tertiary level. Tertiary-level arts institutions include the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the Lasalle College of the Arts, which are the primary arts institutions in Singapore. The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, a division of the National University of Singapore, was established in 1998 to provide higher education in Western music. The only institution that currently offers higher education in Chinese instrumental music is the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

The Chinese Orchestra in Singapore

The lack of sufficient state support, until the formal inauguration of the SCO in 1997, does not mean that there was no significant Chinese music activity in Singapore since the beginning of the 20th century. However, the existence of such performances throughout the century is instead a powerful testimony to the initiative and enthusiasm of many amateur Chinese music practitioners in Singapore. Their investment of time and effort eventually created the impetus for the Singapore government to acknowledge the value of the CO as a means of projecting Singapore as a first-world nation with a strong economy and a rich culture.

At the same time, the involvement of the Singapore government and the introduction of non-music-related agenda into the COs have also influenced the trajectory of the development of this entity. Very often, politics as dictated by non-musicians involved in the running of COs would hold sway over the music priorities of the orchestras.

In the following sections, a general discussion of the CO in Singapore illuminates the conflicting dynamics that have led to its unique shape and form. The big picture of the development of the amateur and professional COs in Singapore will also provide a general context for analysing the social processes that characterise the interactions of the musicians in Singapore's COs in the subsequent chapters.

Historical Background

British Colonial Days (1826-1942)

Since its days under British Colonial rule (1826-1942), the Chinese community in Singapore had used folk music to enrich their interactions with one another and strengthen bonds through social means (Chia 2007:1). The community comprised clan associations that represented a dialect group, native province or village in China, as well as various dialect groups that had coalesced in Singapore. Chinese clan associations had been formed to provide peer and occasional financial support to the many Chinese migrants who had come to Singapore. Just as importantly, through the clan associations, migrants established links with their fellow countrymen in China and held on to cultural ties and traditions with their

respective regions and provinces (Ching 2008). These clan associations thus provided the first performing platforms for Chinese music.

Before the existence of COs, various amateur music groups were formed for the purposes of leisure and retaining cultural ties, and immigrant musicians from China contributed actively to the local Chinese music scene. Little information can be found on these musicians, but their contribution to the development of regional music such as Hokkien *nanyin* (Music from the South) music and Cantonese music at that time was undeniable (Goh 1998:2-3). Fortunately, Chinese music veteran and Singapore Chinese Orchestra's resource manager, Goh Ek Meng, had researched this topic and could provide some information about Chinese music-making at that time.

Founded in 1912, the Yuyu Music Association (*Yuyu Ruyue She*) was the first publicly-known music group. The group practised traditional folk instrumental ensemble music, primarily folk music from the South.⁶ Other associations, such as the Taorong Music Association (*Taorong Ruyue She*), the Music, Song and Dance Ensemble (*Yinyue Gewu Tuan*), and the Golden Star Song and Dance Ensemble (*Jinxing Gewu Tuan*) soon followed.⁷ The figurehead in Chinese music at that time was the Yuyu Music Association's Li Yeqi, who groomed numerous students, some of whom spearheaded the Chinese orchestra movement later on in the 1950s (Goh 1998:3).

In 1939, the Chinese multi-instrumentalist Ren Guangchang founded the Tongluo Music Association (*Tongluo Yinyue Hui*). The association produced music that was considered similar to that which was heard in the Chinese ensembles in China at that time.⁸ As with their mainland Chinese counterparts, the members were actively working to reform and reorganise their instruments, most notably experimenting with bass alternatives by inventing large fiddles that could play in the low register. Moreover, the association composed music, some of which were military songs, which stemmed from their patriotism during the Sino-Japanese war. The music association used its activities to render support to the Chinese in the war by arousing patriotism and raising funds for China. It was highly regarded as a community-based musical group that contributed to society and established

⁶ Music from the South of China, where most early Singaporean immigrants came from, includes: Cantonese music, Teochew music, Hakka Music and Fujian *nanguan* among others.

⁷ Before the 1950s, Chinese instrumental music in Singapore went by the terms *minyue* or *guoyue*, and it was eventually termed *huayue* in the next decade to reflect the status of the Chinese migrant society in Singapore (Goh 1998:1).

⁸ Goh Ek Meng, formal interview, 7 March 2007, Singapore.

the notion that a community music group should fulfill some form of social responsibility other than music (Chia 2007:2).

Not surprisingly, Chinese musical development in Singapore came to a standstill in the 1940s when Singapore was invaded and occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War.⁹ After 1945, Chinese musical groups reorganised themselves, having to make do with instruments that were of low quality to produce music (Goh 1998:2). Singaporean Chinese music critic, Quek Yong Xiu, recounts these groups' efforts to pursue their interest in Chinese music during their leisure:

I was very young then. Before Singapore's independence, there were a few folk music groups around. The majority of them were folk ensembles like Teochew ensembles and Cantonese ensembles. Most of us can't really remember what they did, but the musicians then played music for leisure, keeping day jobs as clerks or workers, and meeting up in these associations in their free time.¹⁰

At that time, Singapore had only one luthier, Wang Jiahe, who made some of the instruments used by the ensembles. Eventually, in the later part of the 1950s, companies such as the Wanshun Company (*Wanshun Gongsi*) and Dexing Company (*Dexing Gongsi*) resolved this obstacle by importing instruments from China for the local Chinese ensembles (Goh 1998:2).

Apart from these Chinese music groups, the Chinese community as a whole strove to use Chinese music, among other art forms, to preserve its cultural heritage in defiance of the British colonial government's Westernisation policies. To counteract this influence and protest against the changing education system, a large part of the Chinese community sought to preserve the Chinese education system by setting up "Chinese schools".¹¹ Students in "Chinese schools" were taught Chinese music and arts to preserve their cultural heritage. The teachers in those schools refused to teach their subjects in English and, similarly, refused to teach Western music, thus rejecting the process of "Westernisation" (Koh, Auger, Yap and Ng 2006:106).

⁹ Singapore was invaded in 1942 and was occupied by the Japanese from 1942 to 1945.

¹⁰ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 11 November 2006, Singapore.

¹¹ Some schools in Singapore were set up and run by Chinese communities. These were known as "Chinese schools". Many Chinese immigrants sent their children to these schools, which used Mandarin Chinese as the medium for instruction. The term "Chinese-educated", commonly used in Singapore, is used to describe people who studied in such schools. Today, the Ministry of Education runs all schools and such "Chinese schools" were phased out after Singapore's independence in 1965.

The 1950s: Formation of Chinese Ensembles, Precursor of the Chinese Orchestra

By the mid-1950s, Chinese schools, workers' organisations, and community centres¹² started Chinese ensembles (Koh, Auger, Yap, and Ng 2006:106). Created for socialisation and recreational purposes, these ensembles brought together Chinese people who had a common love for Chinese music. Apart from their shared passion for Chinese music, they also came together to mingle and keep in touch with one another. Community centres set up for the general populace offered an ideal venue for such activities. Toh Koon Swee, a Chinese instrument technician and pioneer, recounts the time when he joined a Chinese ensemble:

I first joined a Chinese music ensemble, when I was ten, at a community centre near my house. I can't remember what the community centre was called... There were small ensembles in the centres, and there were about ten of us who would sit down and play, drink tea, and chat. Each of us would fork out some money to buy our own instruments and sustain the ensemble. Our music wasn't particularly good, but we enjoyed music-making.¹³

Many Chinese music organisations were formed during this period. They included the Ai Tong Alumni and the Kangle Music Society, which were founded in 1953 and 1954 respectively; they had the most members and were also the most active. The Taorong Music Association (mentioned above) was arguably the most prominent and held the greatest clout;¹⁴ it was later responsible for forming the first fully-fledged CO in Singapore in 1959.

In 1953, the Singapore Middle School Arts Society (*Quanxin Zhongxue Yishu Yanjiu Hui*) formed a large Chinese ensemble that possessed characteristics similar to the modern CO (Chia 2007:2). The Middle School Arts Society debuted at the now defunct Happy World Stadium as part of a variety event and played Han and folk music. Although it was an ensemble mainly composed of students from secondary schools, it generated tremendous interest in the audience with its debut as it was the first time that the Singaporean public had heard of such a group (*ibid.*). The Middle School Arts Society Chinese ensemble deviated from traditional folk ensembles both in instrumentation and in size, boasting over 20 members, much larger than the commonly seen instrumental folk

¹² Community centres were recreational centres set up by the government to provide for the social integration of the society. Community centres held classes and activities for everyone. Classes included cookery instruction, sports, and arts activities.

¹³ Toh Koon Swee, formal interview, 5 March 2007, Singapore

¹⁴ Goh Ek Meng, formal interview, 7 March 2007, Singapore

ensembles at that time. Moreover, the musicians were playing from scores, instead of memory, and were arranged in a fan-like fashion, as in the case of a CO.

A year later in 1954, The Chinese High School's Chinese ensemble played at a concert at the Victoria Memorial Hall (now known as the Victoria Concert Hall). The ensemble played an arranged ensemble piece composed by the school's music teachers, Lee Hao and the late Liu Gongxi. What distinguished this performance from the others was that it took place in a concert setting, which had never happened before. The concert garnered praise from many, especially leaders of the local Chinese community (Goh 1998:4-7). As a result of the performance that left a strong impression on audiences, word began to spread, which created an interest in Chinese ensemble music within the local Chinese community. Quek Yong Xiu talked about this phenomenon:

There was a rise in the numbers of people wanting to learn Chinese music and this was especially so among children and school students. In the 1950s, there were a few Chinese music organisations and schools, which perpetuated Chinese music trends. There were many students and young children who took to learning Chinese instruments and joining Chinese ensembles. The situation then was like this: Because there were few schools with ensembles and there was a growing pool of Chinese musicians, there was no lack of members and Chinese ensembles grew larger and larger. Performance standards improved as a result.¹⁵

Toh Koon Swee explains the growing interest in the leisure pursuit of Chinese music:

If you learnt a Chinese instrument like the *pipa*, you would be considered classy and elitist. People wanted to learn Chinese instruments then as it was considered a fashionable thing to do. While many of us learnt Chinese instruments, we were also cautioned that being a Chinese musician was not a means of livelihood.¹⁶

Nonetheless, during the 1950s, musical knowledge was scarce, and techniques and instrumental skills were not taught. In order to sustain their existence, members of the ensembles showed tremendous passion and initiative by turning to one another for help when they faced difficulties. As such, many of them became close friends and relied on each other for support. The reason for the lack of information pertaining to Chinese music was partly due to the fact that China was cut off from the rest of the world, thus preventing people from other countries from obtaining access to literature or scores of Chinese music from China. Similarly countries like Singapore, for fear of China's communistic influence,

¹⁵ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

¹⁶ Toh Koon Swee, formal interview, 5 March 2007, Singapore.

banned imports of any Chinese books and scores. Any Chinese music books then had to be brought into Singapore via Hong Kong, which was still under British rule. The Singaporean government however, did not ban recordings, and numerous Chinese music recordings were made available. Due to the lack of written materials and resources, members of the orchestras used disc records and tape recorders to transcribe scores by listening to the music repeatedly. Toh Koon Swee recounts his experience:

I first learnt the *dizi* from my father. My father was part of the school's Chinese music ensemble and when he graduated, he was part of the school alumni ensemble. Under my father, I first picked up the *dizi*, then *erhu*, and later the *qinqin*.¹⁷

We didn't have teachers then; we listened to recordings and learnt from limited books that were imported from Hong Kong. While we had a lack of teachers, instruction, and scores, we had no lack of Chinese music recordings. Recordings were easily available from music stores, but scores were scarce.

Based on recordings, we transcribed the scores. It took us a long time, and we listened to the pieces over and over again. We used to play our records or vinyl discs on a gramophone. With vinyl discs, we could slow down our record disc to half the speed and repeat the process till we got all the notes.

I remember transcribing the *pipa* solo, *Ambush*... I had to play the record disc 50 times to note down the opening phrases! I eventually transcribed the whole piece, which I later found out was Li Ting Song's edition. I think I must have turned the vinyl disc thousands of times and replayed it over and over again before I got all the notes.¹⁸

The more established Chinese music organisations at that time, Kangle Music Society, Ai Tong Alumni, and Taorong Music Association Ensemble, also benefited from the recordings obtained from China by using them to produce scores:

By the late 1950s, Singaporeans already had interactions with China, despite the political turmoil happening there at that time. Many musicians managed to get recordings, either on LP or tape, of COs in mainland China. Although many of us did not have the scores to such pieces, we notated the pieces down note by note, aurally. From these pieces, we discovered and worked out the instrumentation of the Chinese orchestral genre – bowed stringed, plucked, wind, and percussion sections - and that was how the CO came into being in Singapore. This was before we had access to full scores and parts.¹⁹

¹⁷ A *qinqin* is a longish-necked lute with a flower shaped body, used mostly in Cantonese regional ensembles.

¹⁸ Toh Koon Swee, formal interview, 5 March 2007, Singapore.

¹⁹ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

The First Chinese Orchestras in Singapore: Political and Non-Political Challenges

In 1959, Taorong Music Association formed the first full-fledged CO in Singapore and was the first Chinese ensemble that comprised the bowed, plucked strings, wind, and percussion sections, and had a formation closest to the modern CO in China (Goh 1998:7; Chia 2007:2; Lau 2005:37). The CO, although lasting a total of three and a half years, had a great impact on the subsequent development of COs in Singapore. Inspired and armed with new recordings and smuggled scores from China and Hong Kong, which was that of the developing CO in China, Taorong reformed its ensemble in accordance to the recordings and instrumentation listed in the scores, and formed a CO. With a membership of 47, the Taorong Music Association was also the largest Chinese ensemble in Singapore at the time (Goh 1998:7-8).

The existence of the orchestra was made possible through the substantial contribution of two members. First, Yang Haoran, a member of the orchestra, was considered to have had the greatest input to the orchestra through his monetary donations, which allowed for the purchase of instruments and operational funding for the orchestra (Goh 1998:7). Second, Hu Guicheng, a musician who was educated and proficient in Western and Chinese musics, was responsible for the musical development of the orchestra. On top of conducting, Hu Guicheng also educated the orchestra's members in music theory and wrote several scores for the orchestra to play (Goh 1998:7-8). During its existence, the orchestra received numerous invitations from community centres and Chinese clan associations to perform at their special events. They built a strong reputation that was spread by word-of-mouth by audiences who were impressed by their performances.

Unfortunately, the orchestra and its members were accused of being a hotbed for communist activity, which led to the forced disbanding of the orchestra in 1961 (Lau 2005:37). The Singaporean government at that time was waging a battle against the communists and the strong Chinese leftists, who had threatened to usurp governmental power. Many members of Chinese music associations at the time tended to be communists. In fact, much of the CO's repertory, which came from China, was composed as an ode to communism. Popular Chinese orchestral arrangements like *The East is Red (Dongfang hong)* promoted the communist cause. From the government's perspective, COs posed a serious political threat by drawing people to the Communist cause through their performances of such propaganda songs.

Thus, it is little wonder that the government was alarmed by the expansion and consolidation of the Taorong Music Association, with its multiple invitations to perform in various community centres, and suppressed the orchestra (Chia 2007:2). The colonial government at that time tried to curb the growth of COs by disbanding them.²⁰ In fact, Taorong Music Association was only the most prominent of the many Chinese music groups that were shut down by the government for political reasons. A Singaporean Chinese music veteran recounts: “Some of these independent Chinese music associations were shut down because they were accused of being leftist or communist, and indeed, many of these members in the music associations were”.²¹

The government’s action was successful in undermining the growth of Chinese music activity. Quek Yong Xiu comments, “As the government had shut down many of these associations, there was a period of time where the Chinese music scene quietened down in Singapore”.²² Although there were still groups that were active, some musicians gave up and stopped playing Chinese music altogether. Thus, compared to the vibrancy of the earlier years, Chinese music activity died down considerably.²³

After Taorong’s disbanding, the Kangle Music Society, which had by now also developed its own CO, filled the position once occupied by Taorong and absorbed Taorong’s members into its own orchestra. In the process, it also took over its instruments (Chia 2007:2). It is possible that Kangle was spared from closing down due to the fact that it did not have as big a reputation as Taorong, thus making it less of a threat. Additionally, its political activities were possibly considered to be less evident to the authorities.

Yet, considering the politically hostile environment, it is a testimony to the resilience and the commitment of the Chinese music practitioners that Chinese orchestral music continued to grow. Some disbanded members at that time would split up and then form new groups through their unions, alumni associations, and school orchestras, thereby indirectly expanding the number of Chinese ensembles. Due to the increase in the choice of ensembles, it was not uncommon to see members of one ensemble participating in the activities of another ensemble (Goh 1998:4-7).

²⁰ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

²¹ CO veteran, formal interview, January 2007, Singapore.

²² Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

²³ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

At the same time, COs in the late 1950s and the early 1960s were also plagued by non-political factors such as sustainability issues. Orchestras found it difficult to pay teachers and conductors, and to purchase musical scores and instruments. This also meant that instrumental skills and techniques were not taught properly. As a result, numerous COs that were set up also folded within months (Goh 1998:57-59).

Overall, it could be said that the early years of the Chinese orchestras and their predecessors – the music ensembles – of the late 1950s and the early 1960s were a challenging period. It was characterised by financial difficulty, the lack of adequate materials and resources, as well as political suppression due to sometimes-valid accusations of leftist ideology.

Nonetheless, in the face of these odds, the CO ultimately became co-opted into the Singapore music scene over the subsequent decades. The next sections chronicle its transformation from being a politically subversive entity into a vehicle that could be used by the Singapore government to advance its political agenda. The legitimisation of the CO would both lead to its growth and development, as well as a sense of disempowerment of the musicians within the professional CO in Singapore.

Formative Years

An interesting turnaround occurred for the CO in Singapore from the late 1960s to the 1970s from the CO struggles of the 50s – government persecution of the COs as communist vehicles slowly quietened down as communist growth had been successfully controlled by the government, allowing COs to grow (Lau 2005:37). This period was characterised by increased performances by prolific orchestras such as school orchestras and Kangle; the involvement of the broadcast media; and the establishment of competitions. Each of these factors, which were influenced by government policies, led to the revival of and renewed interest in the Chinese orchestral genre.

1960s: Early Government Patronage and Cultural Exchanges of Chinese Orchestras

In 1960, due to the influence of Lee Khoon Choy, the Minister of State for Culture, the Central Cultural Board Chinese Orchestra was formed. A *guzheng* player himself, Minister Lee ensured that the orchestra had government backing, the first of its kind. This orchestra, helmed and conducted by Lee Yoke Chuan, performed at many official functions (Koh, Auger, Yap, and Ng 2006:106). Many of the orchestra's members were to be transferred to the later established government-funded National Theatre Chinese Orchestra, to consolidate Singapore's CO talent (Chia 2007:3; Koh, Auger, Yap and Ng 2006:106). This orchestra would later exert an impact on the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore. The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section.

Apart from this government-backed orchestra, amateur Chinese orchestral activity continued to take place. Alumni, workers, and community COs flourished in the 1960s. Some of these new orchestras were sometimes only assembled for special occasions or events. One such example was the Malaysia Arts Association Orchestra.²⁴ Comprising over a hundred members, it was assembled in 1963 solely for the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival and the opening of the National Theatre (Chia 2007:3).

In 1966, performing groups from overseas began to come to Singapore. Chinese instrumental ensembles, coming primarily from Hong Kong, held performances for the enthusiastic Chinese music community in Singapore. Such ensembles included the China Folk Song and Dance Troupe (Zhongguo Minjian Gewutuan) and the Hong Kong Yinxin Arts Group (Xianggang Yinxin Yishutuan), which performed at the National Theatre (Goh 1998:34). As a result, relations were formed between local COs and overseas arts groups. The management of the now-defunct Beijing Hotel was so impressed with the China Folk Song and Dance Troupe's performances that it invited some of the troupe's members to perform as a resident Chinese ensemble in its hotel in 1967, thus forming the first hotel Chinese ensemble in Singapore (Goh 1998:34).

The First Chinese Music Competition

Amidst the growth of COs in the 1960s, the Singapore Broadcasting Centre (SBC) organised the first Chinese music competition in Singapore in 1968. This competition generated such a strong response that even musicians from neighbouring Malaysia came

²⁴ Singapore was part of Malaysia from 1962 to 1965.

over to Singapore to watch and participate. Quek Yong Xiu noted that although many television variety programmes featured Chinese music at that time, the most important was the televised Chinese music competition:

When the competition was first aired, you could tell it was the talk of the town... artists and non-artists would speculate about who would win, and place bets on certain contestants. Never before had there been so much interest in Chinese music. Many of the contestants were Chinese musicians whom I knew personally. When the competition was aired on TV, I would watch the broadcast nervously, especially if the contestants were friends of mine.²⁵

The competition was not structured; there were no categorising of instruments or repertory requirements. Instead, players and ensembles were compared to one another. A panel of judges, comprising Chinese music veterans and broadcast executives, ranked the participants on live television in order to appeal to the public, who found such competitions attractive. The finals of the competition took place on Chinese New Year's Eve in 1969 at the National Theatre. The event was broadcast live, from the preliminaries to the grand finals. The TV broadcasting of the event received high viewership ratings (Goh 1998:53-54). Following the success of the first Chinese music competition, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation held a second competition in 1970, with the finals held at the National Theatre (*ibid.*).

According to a Chinese orchestral veteran, the Chinese music scene captured the attention of the Singapore public. However, it was apparent that the people including the musicians were more interested about the outcomes of the competition, rather than the celebration of Chinese music itself:

It was competition fever then. Everyone in the Chinese music scene had his or her eyes glued on the TV set. There were bets on who would lose and who would win... some of the others [Chinese musicians] thought that some of the prize winners didn't deserve to win. There was a lot of speculation going on.²⁶

In Trevor Herbert's book, *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, he notes that contest success provides esteem for the band and thus there is a "unique obsession with contesting and contest results" (Herbert 1992:118). In studying various band competitions and reviewing their results, Barbara Payne (1997:6) notes that

²⁵ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 11 Nov 2006, Singapore.

²⁶ Singaporean CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

“the results of music competitions have also been used as an overall subjective indicator of... success in several studies”. Moreover, she highlights a negative ramification of this emphasis on competition because it “puts emphasis on winning, not learning” (*ibid*:10). Herbert’s (1992:118) observation that music practitioners are less focused on “the achievement of standards for the sake of the music performed... [but are driven by] the winning of prizes as proof of musicianship” is highly apt. Both of these researchers’ comments aptly depict the focus of the COs in Singapore and the mentality of the musicians who looked to such competitions for recognition and esteem.

Despite the negative literature surrounding the impact of competitions on the practice of music, there is, at the same time, no question that these Chinese music competitions in Singapore were also largely responsible for the discovery of talented new CO musicians and an increase in the awareness of the Chinese orchestral genre in Singapore. Nonetheless, it is also evident that the over-emphasis on competition has also exerted a negative impact on the values and attitudes of Chinese music practitioners, which has remained till today.²⁷

In addition to these competitions, SBC in the late 1960s also helped to promote Chinese music by broadcasting it on the air and recording Chinese music appreciation programmes with musicians introducing Chinese music. Moreover, it recorded programmes featuring the performances of students and school COs. These programmes received widespread support from the public, which in turn encouraged the Corporation’s Mandarin section to form a CO later on in 1974 under the direction of Tay Teow Kiat (Chia 2007:4).

²⁷ This topic will be further explored in the subsequent chapters on the social processes that characterise the interactions within COs and the impact of external forces on the development of COs in Singapore.

The Period of Stabilisation and Growth

Establishment of COs and Emergence of Full-time Chinese Musicians

The Chinese orchestral scene of the 1970s and 1980s in Singapore was characterised by stability and growth. This period saw the initiation and popularity of the National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (NTCO) and the People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO), along with other school and amateur COs. It was also during this period that the genre of the CO became an art form that was widely accepted and known by Singaporeans.²⁸ Chinese musicians also had increased career options in Chinese music, such as teaching or researching, on top of performing and learning (Goh 1998:129-30). These job options provided decent incomes that heralded the birth of the full-time Chinese musician. A Chinese music practitioner recounts:

In those days, there were a few musicians who played Chinese music as a livelihood and we all knew each other, at least by face... jobs were available everywhere. Earning was not a problem as long as one was willing to work hard.²⁹

Moreover, entrepreneurial Chinese orchestral musicians created an alternative source of income by establishing and running enterprises dedicated to importing instruments, accessories, music books, scores, and audio and visual material from China for Chinese orchestral enthusiasts in Singapore.³⁰ The enterprises also provided for most of the instruments used in school orchestras, which accounted for the bulk of profit made. More than just a source of revenue, these enterprises also served as bridges of information from China and catered to the growing interest of many practitioners in the COs. In a win-win situation, the enthusiasts provided much profit for these enterprises, while the Chinese orchestral field was kept competitive by enterprises that were constantly bringing in the most up-to-date materials from China.

²⁸ Goh Ek Meng, formal interview, 7 March 2007, Singapore.

²⁹ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

³⁰ Books were allowed in Singapore by then as Communism had been controlled. There were an estimated 15-20 enterprises specialising in CO instruments and music in Singapore at that time.

Influence of Professional Musicians from Overseas on CO Music Scene in Singapore

Further stimuli to the Chinese orchestral music scene came from Chinese musicians and orchestras who travelled to Singapore to perform and impart music and skills to the Singaporean Chinese music community. In the past ten years, the immigration of “foreign talent” in the arts, including Chinese music, has been commonplace. Mainland Chinese who have come to Singapore for employment in the arts have constantly spearheaded Chinese music efforts. With the effects of immigration and the encouragement of the government in cultural efforts, the standard of Chinese music, particularly in CO, progressed rapidly. For instance, the SCO brought in many musicians from overseas when it turned professional, offering them employment passes that could lead to permanent residence and eventually citizenship in Singapore. These Chinese musicians, mostly graduates from major conservatories in China, brought with them their practices, training methodology, and repertory. As a result, the performance methods and training were similar to that of China to a certain extent. The transfer of skills mainly through performances and the teaching of local musicians have allowed Chinese orchestral standards and participation in Singapore to be raised drastically, thus enabling this ethnically marked genre to gain prominence:³¹

In the 1970s and 80s, the CO stabilised in Singapore. There were many visiting musicians from Hong Kong and China, who came to Singapore and taught our local conductors about the CO and brought scores from China for the CO. Singaporean conductors came to know about sound, balance, and the latest developments with the Chinese orchestral scene abroad. There were overseas orchestras as well and when they toured Singapore, they promoted the CO, and the popularity of the CO grew continuously.³²

By the 1980s, Chinese music in Singapore had become widespread, with performances having an increasing attendance rate, in comparison to the past where those who practiced Chinese music were associated with communism and frowned upon. According to Guan (1993), the growth of the public’s interest in Chinese music was so great that in 1989, at a music festival, performances in Chinese music were the only ones to have a full house, as compared to the other types of arts performances. The latter only had, at best, an attendance rate of 75%. The number of Chinese orchestral performances had also quadrupled in the 1980s from the 1970s (Guan 1993). Toh Koon Swee confirms this Chinese music craze:

³¹ Most other ethnic ensembles like gamelan groups do not boast such a large participatory population. This is in part due to Singapore’s demographic makeup in which 70% of the population is ethnically Chinese.

³² Toh Koon Swee. formal interview. 5 March 2007, Singapore.

I remember when visiting musicians came, we [Chinese music enthusiasts] would stalk them and chase them around like fans, waiting downstairs at their hotels and following them around as they went for their rehearsals. I remember the 1983 concert, when *pipa* player Liu Dehai came to Singapore and played the famous “Little Sisters on the Grassland Concerto” with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Tickets were sold out within hours and the queues were ridiculously long. There were a lot of lovers of Chinese music. I even took leave from work to queue for a concert ticket, but by the time I got to the queue, tickets had already sold out! I went to look for the conductor of the orchestra in desperation, who told me that a second concert was being planned due to the overwhelming response. I managed to get the ticket for the second performance and I felt so lucky to get a ticket. There was such great demand for Chinese music then.³³

The popularity of the CO was also reflected in the growing number of community centres offering courses in Chinese music to meet the increased demand for CO.

Accessibility and Impact of Chinese Orchestral Recordings

Chinese orchestral recordings from China and Hong Kong were easily accessible in the 1970s and 1980s. With a greater availability of recordings in Singapore, the public had access to Chinese orchestral music in greater quantity and quality (Guan 1993). The accessibility of Chinese orchestral music made it easier for the public to appreciate this type of music. More than just listening to the music, many became amateur music practitioners – a trend that was confirmed by an increase in the setting up of and overall membership in school and amateur COs. During the 1970s and 1980s, an increasing number of youths found Chinese orchestral music to be as appealing as their Western counterparts. With the constant media attention that the CO and its music were getting from the radio and television, many young Chinese were drawn to the genre as a way to connect with their cultural heritage. The playing of Chinese instruments had tremendous appeal to them (Guan 1993).

The changing outlook on Chinese music caused the general public to find it increasingly fashionable. As a result, they no longer looked down on it or thought of it as a communist activity as they had in the past, resulting in a “Chinese orchestral boom”.³⁴ A Chinese music practitioner observed:

³³ Toh Koon Swee, formal interview, 5 March 2007, Singapore.

³⁴ CO veterans, informal interviews, 2005 to 2006, Singapore.

At that time, Singapore was possibly the only Asian country where the appreciation of amateur Chinese music was most widespread.... Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China may have had the most up-to-date professional orchestras, but here in Singapore, we had more amateurs who played Chinese music.³⁵

Government Assistance

The Singaporean government has been partially attributed for the development of CO in Singapore (Chia 2007:7). Its initiatives included: the provision of funding and facility as in the case of the National Theatre Trust; performing platforms in the form of “community concerts, radio concerts and the ‘Music for Everyone’ series”; the establishment of the CO as a CCA at 80 schools (Guan 1993); and the recruitment of talented foreign musicians such as Zheng Sisen and Ng Tai Kong (more shall be explained on these two figures in the following section, **The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra**).

In spite of the positive aspects of these measures, it needs to be qualified by the fact that the government’s support for the CO extended only as far as its own political agenda. Essentially, the government has always conceived of the CO in Singapore as a tool to promote racial harmony and cultural exchange because it is representative of Chinese culture. This agenda is apparent by the fact that considerable efforts have been made in creating collaborative works with Indian and Malay music, which result in multi-cultural Chinese orchestral works. Such a practice is in keeping with the governmental policy of racial integration.³⁶

Moreover, as the following discussion on the individual orchestras will show, the government also withdrew its funding support for COs and let go of talented foreign musicians in leadership positions, regardless of their artistic merits and accomplishments. In these instances, it is evident that internal politics had a higher priority than the cultivation of the CO musicians or the musical development of the COs in question.

These issues will now be further explored and contextualised through the discussion of the history and development of the prominent COs in Singapore in the next section. We begin with the NTCO, Singapore’s first semi-professional CO.

³⁵ CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

³⁶ CO veteran, informal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (NTCO)

Upon Singapore's independence in 1965,³⁷ a National Theatre Trust was instituted to promote the arts with support from the Ministry of Culture (Koh, Auger, Yap and Ng 2006:106). This resulted in the launch of the National Theatre Arts Troupe in May 1968. This umbrella arts organisation supported the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, the National Theatre Chorus, and the NTCO as its core activities. The NTCO was led by Zhang Zhengquan as its chairperson and Li Xueling as its vice-chair. Its conductor was Zheng Sisen. Zheng was originally from the China Folk Song and Dance Troupe, but left the group when he was lured by the prospect of regular work as a *pipa* player at the Beijing Hotel in Singapore.³⁸ Zheng was then recruited by the National Theatre Trust to be a resident conductor of its newly-formed CO. This CO was formed through the initiative and the efforts of the then-Minister for Culture, Jek Yuen Thong, who actively enlisted the help of the administrators within the ministry to seek donations from the public, philanthropists, and businesspeople through various fundraisers. The minister's effort was highly significant because the government did not fully fund arts organisations. Therefore, without public support, the CO could not have started up (Goh 1998:36-40).

The majority of the members of the new CO comprised former members of the Kangle Music Society and Ai Tong Alumni. Musicians recruited into this arts troupe were regarded as semi-professional: they were given a monthly allowance as a professional fee (the first of its kind for Chinese musicians in Singapore) by the National Theatre Trust (Chia 2007:3). A Chinese music veteran recounts his experience of being one of the first Chinese musicians in the NTCO:

The orchestra's members were not given a salary, but got a small allowance, a transportation fee. As members, we were already very happy to receive this amount. It was the first time we felt like paid musicians.³⁹

Shortly after the NTCO was formed, it released the first recorded disc of Chinese orchestral music in Singapore with the involvement of the SBC. Because of the widespread popularity of the Chinese music competitions and programmes, which brought high viewership ratings, the SBC was predisposed to supporting Chinese music endeavours.

³⁷ Singapore separated from Malaysia and became a Republic on 9 August 1965.

³⁸ As mentioned earlier, some touring musicians were poached by the Beijing Hotel to form a resident Chinese ensemble.

³⁹ CO veteran, formal interview, January 2007, Singapore.

More importantly for the CO, the discs were a tremendous boost for its members and the group as a whole. Because they had never recorded a disc before, the orchestra members were extremely motivated. Driven by excitement, ambition, and enthusiasm, they recorded almost continuously for 16 hours in one day.⁴⁰ Perceiving themselves as pioneers who were blazing a path for this genre of music in Singapore, these musicians were also excited by the prospect of instant popularity and fame due to the widespread dissemination of the discs to the general public. In fact, these discs allowed the general public to gain greater insight into the Chinese orchestral genre as a whole and the NTCO in particular. The resultant public interest in the CO gave an impetus to other Chinese music enthusiasts to form new orchestras (Cheng 1982:13).

Apart from producing the disc, the SBC also broadcast the performances of the orchestra. In November 1968, the orchestra performed three songs that were broadcast throughout Singapore on free-to-air television. The broadcast of the CO's performances proved to be extremely popular. Capitalising on the popularity of Chinese music, the SBC broadcast even more Chinese music programmes by introducing instrumental solos and ensembles on variety shows. In addition, the television stations incorporated shows of an artistic nature in their programming, in which musicians were invited to be guests and were interviewed, thus giving many in the music community, including Chinese musicians, more exposure (Koh, Auger, Yap and Ng 2006:106).

Even more significantly for the NTCO, its successful television performances allowed the orchestra to obtain the approval from its management to increase its membership. In 1969, another call for auditions was made with over 50 musicians applying. With the newly-selected members, the orchestra's membership was brought to a total of 40. With Zheng Sisen as the musical director, the orchestra was largely successful with well-attended community concerts, thus indicating tremendous support from the general public. With its growing success, the orchestra continued its efforts to promote Chinese music by working closely together with SBC in a symbiotic relationship. In particular, a television performance held in April 1969 by the SBC to celebrate 150 weeks of Singapore's independence was deemed the grandest performance of the 1960s. With an audience of over 7000 people, the performance was broadcast live to an enthusiastic public (*ibid.*).

⁴⁰ Goh Ek Meng, formal interview, 7 March 2007, Singapore.

With the securing of sponsorship from the United Overseas Bank (UOB) in 1969, the NTCO started a string of performances in a bid to bring Chinese orchestral music to the masses in a major outreach effort. The concerts themed “Sounds of Drum and Voice” (*Guyue gesheng*) were held from May through September 1969. The orchestra performed with a chorus in 12 different locations of Singapore including the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the National University of Singapore, and Nanyang University, among others (Goh 1998:40-56).

This series was an initiative of the then-National Theatre Chairman, Wu Baoxing. He felt that live Chinese orchestral performances should be introduced to the public, rather than to a small educated minority. His initiative produced the intended outcome: the Singaporean public appeared in droves to these free concerts. As a result of these outreach performances, the Singaporean general public became even more exposed to the Chinese orchestral genre. Just as importantly, the performances were ground-breaking as this series of performances encouraged other COs to hold public outreach performances, eventually making it a common practice. Prior to the NTCO’s initiative, most of the orchestras then limited their performances to special concerts or events, or when they were hired; they never staged outreach concerts nor performed outside of concert halls (Chia 2007:3).

In spite of this success, the NTCO experienced a constant lack of funding, as was the case among all the National Theatre’s arts groups. As a result, the National Arts Theatre Trust Committee organised a membership series entitled “Friends of Arts Groups” in a bid to raise funds to meet these groups’ expenditures. A working committee was formed and it used newspapers to advertise the cause of these arts groups: any member or group under the “Friends of Arts Groups” would enjoy certain benefits or privileges upon donating. The privileges were divided into three categories:

- Personal membership for those donating \$25 and above;
- Membership for associations and societies for a yearly donation of above \$500;
- Membership for philanthropists with donations exceeding \$5000.

Benefits of donation included: a certificate and membership card, discounts for the purchase of tickets, and public recognition through the publication of donor-member names in programme booklets. For members whose donations exceed \$5000, their names would be published in the National Theatre’s autograph booklet and donors would be credited at

performances. Through the scheme, the NTCO was successful in getting donations, and money helped fund the operations of the orchestra (Ministry of Community Development 1984:31).

To popularise Chinese instruments and to earn more money, the NTCO also started classes to teach people who were interested to learn how to play Chinese instruments, a first in Singapore at that time. So popular and well-received were these classes that some classes had to be conducted in external venues due to inadequate space at the National Theatre venue. These classes for amateurs enjoyed a high participation rate with students, working adults, and retirees constituting the majority of its participants (*ibid.*).

In spite of the relative success and popularity of the NTCO and efforts to raise funds, the orchestra still faced considerable pressures from different fronts to stay together. First of all, Chinese orchestral musicians who lacked adequate pay for their participation in this CO were lured away by hotels that were able to give them more money. Interviews with two Chinese orchestral veterans revealed that for the Chinese orchestral musicians who relied on their music-making for a living, economics was a decisive factor that influenced their loyalties. One of the Chinese orchestral veterans recalls:

In fact after the 1969 performance celebrating 150 weeks of Singapore's independence, a group of members left the NTCO to join bands in hotels. Hotels then hired Chinese instrumentalists to play and the money offered by the hotels was much more lucrative than the small sum given by the National Theatre. The orchestra had to re-audition to get more members in.⁴¹

Second, there were also political conflicts at the leadership level within the orchestra, which resulted in internal divisions and dissension among the musicians. These conflicts resulted in Zheng Sisen leaving the NTCO in 1972. According to a Chinese orchestral veteran, Zheng Sisen was ousted by Li Xueling who had been eyeing Zheng's conductor position in order to gain more prestige, fame, and recognition. In spite of the fact that he was not a good conductor from a musical perspective, he found ways to push Zheng out of the job by getting support from the management and some of the musicians:

⁴¹ CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

Through orchestral politics, Li kicked Zheng out of his post. Zheng was a good conductor. Following his departure from the orchestra, Zheng relocated to Hong Kong and then later moved to Taiwan, finally passing away there. Li Xueling has also since died.⁴²

It is interesting to note that unlike the rosy and picturesque image projected of the picture of the NTCO by the media, there were also underlying economic and political factors happening beneath the surface. For many of the musicians, promoting, performing and teaching Chinese music left them too busy to be able to deal with the political issues at the leadership level, and thus, to prevent Zheng from leaving the orchestra. A CO veteran, then a member in the NTCO related:

We couldn't help it... although it was a pity, there were a huge number of things going on for the Chinese orchestral scene then, and we were constantly kept busy, practising, performing, teaching, or conducting.⁴³

However, all the underlying political and economic issues surged to the surface when the orchestra was forced by the government to shut down in 1974. The National Theatre Trust announced that it was adopting a new sponsoring scheme for the performing arts and would discontinue support for its current groups. Apparently, despite its efforts, the NTCO was incurring financial losses, thus making it hard to sustain the orchestra. The NTCO's demise was also likely to have been affected by larger political changes. Jek Yuen Tong, the previous minister, a strong advocate of Chinese music, who stepped down in 1969, was replaced by an acting minister Wee Toon Boon, who did not support the CO. It is important to point out that, of all the activities of the National Theatre Trust, only the CO was closed down (Chia 2007:3).

A possible decisive factor that was responsible for the cessation of the NTCO was the rise of another CO – the People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) – that came into being in 1968. Over the years, there had been overlapping memberships between the NTCO and the PACO. A Chinese orchestral veteran offers a detailed account of the gradual disintegration of the NTCO with the “defections” from the NTCO to the PACO:

The shift of talent to PA broke the NTCO and the following success of PACO actually drove the NTCO to the ground. The National Theatre had already begun to show signs of breaking up, but with the success of PA's orchestra, it became inevitable that the orchestra would be dissolved. Singapore is a small country. Furthermore, one of the main directors responsible for the NTCO had moved to PA earlier and as a result,

⁴² CO veteran, formal interview, January 2007 Singapore.

⁴³ CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

had encouraged PA to develop its orchestra. In the end, many of the National Theatre members joined the PA orchestra when the orchestra disbanded.⁴⁴

In the following section, the rise of the PACO will be described in greater detail.

The People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO)

The People's Association (PA) was formed by the government on 1 July 1960 to foster racial harmony following Singapore's turbulent racial riots in the 1950s. As part of its effort to cultivate racial harmony and social cohesion, the PA set up meeting grounds for various ethnic groups known as community centres. The community centres organised activities for the people, which included cultural programmes, classes and sports, and invited Singaporeans to actively participate in them.⁴⁵

In 1968, amidst the growing popularity of Chinese orchestral music thanks to the NTCO, the PA, under the initiative of some Chinese orchestral enthusiasts,⁴⁶ decided to set up its own orchestra as well (PACO Overseas Tour 1976:1). However, for three years, no significant activity occurred. A founding member of the PACO explains the underlying reason for the lack of development of this orchestra:

When PA started the orchestra, they had no intention of developing it; they just viewed it as a political move to support racial harmony. PA didn't see the orchestra as a musical group, or even a performing arts organisation. It was a way of saying that the Chinese community's arts were addressed in this governmental department.... PA was also an umbrella organisation to a host of other activities. The stand PA had toward the orchestra was that it was one of the many activities that were under the jurisdiction of the association. They saw no point in developing it further. With the PA playing a non-committal role to the CO, it took us three years before any progress was made.⁴⁷

However, in 1971, when the Chinese orchestral revolution in TV and radio had taken off due to the efforts of the NTCO, the PA decided to invest some money and effort in its CO. In fact, by the early 1970s, the PA, the organisation that once adopted an indifferent attitude to the CO had become an important player in the promotion of Chinese music, due to its recognition of the growing popularity of this musical genre among the masses. Thus, it

⁴⁴ CO veteran, formal interview, January 2007, Singapore.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.pa.gov.sg/> for more information.

⁴⁶ The enthusiasts included an influential director who had joined the PA from the National Theatre.

⁴⁷ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

started various COs and Chinese instrumental ensemble classes in its 190 community centres and actively promoted the Chinese orchestral genre (Goh 1998:62-63). The outcome of the active promotion by the PA was that it generated jobs for many Chinese musicians who derived their primary income from teaching in the community centres. Quek Yongxiu, one of the early members of the PACO and Chinese music critic, recounts:

The PA at that time decided that it would concentrate on developing its CO, and in 1971, invited Ma Wen from Hong Kong. It auditioned 60 people that year to build up the orchestra.⁴⁸

While he was a part of the association, Ma Wen held a few concerts, in particular, a concert titled *Qiyue erchongzou* (The July Duet) in 1971. This was a joint concert involving a collaboration between the PACO and the NTCO in an endeavour to promote Chinese music in Singapore. Under Ma's directorship, various Chinese music talents were groomed; his most famous protégé was arguably the conductor and critic Quek Yongxiu.⁴⁹ Ma held the belief that those with authority in the orchestra – the conductor in particular – should not be the only person to dictate the sort of music the orchestra produces. Thus, he often encouraged his students to think creatively (Quek 2002:287).

However, after a short stint as conductor from 1971 to 1973, Ma Wen returned to Hong Kong. Although he was respected as an extremely talented and dedicated musician who encouraged the musicians in the orchestra, Ma Wen struggled with the institutional bureaucracy that did not provide adequate musical support to the musicians. Quek recounts:

Ma Wen was a very straightforward person who could not adapt to Singapore's bureaucratic environment. Ma often encouraged students not to believe in institutional bureaucracy and encouraged them to be creative. I felt sad to see him leave.⁵⁰

Another member of the PA orchestra also regretted Ma Wen's departure:

Ma Wen, despite being invited here, felt that the scene here was too myopic and left soon after. I remember an incident, as a young member of the youth orchestra at time, where Ma Wen had a heated argument with the PA management over the purchasing of some much-needed instruments. I remember him saying that even a cleaner had a right to a broom; how could a musician not have a right to a basic instrument?⁵¹

⁴⁸ Quek Yongxiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore

⁴⁹ CO veteran, informal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

⁵⁰ Quek Yongxiu, formal interview, 11 November 2006, Singapore.

⁵¹ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

At this juncture, it is important to provide a background description of the role of the management and the orchestral politics. The PACO was run by the PA management that comprised individuals who were responsible for a wide variety of areas in the PA. According to the veteran CO musicians I interviewed, these individuals had no particular interest in, nor knowledge of CO. Because of this reality, their main emphasis was on ensuring that the PACO could perform adequately within the allocated budget. Thus, when confronted with Ma's fiery demands, the PA management began to perceive Ma as a troublesome CO musician who could damage the image of the PACO. In the midst of the tension and frequent conflicts, a frustrated Ma Wen left the PACO.⁵²

With Ma Wen's departure, the PA management hired Li Xueling from the NTCO to take over the conductorship of the orchestra. Many PA musicians I interviewed stated that Li Xueling only got the position because the PA management did not possess an adequate CO knowledge to assess the artistic ability of Li Xueling, except for his prior conducting experience with the NTCO. A PA musician even suggested that Li Xueling was angling for the position of the conductor of the PACO, even when Ma was there. Seeing that there was tension between Ma and the management, Li thrust himself forward as a viable alternative to replace Ma. Quoting a CO veteran who was privy to these politics: "When Ma Wen left, Li Xueling took over — it was all politics.... Do you think Ma left so easily after being invited over here?".

Under Li's conductorship, the orchestra recruited more members and tried to increase the orchestra's standards.⁵³ Contrary to the negative impression that most Chinese orchestral practitioners had of Li at the time, a 1989 newspaper report covering the history of CO in Singapore gave him a glowing tribute: "without Li Xueling, there would not be such a strong Chinese music scene in Singapore now" (Goh 1998:71). The conflicts in the perceptions of Li illuminate the reality that members of the public who do not have the insider's perspective of the CO sometimes form impressions that do not reflect those of CO musicians. In fact, many of the PA musicians stated that Li's incompetence as a conductor was apparent straight from the start and petitioned to the management for a change in conductor.

⁵² CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

⁵³ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

The PA management learnt about Ng Tai Kong when he was invited as guest conductor of the NTCO in 1973 (PACO Overseas Tour 1976:1-3). He guest conducted the PACO with Li Xueling on January 1973, premiering the *dizi* concerto, “MacRitchie”,⁵⁴ composed by and conducted for a Singaporean *dizi* player and Chinese orchestral pioneer, Yong Phew Kheng (Cheng 1982:6). Born in Guangdong in 1943, Ng studied the violin and *erhu* at 15. Subsequently, he was mentored in conducting by Peng Xiuwen, the forefather of the Chinese orchestral genre (Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra 1999:15). When he was 20, he migrated to Hong Kong as an illegal immigrant and spent his early days trying to make ends meet by working in factories and as a janitor in a school.⁵⁵ He then found a job as a lecturer of Chinese music at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (*ibid.*). While in Hong Kong, he established himself as one of the most renowned conductors and composers for Chinese film music, composing scores for over a hundred Chinese films (PACO Overseas Tour 1976:1-3). Because he was proficient in the *guzheng*, *sanxian*, *pipa*, *banhu*, and *erhu*, he was tasked to form the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra in 1972.⁵⁶ The PA was so impressed with Ng’s credentials and performances that it offered Ng a full-time position in 1974 as conductor. He was hired to spearhead and conduct PA’s symphony orchestra, the CO, the dance company, and the chorus. Upon accepting the post, Ng started making radical changes to the PACO and launched it into another phase of significant progress.

First, Ng pushed for the PACO to turn semi-professional. In September 1974, Ng auditioned and recruited six full-time musicians. At the time, Ng was unsure of the orchestra’s ability to survive, as well as whether its full-time members would be able to find other jobs should the orchestra collapse. Nevertheless, he still went ahead and his first six musicians included Phoon Yew Tien, Goh Ek Meng, Yeo Siew Wee, Xu Li Fang, Zhou Bixia, and Lin Yayu. They constituted the first professional Chinese ensemble outside China. Ng then recruited amateurs on an *ad hoc* basis to make up the full orchestra whenever required on concert occasions (Goh 1998:100). Under Ng’s leadership, the orchestra’s morale rose considerably. Orchestral planning and practices took place more frequently⁵⁷ and in a more organised manner. More specifically, Ng started having regular rehearsals and was systematic in the way he conducted the rehearsals. He improved the artistry of the orchestra by working on increasing the performing standards of the musicians, as well as the precision, sound, and musicality of the overall orchestra.

⁵⁴ MacRitchie is the name of a reservoir in Singapore.

⁵⁵ See http://www.hkco.org/eng/concert_30th_info_c2_eng.asp for more information.

⁵⁶ The Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra did not officially take off until 1977, when Ng was re-invited to Hong Kong to re-establish the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra. Singaporean Chinese orchestral veteran, personal communication, Singapore.

⁵⁷ The PA orchestra only practiced twice a week before it turned semi-professional (Goh 1998:101).

Within a year of Ng's employment, the PACO improved sufficiently to be able to stage two concerts – “Fantasia” and “Singapura”⁵⁸ – at the Singapore Conference Hall in 1975. Following the success of the concerts, the orchestra was invited to make a Long Play (LP) vinyl recording. The recording titled “The Moon Rises” was published by the EMI Recording Company and achieved considerable acclaim. So successful was the orchestra that the then-prominent Hong Kong film director, James Wong, requested for the orchestra to play for a drama he was producing (PACO Overseas Tour 1976:2-3). In 1976, the orchestra took part in the 1st Asian Arts Festival held in Hong Kong, which brought recognition to Chinese music in Singapore. The orchestra then recorded another LP to commemorate its participation in the festival. All these engagements greatly boosted morale among the musicians and raised their profile (Koh Auger Yap and Ng 2006:106). Classes for Chinese instruments were also organised for the public in 1977 to spread the popularity of Chinese music, as well as to uncover new talent. The success of Ng's leadership and the PACO was captured by the reflections of a Chinese orchestral veteran:

PA brought in Ng Tai Kong who led the orchestra through a series of successful large-scale concerts. The concerts brought much fame for the orchestra and for Ng, and the orchestra was admired greatly by the artistic community in Singapore.⁵⁹

Moreover, Ng often took the initiative to act above and beyond his capacity to strive for the growth of the CO in Singapore. Because Singapore did not have any music institutions then to provide formal training in Chinese music, Ng conducted lessons in music theory at the PA for members of the orchestra. He observed that there was a lack of basic technique in the members and that many of them did not have a strong music foundation in theory and basic musicianship – fundamentals required for the advancement of music. An inspiring teacher who composed many pieces for the CO, he also encouraged his students to tap into their culture and compose musical pieces infused with local Singaporean elements.

Thus, it is little wonder that Ng is largely credited by Singaporean Chinese musicians including Goh and Quek as the man who established the CO as a genre among music lovers in Singapore. He was also hailed as the force behind improving the standards of Chinese musicians in Singapore greatly. Under Ng, the PACO musicians felt a sense of

⁵⁸ “Singapura” is Malay for Singapore.

⁵⁹ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

belonging to the orchestra. With his guidance and tutelage, the musicians felt motivated with the belief that they were engaged in the creation of art. Feeling inspired by his artistic integrity, many considered themselves to be musicians involved in a collective music-making process, not just playing individual instruments in an orchestra. They were proud to be a part of a professional music-making community (PACO Overseas Tour 1976:1).

In spite of spectacular success that demonstrated Ng's outstanding ability to lead the CO and his dedication, there were also signs of tension and conflict. Some of the CO musicians perceived Ng as a tough taskmaster who was direct in scolding musicians who did not meet his standards during rehearsals. He often blamed musicians for being technically inadequate or slow to understand his concepts:

Despite Ng's artistic achievements, he was also described as brash, arrogant, and demanding; a person who often made statements that offended many. While he was conducting the PACO, much tension and conflict arose from his demands and his impatience.⁶⁰

Ng's difficult personality was also confirmed by his son, Ng Tin Chung (as quoted by the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra), who described his father as follows:

As a self-made hero, he regarded himself in that light. He viewed himself with epic dimensions befitting a heroic figure on a pedestal, and everything, or everyone, around him was to subordinate to his wishes.⁶¹

In May 1977, Ng left Singapore, accepting an invitation by Hong Kong's municipal government to join the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra (Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra n.d.). According to Goh, Ng Tai Kong left Singapore due to the orchestral conditions in Singapore, which was characterised by a low artistic level due to the dearth of talent and the absence of competition between orchestras. Back then, the PACO was the only semi-professional orchestra. In talking about the episode of Ng's departure, an orchestral member captures perfectly Singapore's lack of sufficient creative stimulus for outstanding CO musicians like Ng:

When Ng left Singapore for Hong Kong, speculations flew about how Ng had used Singapore and the People's Association as a stepping-stone for his job in Hong Kong. It seemed that the Hong Kong government had not been keen to support and develop a CO when he tried to start one in 1972. It was

⁶⁰ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

⁶¹ Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, http://www.hkco.org/eng/concert_30th_info_c2_eng.asp, accessed 17 April 2008.

only after reviewing Ng's success in Singapore that the Hong Kong government relented and wanted Ng back. Ng brought with him Goh Aik Yew, the boss of Hugo records, and Yong Siew Wee among other fine musicians from the PA orchestra then. There was literally a "brain drain" from the PACO.⁶²

While this comment can be interpreted to portray Ng as an ambitious CO musician who took advantage of the PACO for his own career advancement, it also revealed the severe lack of options and opportunities for creative growth and development for CO musicians. The Singapore CO environment lacked the necessary elements to retain talented individuals such as Ng. In fact, many talented musicians from the orchestra in Singapore followed Ng to Hong Kong, taking up positions of importance in the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, and some remain there till today. With Ng founding and leading the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra, it went on to become one of the best COs in the world.

Once again, with the void left by Ng, Li Xueling served as a stand-in conductor for the PACO while the PA management searched for a replacement. In August 1977, it hired Lim Tiap Guan, a former conductor of the Singapore Armed Forces Reservists' Association Chinese Orchestra.⁶³ Lim was the first Singaporean to obtain a Licentiate of the Royal Schools of Music in the viola. He was also proficient in various other instruments such as the violin and flute (PACO Concert 1978:3). However, to many of the PA musicians, Lim was clearly artistically inferior to his predecessors such as Ma and Ng.

Other than expanding the orchestra's original strength from six professional musicians to 18 (Quek 2002:288), Lim did not make significant changes to the orchestra. A Chinese orchestral veteran recounts Lin's only artistic innovation:

Lin started a trend of fusion music, where he brought military bands, symphony orchestras, and other western musical genres to work with the CO, creating a lot of east-west collaboration. But he was a timid man, and he was ousted by orchestral politics as well.⁶⁴

Once again, the CO musicians rallied for a change of conductor and the PA management was pressured to search for an alternative.

⁶² CO veteran, formal interview, March 2005, Singapore.

⁶³ The Singapore Armed Forces Association Chinese Orchestra was one of the amateur orchestras among the many that formed in the 1960s. It was primarily made up of reservist servicemen.

⁶⁴ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2005, Singapore.

In 1980, Ku Lap Man, a percussionist and composer, whose career began with the Chongqing Music and Dance Theatre in 1951, was hired as a conductor. As a veteran CO musician described it: “Ku Lap Man...was poached by the PA while he was a percussionist with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra at that time”.

A significant fact to note here is that in the 1970s and the 1980s, the PA management did not have a wide range of options for hiring conductors. Due to the absence of a strong CO environment in Singapore, there were very few CO conductors who could perform the task adequately. At the same time, conductors from mainland China were not readily available due to the restrictions of the Chinese government.⁶⁵ The PA management often gained access to prominent CO musicians from mainland China when they were already working in Hong Kong.

Ku was well-known in China for his composition, “Dragon Dance”, which was the most highly-rated piece at China’s National Music and Dance Festival in 1965 (Ministry of Community Development 1984:15). He was also an experienced conductor, having led the Chongqing Music and Dance Troupe from 1961 to 1978 (Cheng 1982:6).

Under Ku, the orchestra expanded to 32 members in 1984 (Goh 1998:100-02) and performed at the Australian-Indian Ocean music festival in 1984, the Japanese Universiade Festival in 1988, and the Taipei Traditional Arts Festival in 1991. The orchestra had more regular public performances and participated frequently in Arts Festivals (SCO 1993:3). However, unlike his previous artistically-inclined and musically ambitious predecessors from China, Ku was not considered to be a veritable artistic force by the CO musicians. The veteran CO members I interviewed commented that Ku’s style of conducting, while precise and proficient did not inspire the musicians to push for a greater variety of sound:

He has a very delicate way of handling music, and he was very precise and meticulous in his conducting. But the orchestra lacked a larger range of sounds, which it required if it were to go fully professional.⁶⁶

He had experience in conducting COs and demanded honest and plain sounds from the orchestra. But he had no thoughts of expansions and that’s why he was able to last a bit longer than the rest [of the conductors].⁶⁷

⁶⁵ China was living largely in Communist isolation then.

⁶⁶ CO veteran, formal interview, March 2007, Singapore.

From the CO musicians' perspective, Ku's competence, coupled with his lack of ambition for the orchestra and the music agenda probably enabled him to last for a longer period of time as a conductor. Ku was appreciated by the management as a mild and non-invasive conductor who did not offend anyone sufficiently to lead to the termination of his tenure. He served as the conductor until his retirement in 1995 (SCO 1996:3).

The length of his tenure clearly highlighted a key issue that has contributed to the state of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore. In reviewing the history of the PACO, it is evident that the conductor of the PACO who had enjoyed the longer tenure was a competent, but artistically uninspiring CO musician. In contrast, the artistic individuals who made a genuine attempt to transform the CO music scene in Singapore often left after feeling frustrated by the lack of adequate support from the PA management.

⁶⁷ CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

Contemporary Society

At the height of the CO's popularity in the 70s and following the success of SBC's Chinese music programmes, the SBC decided to form its own CO in 1974.⁶⁸ However, the late 80s Singapore saw an increased emphasis on Western popular culture and pop music in Singapore and an understanding by the various media agencies that there was greater profitability with its promotion; CO music was deemed to be not as profitable (Goh 1998:103). Leong (2003) notes that the media portrayals of Western pop lifestyles and values to be desirable and "representing happiness, success, prosperity and progress" led to an outlook that "seriously affected the development of indigenous and ethnic musics" (158), while Takizawa in his study of music in 1987 Singapore pointed out that by then "the popularity of western pop music exceed[ed] that of ethnic music" (1987:19). A Chinese orchestral veteran recounts:

The broadcasting stations are mercenary enterprises, they don't care for the development of the arts at all, when they realised that western pop music was bringing in the ratings and could earn more money for them, they [the station management] disbanded the broadcast CO.... But it wasn't the disbanding of the broadcast orchestra that affected us, it was the lack of media attention that slowly caused a decline in our [CO's] popularity – CO wasn't what it used to be anymore.

As a result of the disbanding in 1983, CO music was less often featured in mainstream media, Chinese music programmes ceased and the popularity of CO declined from its previous state (Goh 1998:103). By the 90s, the period of boom was over, and general public interest over the CO started to decline; Singaporeans had generally accepted the CO as part of the cultural landscape in Singapore. COs had already gained a strong foothold in some schools since the 70s, becoming the breeding ground for new CO musicians to come, ensuring a constant supply of CO musicians.⁶⁹ Amateur COs like the PACO were still active across Singapore and held regular concerts and made recordings; community centres were still proliferating the CO genre and although it was not as popular as before, the CO genre still commanded a steady audience base in Singapore.

Singapore in the 90s and the new millennium saw the development of CO grading examinations, the institution of COs as Co-Curricular Activities, and the development of

⁶⁸ More information will be covered in the later section below, **Singapore Broadcasting Centre Chinese Orchestra.**

⁶⁹ More of this will be covered later in the chapter, **Amateur orchestras – School and Non-school Chinese orchestras.**

Singapore's second national orchestra – the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO). The material covered in the subsequent sections will form the background for my analysis of the social processes and the CO, to be covered in the next chapter. The SCO will be explained in greater detail in the following section.

The Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO)

In 1992, under the initiative of the Singaporean government, the PACO was renamed the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) to reflect its leading status as Singapore's second national orchestra,⁷⁰ thus giving it a national identity (SCO 1997:27). The orchestra was equipped with its own administrative team to deal with management matters and the PA temporarily hosted the SCO on its premises, thus allowing the orchestra to “pave the way for the eventual development of the SCO into a fully-fledged orchestra with its own board of management” (Chin 1996; SCO 1997:27; Chin 1997).

In 1993, in preparation for Ku's impending retirement, Qu Chun Quan was brought into the SCO, first as a co-conductor with Ku, before eventually becoming its full-fledged conductor in 1995 after Ku Lap Man retired.⁷¹ Qu, a conductor of considerable renown in China, took up music while he was young and joined the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra in 1956 as an *erhu* player, later going on to study conducting at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music's Conducting and Composition Department. Upon graduation in 1978, he became the resident conductor of the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra, as well as the Vice-Chair of the Shanghai Conductor's Association and committee member of the China Chinese Music Association. Qu also won awards at the Shanghai Arts Festival and the Shanghai Festival of Spring Music Competition for his compositions (Chin 1997). He was also a guest conductor of many well-known orchestras, including the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra and the Taipei Municipal Chinese Orchestra (SCO 1996:9).

With a wide range of repertoire to his name and a reputation for being a first-rate conductor in China, Qu harked back to the outstanding artistic conductors in the 1970s. Many SCO musicians at the time realised that it was a tremendous privilege for the SCO to have someone of Qu's calibre to come and conduct this orchestra. There were even CO

⁷⁰ The Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) was founded in 1979 with the support of the government (Quek 2002:292).

⁷¹ Quek Yong Xiu, formal interview, 4 November 2006, Singapore.

musicians who felt that Qu's talent was wasted on the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore (Goh 1998:101).⁷²

True to his artistic ability and leadership, Qu invested tremendous effort in improving the performance of the SCO. Under Qu, the orchestra took on pioneering performance projects, which would raise its overall standards. One of his endeavours was to encourage local composers to produce compositions for the CO. In 1993, Qu held a seminar for local composers, in which he encouraged them to create their own music instead of limiting themselves to playing pieces from China. Under his influence, many composers, despite making their maiden attempts, were willing to compose for the CO (Ho 1994). The outcome of this initiative was the Singaporean composition showcase performance the following year, in which the SCO, led by Qu, played only local compositions. Qu also led 17 musicians to perform at an international festival in the Tochigi Prefecture in 1995, and was continually in demand as a guest conductor for overseas orchestras (SCO 1997:35).

Qu's impressive work both locally and abroad lent sufficient legitimacy to the SCO such that in 1995, the then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong directed the setting up of a full-fledged professional national CO.⁷³ The then-Deputy Prime Minister Brigadier-General (BG) Lee Hsien Loong, was appointed as the orchestra's patron. The orchestra was to be governed by a Board of Directors comprising individuals appointed by the Prime Minister's Office and the Chairman of the PA. An endowment fund was accordingly set up and fundraising came into full force immediately (Leong 1996). In May 1996, the SCO inaugurated itself as a privatised company, independent of the PA. The then-Deputy Prime Minister (BG) Lee Hsien Loong, wrote in the company's inauguration booklet:

[The] government will focus more attention on gracious living, which includes working with the community to develop the arts and culture for all Singaporeans.... SCO [has] acquired sufficient experience and expertise to upgrade itself into a full-fledged national orchestra... [it] will act as a catalyst to promote Chinese music, and contribute significantly to Singapore's cultural scene (Lee 1996).

At an SCO's Inaugural Fundraising dinner, he spoke further:

Singapore has made good progress in the economic and social areas. Our standard of living in material terms is equivalent to many developed nations. But we must not neglect cultural

⁷² Professional CO musician, informal interview, May 2007, Singapore.

⁷³ There was only one other national orchestra then – the Singapore Symphony Orchestra.

and artistic pursuits. A full-fledged professional CO will be an important part of our cultural scene. Chinese music is already popular among Singaporeans. There is much amateur talent, especially in the SAP schools.⁷⁴ The SCO must reach out to Singaporeans who are interested in Chinese music. It should also try to expand the audience for Chinese music, to sustain itself and to help to fulfill our vision of a more gracious and artistically vibrant society (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 1996).

The government also provided the SCO with the Singapore Conference Hall as a venue for rehearsals and performances, along with renovation funding and an annual grant to cover rent. In total, the government spent \$22 million in renovating the hall for the orchestra's use (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 1996).⁷⁵ To help the SCO meet the high expectations of global prominence, additional funding for the SCO was also provided through an endowment fund, which was set up by the company. With the orchestra's projected expenditure reaching close to \$4.7 million every year, the aim of the endowment fund was to raise \$25 million to support the orchestra's activities in the future, and support its growth (Leong 1996). The Singapore Totalisator Board also set up a separate fund that supplied the SCO with funding for one-tenth of its cost of operations (Leong 1997; Chin 1997).⁷⁶

The above description of the government's involvement in the cultivation of the role of the CO in Singapore offers real insight into the development of the CO scene in Singapore. The government finally paid attention to the CO and provided it with funding because it saw the value of the CO as a vehicle that could aid in the construction of the image of Singapore as a "gracious and artistically vibrant society" worthy of its growing economic prowess. However, at the time, it had no intention of investing the necessary time and resources to create an environment that would be conducive for nurturing CO musicians within the local environment. This is clearly reflected in the then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's proposal that the SCO bring in foreign talent during the initial start-up of the CO. Essentially, the government was aiming for the quickest way of achieving its objective of projecting a world-class image of the SCO, without a concomitant investment

⁷⁴ SAP refers to Special Assistance Plan Schools, an elite breed of schools where both the English language and the mother tongue language (Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil etc.) are taken as first languages to cater to academically strong students. Most other schools take the English language as a first language, and the mother tongue language as second.

⁷⁵ The Singapore Conference Hall was fully renovated and refurbished in 2001. The orchestra rehearsed temporarily at the PA's premises prior to the Hall's opening.

⁷⁶ The Singapore Totalisator Board, the regulatory body for the Singapore Turf Club, the government's agent for horseracing, totalisator, betting and other gambling operations, set up a \$10-million reversionary trust fund for the SCO and gave the SCO a \$1 million-grant (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts 1996).

of the time and resources to establish a CO music scene in Singapore. The strategy was premised on the belief that over time, under the positive influence of the superior foreign CO musicians, the locals would be able to completely take over (Leong 1996). To this day, the SCO is still largely dominated by foreign CO musicians: 60% of the orchestra is made up of foreign musicians and a strong CO music environment that provides high-quality training to CO musicians is still absent in Singapore.

In 1996, the year the SCO was inaugurated as a private company, the SCO's Board of Directors was tasked with the job of expanding the current SCO of 31 musicians into a 62-strong orchestra of international standing. It is important to highlight the fact that the Board comprises individuals who have little or no knowledge of music. They have been invited to be part of the orchestra's governing board due to their extensive networks of rich individuals who could patronise the SCO. Their involvement in the CO was thus based on their potential for raising funds for the SCO.⁷⁷

Following the suggestion of the then-DPM Lee and armed with increased funding, the orchestral management sought to revamp the entire SCO. It launched an international recruitment hunt for Chinese instrumental talent from the conductor position to the CO musicians by heading to conservatories and orchestras in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. During their search, the orchestral management came across Hu Bingxu who boasted impressive credentials. Hu graduated with honours from the Central Conservatory in China and joined the Central Symphony Orchestra as an oboist. In 1966, he took up conducting and over time became the resident conductor of the Central Symphony Orchestra, the Shanghai Opera Theatre, the Central Opera, the Central Ballet, and the China Central Chinese Orchestra.

In 1996, the orchestra recruited Hu Bingxu and installed him as SCO's Music Director with Qu as Deputy Music Director (Anon 1997). As part of the revamp, all existing members of the SCO, along with potential new members, had to go through auditions before an independent panel. Of the 32 members from the previous PACO, 28 made it through to the "revamped" Chinese orchestra, which saw an audition of more than 100 applicants. By the end of the auditions, the orchestra comprised 45 members (Chin 1997).⁷⁸ As most Singaporean Chinese musicians do not have strong formal training, foreign musicians from countries such as China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, who had studied in

⁷⁷ CO musician, informal interview. April 2006, Singapore.

⁷⁸ When SCO first started, 40% of the CO comprised foreign talent; the number has since increased to 60%.

conservatories and had strong performance experiences, were recruited. Their presence certainly raised the standards of the SCO considerably (Tsang 1999).

Backed up by a renewed CO of international talent, Hu reportedly boasted that the orchestra would reach world-class standards in five years. Qu also set up an objective for the orchestra to play and write music with a strong local flavour that would eventually widen the repertoire of the SCO. Both the conductors also announced their intention for the SCO to stage at least one major production every month (Chin 1997). On 20 April 1997, the SCO held its inaugural concert to a full house, featuring famed *erhu* soloist Min Huifen and local composer Phoon Yew Tien. The media interviews of the leaders of the SCO showed that the stakes were very high because of the support and funding received from the government:

This concert will show Singaporeans what the new SCO is made up of. We will have to go all out to make a strong first impression (Deputy Conductor Qu, quoted in Chin 1997).

We have received a lot of support from the government and community. We cannot afford to fail (Chng Heng Thiu, Chairman of the SCO, quoted in Chin 1997).

The ticket sales for the gala concert were so successful that a pre-gala afternoon show was added (Anon 1997; Chin 1997).

Following its inaugural concert, the orchestra embarked on a proactive policy of bringing Chinese music to the masses. For example, the SCO performed at the Whampoa Community Club in the HDB heartlands⁷⁹ in 1997 to launch its series of community concerts. In an interview, the then-general manager of the SCO Sim Bee Hia said: “There are many out there who will not bother about going to a concert hall. So we will go to the parks and community centres instead to entertain them” (Leong 1997). This was a highly unusual move at the time as there were few national arts groups that brought their music to the masses; only amateur groups and non-nationalised arts groups had such outreach programmes. Also, the arts were considered an elitist activity reserved for the rich and the cultured. The SSO, for one, rarely held concerts beyond the concert halls. The SCO’s community series brought Chinese orchestral music closer to the common folk and the concerts were accompanied by educational activities. There were talks about the instruments and the orchestra given in English and Mandarin; audiences were encouraged to

⁷⁹ Housing Development Board (HDB) heartlands refers to the community of public housing areas in which Singaporeans reside.

interact with the musicians and have hands-on-sessions with the instruments. Pieces played included Malay folk tunes that were familiar with the Singaporean masses, such as *Chan Mali Chan* and *Di Tanjong Katong*, among other Chinese instrumental pieces. As Sim explained, “We want to introduce the orchestra to residents of the other races and language streams as well” (Leong 1997). The concerts in the heartlands were extremely well-received and the SCO gained a strong audience following at the grassroots level. By the end of 1997, within the span of just eight months, the SCO had staged 12 major concerts, 11 school concerts, six community series concerts and one outdoor concert. For these events, the orchestra invited and featured 15 foreign soloists, vocalists, and a guest conductor (Chuan, Goh, and Ling 1998:4). The aim of having so many concerts was to allow those unfamiliar with Chinese music to learn how to appreciate it and to allow the orchestra to gain mass appeal beyond an audience of Chinese people (Chin 1996).

The SCO was not only active in Singapore, but also overseas. In August 1997, the orchestra sent 10 musicians to take part in the Eighth Ismailia International Folklore Festival in Cairo, Egypt (Chuan, Goh, and Ling 1998:4). This was followed in September 1998 by the SCO’s first full orchestral concert tour since its inauguration. During this tour, the SCO gave performances in Beijing, Shanghai, and Xiamen to critical acclaim. It performed together with the Central Chinese Orchestra in Beijing and the Shanghai Chinese Orchestra in Shanghai.⁸⁰ Under the baton of Hu, the performances were well-commended by audiences and the orchestra gained critical acclaim from China’s industry insiders. At the Beijing Cultural Exchange Forum in the same year, Chinese music insiders commented that the SCO should be added as the “4th pillar” to what was commonly known as the “Three Kingdoms”⁸¹ of Chinese orchestral music from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (*ibid.*:6).

In 1999, the SCO came under the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, which was described as a “logical move” by the then-National Arts Council Chairman, Liu Thai Ker, as the orchestra would receive better support from this ministry that aims to promote mainstream cultural development (Lea 1999). This move enabled the orchestra to achieve financial independence from the National Arts Council, which was largely responsible for the orchestra’s funding till 1999, on top of its enjoyment of free artistic expression and control over administrative matters.

⁸⁰ The orchestra performed on 22 September 1998 at the Beijing Concert Hall, on 25 September 1998 at the Shanghai Concert Hall and on 28 September 1998 at the Xiamen Concert Hall.

⁸¹ The actual term, ‘Three Kingdoms’, was used to describe a historical period in China’s History (220-280 AD) that has been greatly romanticised in Chinese culture and celebrated in operas, folk stories and novels.

Throughout 1999, the SCO played a total of 69 concerts, with 29 taking place in the latter half of the year, which included school and community events. Out of the 13 regular concerts held from June to December, five of them were played to a full house (Jin and Goh 2000:5). The same year, the *Singapore Business Times* reported that the SCO had encouraging box office sales, with all concerts attracting a minimum of 80% in ticket sales. Some concerts, especially those with renowned guest conductors, even saw rehearsals being ticketed and sold to audiences due to strong demand (Tsang 1999).

However, the outward success of the orchestra, once again, masked the internal turmoil within the CO itself. According to the veteran CO musicians who were in the SCO at the time, Hu and Qu were often embroiled in heated arguments over musical interpretations, programming, and rehearsal techniques. One of the underlying reasons stemmed from the differences in their training at different conservatories as Hu came from Beijing and Qu came from Shanghai. As one veteran CO musician explained it, CO musicians from the conservatories in Beijing often considered their counterparts from Shanghai to be musically inferior and vice versa:

Qu and Hu came from the southern and northern schools of music respectively. Qu had come from the south, while Hu was predominantly based in Beijing. As you know, with one from the south and the other from the north, they never got along well together... there were frequent quarrels over artistic direction and administrative matters.

They also had different artistic temperaments: Hu disliked Qu's conducting style and rehearsal techniques.⁸² Because Hu was Qu's superior within the orchestral hierarchy, he had the upper hand in making artistic decisions and overruled many of Qu's ideas and strategies. One of the SCO musicians commented: "Hu just made Qu's working conditions unbearable." Another Chinese orchestral pioneer recounted:

Hu was very good at playing politics. In 1999, Qu, unable to take the politics in Singapore any longer, left for another job opportunity in Taipei".⁸³

Nonetheless, the SCO continued to project an impressive façade to the general public. At the end of 1999, the SCO embarked on its most ambitious project to date – a Millennium concert held at the Singapore Indoor Stadium, Singapore's largest indoor

⁸² Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to March 2006, Singapore.

⁸³ Professional CO musician, formal interview, March 2006, Singapore.

venue, involving over 1,000 orchestral players playing together. The project mobilised many CO musicians in Singapore and proved to be an exciting experience. Apart from gaining fame and recognition, the orchestra sought to earn \$2 million in revenue through advertising, sponsorship, ticket revenue, and broadcast rights of this event. Thus, economic factors played a large role in the management strategy of the SCO, as it needed to raise sufficient funds in order to ensure its existence.

On 1 January 2000, the Millennium Concert 2000 was successfully staged. The concert, a collaboration between the SCO and the Ministry of Education, featured more than 1,200 performers comprising professional musicians from the SCO and members of various amateur orchestras. This concert made the news and set a record for the world's biggest CO (Lea 1999). This was followed by SCO's second overseas tour to Taiwan in February 2000. It performed with Taiwan's national orchestras at the Taipei National Concert Hall as part of the Taipei Traditional Arts Festival and the Taichung City Concert Hall.⁸⁴ The performances were highly commended and received positive reviews (Jin and Goh 2000:2-3).

The success of the SCO in gaining the attention of the public was also reflected in a series of audience surveys among 462 respondents in the year 2000. The survey findings indicated that 27% of respondents attended more than seven regular concerts per year; 40% attended 3-7 concerts; 15% attended less than three concerts and 18% were first-time concertgoers. The CO audience base consisted primarily of students, followed by young working adults with Chinese orchestral experience and professionals with a passion for traditional Chinese music. The popularity of the SCO among students, vis-à-vis the other groups, is partly attributed to the fact that many SCO musicians serve as conductors or instructors in the various school COs. Thus, SCO musicians who are instructors in schools are also unofficial ambassadors of various local amateur COs. Coupled with the support of the media in providing information about the concert, the SCO was able to secure an attendance rate of 90% in 1999, based on ticket sales (Chuan and Goh 2000:6).

Yet, once again, even as the SCO appeared to be thriving in the public's eye, internal politics threatened to undermine its positive image. In April 2000, the management of the SCO decided not to renew Hu Bingxu's contract. Hu's departure shook up the CO community in Singapore. He had been a brilliant conductor who had been instrumental in

⁸⁴ The concert was held on 1 and 2 March 2000.

enabling the SCO to develop a loyal audience following. Under him, SCO's popularity reached its peak.

The Chinese orchestral practitioners I interviewed attributed Hu's unexpected departure to two factors. One of them was the discontent of the musicians who supported Qu, mostly the Shanghainese graduates or affiliates in the orchestra. According to the SCO musicians at the time, these musicians came together and sent a petition to the Board to remove Hu, citing his violent and unpredictable temperament as a reason:

After Qu left, a few prominent Singaporean musicians and the predominantly southern-schooled orchestra made moves to oust Hu. Some of the musicians were exacting revenge on Hu for chasing Qu away.⁸⁵

Hu's departure was totally a result of orchestral politics in which a group of musicians who were unhappy with him plotted his departure. Not all the musicians liked him.⁸⁶

This petition was effective in eliciting the desired outcome because the Board of Directors had become increasingly unhappy with Hu. The Board of Directors were having a strained relationship with Hu characterised by communication conflicts. In their previous interactions with Hu, they had found him brash and brazen. The Board expected Hu as an employee to be submissive and to comply with instructions. Hu, on the other hand, believed that the board that lacked individuals with knowledge of CO music need not be consulted for executive decisions.⁸⁷ His lack of deference to the authority and power of the Board greatly angered the directors:

And there was some friction between him and the Board of Directors. He wanted things to be done in a certain way and perhaps that didn't endear him to other people. He was certainly talented, no doubt about it. But people with talent can also be highly temperamental. Talent is one thing, but you also want to have an environment of a healthy organisation. Perhaps, the board decided that it was better to find someone with a better temperament.⁸⁸

Officially, the SCO dismissed the issue as a simple case of the directors deciding not to renew Hu's contract, thus downplaying the politics that were occurring with the orchestra:

⁸⁵ Professional CO musician, formal interview, April 2006, Singapore.

⁸⁶ Professional CO musician, formal interview, March 2006, Singapore.

⁸⁷ Professional CO musician, informal interview, April 2006, Singapore.

⁸⁸ Professional CO musician, formal interview, May 2006, Singapore.

[Hu's] contract was to expire on 3 April and the board decided not to renew it. The reasons for doing so are confidential. Meanwhile, the board is looking for a replacement, but until then, we have guest conductors (Ee 2000).

Nonetheless, Hu's departure was considered a great deficit by other CO musicians within the Chinese music community. Quek Yong Xiu, who felt a tremendous sense of loss at Hu's departure considered that Singapore was fortunate to have been led by Hu. In an essay, he commented that had Hu Bingxu, who had likened Singapore's cultural landscape to a "desert", realised that the SCO consisted of mostly amateur players when he first came, he might not have accepted the position of music director. Quek also recounts a conversation with Hu just before he left, which captured Hu's understanding of the deficits of Singapore's strategy in building the SCO. According to Hu, Singaporeans are very practical people: regardless of what they do, they tend to ask for results; because of this intrinsic nature, they also believe that culture and the arts can be established successfully through quick means (Quek 2002:289).

On the external front, the SCO continued to capitalise on its growing popularity. SCO's concertmaster at that time, Lum Yan Sing, took over the orchestra for its immediate performances for the rest of the year. In March 2001, Professor Xia Feiyun of the Shanghai Conservatory was invited to conduct the orchestra temporarily (Jin 2002:1). Despite its lack of music directorship, the orchestra continued increasing its performances and amassed 82 major concerts in the year 2001 (Kor 2001). In July 2001, the Singapore Conference hall promised to the orchestra by the Prime Minister was fully furnished and the orchestra moved to its permanent home. Located in Singapore's Shenton Way business district, the Conference Hall boasted a concert hall, a resource library, a score library, an exhibition hall, three practice halls, 15 studios, and an office space. The Conference Hall provided an additional source of income for the orchestra through its rental of its facilities (*ibid.*).

It was only in January 2002 that Tsung Yeh, a Chinese-American conductor, assumed the music directorship of the orchestra. SCO's Chairman Chew Keng Juea was quoted as stating that Yeh's appointment first came into being through an informal petition from the orchestral musicians who urged the management to sign him on after a successful guest-conducting stint in September 2001. It is possible that after one year without artistic leadership, some of the CO musicians were eager to find a conductor, especially since the management had been ineffective in hiring a prominent CO musician. As one of the SCO musicians stated:

The musicians who signed the petition did not know anything about him. After the drama with all the other mainland CO conductors, they thought that he would be a refreshing change.

Essentially, the CO musicians who supported his appointment did not have a genuine understanding of his artistic approach and style. On his part, Yeh was at first not particularly keen to take on this assignment as he did not want to leave his work in the U.S.. It was only after much negotiation that Yeh agreed to come to Singapore for a five-year term of 13-week stints, which would allow him to continue to work in the U.S. (Tan 2002).

Born in Shanghai, Yeh was initially trained as a pianist and was once a piano accompanist in the Eastern Song and Dance Troupe during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He later studied conducting at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and then at Mannes College in New York and Yale University. He was also the music director of the South Bend Symphony Orchestra and the Hong Kong Sinfonietta. Tsung Yeh had a penchant for contemporary music and was a strong advocate of new work. He envisaged a type of Chinese music that could be pushed into the mainstream through the fusion of the Chinese orchestral genre with jazz and popular music in order to reach out to the younger crowd. Programming such as this was seldom heard of in COs in any part of the world. Thus, many industry insiders greeted his appointment with suspicion. Many wondered if a predominantly Western-based conductor was capable of conducting a CO. Quek Yong Xiu mentions, "The issue is not if a western conductor can conduct a CO, but rather, if he has sufficient knowledge and research in the CO" (Quek 2002:284-85).

Upon his appointment, Yeh divided the orchestra's concerts into four major categories, calling them "Master Series", "Pop Series", "Chamber Music Series" and "Family Series". This strategy was implemented to cater to the largest spectrum of audiences and getting audiences of varying financial situations to come to Chinese orchestral performances (Jin 2002:1). The "Master Series" concerts featured renowned soloists and conductors, and catered to serious Chinese music practitioners, including a large student following. The "Pop Series" concerts integrated Chinese music with pop music, new age music and even jazz. The "Family Series" concerts were created for parents to bring their children to the concerts. The "Chamber Music Series" featured traditional and contemporary chamber work, thus preserving the traditions of Chinese folk music (Goh and Ong 2001:2).

Because such a strategic approach that was targeted at increasing the mass appeal of the public suited the priorities and objectives of the Board and the management, Yeh gained tremendous support from them. Many of the CO musicians noted that he was apparently on very good terms with the Board of Directors of the SCO and knew how to play politics by pandering to the Board's requests readily. Yeh's strong relationship with the Board thus placed him in an unassailable position, which has enabled him to renew his contract twice on terms that were favourable to him. Yeh has also dismissed some members of the orchestra who were responsible for Hu's demise.⁸⁹

Even more significantly, Yeh's relationship with the board has protected him from the discontent of the CO musicians who now perceived Yeh to be a terrible choice for the conductor position. The SCO musicians I interviewed stated that they were very uncomfortable with the radical changes that he was bringing into the orchestra. They included the move from cipher notation to manuscript in the orchestra; the reorganisation of the seating positions; and the reorganised repertory of the orchestra.⁹⁰ Due to his background in Western music, he was making music choices that did not demonstrate a strong understanding of Chinese music. In addition, he treated the musicians harshly like a slave driver, expecting the SCO musicians to rehearse in the morning and night in deference to his schedule in Singapore. Noting Yeh's good relationship with the Board of Directors, many SCO musicians do not voice their protest for fear of losing their jobs.⁹¹

Nonetheless, as in the past, the internal conflicts within the CO did not stop the SCO from putting on spectacular performances for the general public. In October 2002, at the opening festival of the Esplanade, Yeh led the orchestra to perform a symphonic epic, "Marco Polo and Princess Blue", an interdisciplinary seven-movement work featuring soloists, the CO, as well as a children's choir and an adult chorus performing in Chinese and Mongolian. The piece, composed by China-based Liu Yuan, incorporated elements from opera and musical theatre; it was one of the orchestra's largest works. Then in May 2003, the SCO managed to secure the much-desired spot of the opening performance at the annual Singapore Arts Festival. It collaborated with Singaporean visual artist, Tan Swie Hian, to stage "Instant is a Millennium – A Musical Conversation with Tan Swie Hian" to a fully-packed theatre at the Esplanade. One of the largest concerts in the history of the SCO, the interdisciplinary work also featured a large chorus and utilised multimedia, visual art,

⁸⁹ Professional CO musician, informal interview, May 2006, Singapore.

⁹⁰ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

⁹¹ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

calligraphy, and art installations. On 30 July 2004, the orchestra held a concert in celebration of Singapore's National Day. Similar to the Millennium Concert in 2000, Yeh led the SCO in a performance entitled "Our People Our Music", which featured a staggering 2,300 performers (over a thousand performers more than the Millennium concert). The concert featured local compositions and National Day music.

By then, it was no surprise that Yeh was getting a reputation for creating works that were getting bigger, which involved more participants, as well as larger budgets.⁹² According to the disillusioned CO musicians, Yeh's continuous pursuit to put up huge performances involving many performers testified to the orchestra's superficial conception of success.⁹³ However, audience members and arts practitioners from other industries whom I interviewed viewed Yeh's moves as strategic and planned; catering to the masses.

In March and April 2005, Yeh led the SCO on a European tour to Hungary and the United Kingdom. The orchestra performed at the Budapest Spring Festival, the Barbican in London, and the Sage Gateshead in Newcastle.⁹⁴ The orchestra played contemporary pieces and transcriptions of Western pieces including a specially commissioned work by minimalist composer Michael Nyman. Throughout the tour, the SCO was favourably received as an orchestra but Nyman's piece was in turn criticised by reviewers who wrote that he was unfamiliar with the CO idiom; Yeh's programming choices also came under fire from the Singaporean music critics.⁹⁵

In October 2007, SCO embarked on performances in Beijing and Shanghai under the invitation of the Beijing Music Festival and Shanghai International Arts Festival, as part of the Singapore Season.⁹⁶ The SCO was also invited to perform in Macau during the Macau International Music Festival, as well as major concert halls in Guangzhou, Zhongshan, and Shenzhen, in October 2007. The performances in 2007 were better received by the press and Chinese music insiders.⁹⁷

⁹² Professional CO musician, informal interview, April 2006, Singapore.

⁹³ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, May 2006, Singapore.

⁹⁴ The orchestra performed at the Bucharest Festival Theatre on 28 March, London Barbican Centre on 1 April 2005 and Newcastle Sage Gateshead on 3 April 2005.

⁹⁵ See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/apr/04/classicalmusicandopera> for a review by The Guardian on 4 April 2005 and Tan (2005).

⁹⁶ The Singapore Season is a cultural diplomacy effort to raise the awareness of Singapore as a multi-cultural and global artistic city. Singapore's premier arts groups were sponsored by the government and showcased on various platforms in a city chosen by the government. The location of the city changes every year

⁹⁷ See Hong (2007a) and (Hong 2007b) for more information.

Yeh's appeal to the masses and hence his support from the Board stems from the SCO's continuous dependence on the public for additional funding. What stands out throughout this discussion of the SCO is the discrepancy between the external perception of the SCO as a thriving world-class orchestra that is earning accolades and the internal perceptions of the discontented Chinese orchestral musicians, which is unknown to the outside world. Throughout the history of the SCO, the management of the orchestral entity has tended to cater to conductors who know how to play politics, while letting go of those who are more focused on the musical priorities and the well-being of the musicians. Ultimately, to the management and the Singapore government, the cultivation of an impeccable image of the SCO is far more important than the interests of the musicians who make up the orchestra. Unfortunately, this has taken a toll on the SCO musicians, which has in turn undermined the current development of the SCO. In Chapter 4, the insider perspectives of the CO musicians involved in the current SCO will provide a revealing juxtaposition with the outward signs of success of the SCO. More specifically, the tension between formal structures of the CO designed to cultivate the collective entity of the CO and the motivation of individual musicians, which affect social relationships between the musicians in the SCO, will be discussed.

National Chinese Music Competition and Graded Examinations

National Chinese Music Competition

Another factor that contributed to the development of the Chinese orchestral landscape in the 90s was the National Chinese Music Competition. In 1980, the National Arts Council started a music competition comprising both Chinese and Western instrumental categories.⁹⁸ After the 10th competition in 1995, the National Music Competition was restructured into two separate events, namely the National Piano & Violin Competition, first held in 1997, and the National Chinese Music Competition, first held in 1998. The biennial music competition was created to serve as a platform for music excellence; identify potential music talent; develop the performing skills of musicians in Singapore; and improve their musical standards (National Arts Council 1998:2).

⁹⁸ This competition is not to be confused with the broadcast competitions of the 60s.

Since its inception, the National Chinese Music Competition, organised by the National Arts Council, has led to the discovery of many potential stars in the music arena. In 2004, the SCO associated itself with the National Chinese Music Competition by co-organising and providing the Singapore Conference Hall as the venue for the event. Today, the competition is held at the Esplanade and comprises *erhu*, *dizi*, *guzheng*, *pipa*, *yangqin*, and *ruan* solo categories, as well as an ensemble category. Competition winners are awarded prize money, as well as performing opportunities within the SCO and international engagements (National Arts Council 2004:2).

Graded Examinations

At the end of 1990, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), in conjunction with the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, started graded examinations for *erhu*, *guzheng*, *pipa* and *dizi* musicians (Guan 1993). Quoting Benjamin Loh, the head of music at the NAFA at that time, the examination's main objectives were to "raise the standards of Chinese instrumental playing and also to enhance the awareness and appreciation of Chinese music... [NAFA] wanted something similar to what was being offered to Western instrumentalists" (Lim 1999). The Central Conservatory of Music was chosen as the representative institution to administer the examinations as it was "well-known for its high standards in the teaching and performing of both Western and Chinese instrumental music" (*ibid.*). In 2004, the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Centre for the Arts organised its version of graded examinations. Led by Lum Yan Sing, the former assistant conductor of the SCO, the examinations were designed to promote the appreciation and education of Chinese music in Singapore.⁹⁹

The graded examinations are still available today. Chinese Instrumental examinations organised by the NAFA and the NUS are similar to the ones held by the Associated Boards and are validated by various academic and musical institutions. Each year, a large number of applicants register for graded examinations.

⁹⁹ National University of Singapore. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/cfa/chime/index.html>, accessed 6 May 2008.

Amateur Chinese Orchestras – School and Non-School Chinese Orchestras

The professional groups, amateur orchestras, and schools greatly accounted for the growth of the CO... especially the schools. Without the schools, the CO would have fallen and failed long ago.¹⁰⁰

This statement testifies to the important role played by schools in providing a supply of musicians who were groomed to play in the professional COs in Singapore. In Singapore, school and amateur COs are the main sources of future Chinese orchestral talent, where they are exposed to CO music for the first time. Most of the local professional Chinese orchestral musicians today are formerly members of school and amateur COs. The following sections provide a discussion of the history of the formation of the school COs, followed by the amateur COs.

School Chinese Orchestras

Until 1968, existing orchestras had been run independently by clan associations and the school managements outside of the Ministry of Education's (MOE) guidelines and supervision (Chia 2007:5). For two years after that, the MOE did little to promote the art form in schools. Though it had not paid attention to the CO earlier, the government soon came to see the CO as a potentially effective political tool for preserving the Chinese culture and heritage within the context of its agenda to establish a multicultural and multiracial society (Chia 2007:7). In 1970, the MOE decided to promote the CO as an ECA. The MOE's education officer, Wu Shiming, held meetings with ministry officials and Chinese musicians to discuss how to expand the number of COs in schools (Goh 1998: 48-49). Through the funding provided by the Ministry, the schools were able to hire professional Chinese musicians as instructors and purchase instruments to train student musicians. With the increasing accessibility and popularity of Chinese orchestral music, made fashionable through radio, television, and concerts in the 70s, schools took to the implementation of the CO as a core performing arts activity. They actively recruited students, provided a rehearsal space, and hired instructors based on recommendations.

By the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, there were nine schools that had COs. They included: Chung Cheng High School, National Junior College, Jurong

¹⁰⁰ Professional CO musician, personal communication, Singapore.

Secondary School, Hwa Chong Junior College, and Dunman High. Two decades later, school orchestras, propped up by the funding provided by the MOE, have continued to grow rapidly.¹⁰¹

To provide greater insight into school COs, a concise historical background discussion of the Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra, one of the most successful school COs (Dunman High School 1994:160-62), will be presented below. This CO is the only secondary school CO to have performed on the international stage. Furthermore, many of the graduates of this CO have gone on to become professional CO musicians.

Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra

The Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra first started as a Chinese Music Society in 1973 with a modest strength of 40 players and only four instrument divisions: *erhu*, *dizi*, *yangqin*, and *liuqin*. In 1976, percussion instruments were added. However, because the skills of the members were so varied, the orchestra, on the whole, encountered difficulties in both raising its standard and making progress (Dunman High School 1994:12). The society's main avenues for performing were limited to the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) Concerts and school functions. They also participated in performances organised by the then-SBC in the mid-70s.

However, the CO's fate was transformed in 1978 when Lim Nai Yan took over as Dunman's principal. A keen supporter of CO's development in Singapore, Lim invited a local Chinese musician and conductor of the then-SBC Chinese Orchestra, Tay Teow Kiat, to conduct the music society and transform it into a CO in 1980. Born in 1947, Tay learnt various Chinese instruments from the Singaporean pioneer, Yang Haoran, and furthered his training at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He eventually returned to Singapore after his education to teach school orchestras. By 1980, Tay Teow Kiat was considered a musician of considerable renown not just in Singapore, but also in the Southeast Asian region. He would eventually groom over a hundred orchestras to a reasonable standard, most of which were school orchestras (Piao 2003:168-71). He would also become a frequent guest judge at competitions and a guest conductor at concerts. His contributions to

¹⁰¹ There are currently over 120 school Chinese orchestras in Singapore today.

CO music were publicly acknowledged when he was awarded the Singaporean National Day Medal of Efficiency in 1989 and the National Arts Council Cultural Medallion in 1993.

Undertaking the task of transforming the flagging CO society at Dunman High into a high-quality orchestra, Tay rose to the challenge and revamped the school ensemble. The group grew into a 79-strong orchestra. Within a year, it performed at the school's 25th anniversary at the Victoria Theatre (Dunman High School 1994:12). The years 1982, 1983, 1986, and 1989 also saw the orchestra visiting Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and East and West Malaysia respectively in a series of concert tours (*ibid.*:161). Their performances abroad raised the profile of Singapore's school COs and enhanced the school's reputation in Singapore. From 1984, the school orchestra started presenting public concerts at the Victoria Concert Halls annually. It also clinched numerous prizes in both individual and group categories in various competitions. The orchestra was also given the honour of performing at the opening ceremonies of the biennial SYF and the Istana¹⁰² in 1992. In June of the same year, the orchestra was invited by the Beijing Cultural Exchange Agency to perform in Beijing and Shanghai. In Beijing, the 110-strong orchestra was also specially invited to perform a concert over two nights at the Beijing Concert Hall. Tay led the orchestra in a performance that surprised China's musicians with the high performance level of the orchestra and its sheer size; a CO of this size was seldom seen.

CO as ECAs and CCAs

As mentioned earlier, since the introduction of the ECA programme and the SYF's Chinese orchestral competitions organised by the MOE, membership in school COs has increased significantly. Students in secondary schools were encouraged to join ECAs and many schools continued to set up COs with funding provided by the Ministry. In 1991, ECAs were made compulsory for students in secondary schools and junior colleges; in 1998, a grading system was implemented and students were graded on their participation and achievement in ECAs (Shanmugaratnam 2003).

The term ECA was renamed Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) to reflect its role as an "integral part in Singaporean education" (*ibid.*). Points were awarded for each student's involvement and achievement in their respective CCAs and these points were used for

¹⁰² The word Istana, meaning 'palace' in Malay, is the official residence of the President of Singapore.

admission into junior colleges. In 2003, the points system was also implemented for university admission, thus augmenting the importance of the CCA (*ibid.*). A good grade in the CCA was also required in all local scholarship applications.

With these schemes implemented by the MOE, COs in schools saw a surge in membership, with students joining the CO in a bid to earn more CCA points, largely due to the CO's inclusion in the SYFs and competitions, which could enable the students to garner more points. These performances at the SYFs have become a focus for many school COs, as awards at the festival would ensure the receipt of more points for student orchestral members.

Impact of Competitions and Examinations on School Chinese Orchestras

Since the early 1970s, competitions and the introduction of exams have led to the proliferation of school COs in Singapore. However, such a culture based on competitions and exams has also tainted this music tradition, as in the case of other performing arts in Singapore. According to a few Chinese orchestral pioneers, schools then saw the COs as competitive vehicles that could help to bring prestige and honour to the schools.¹⁰³ In particular, many schools sent their COs to participate in the SYF Judging Competitions.¹⁰⁴ The desire to win the competitions was the predominant driving force underlying this development of COs within schools, rather than the love of Chinese music:

None of them [school managements] really cared for the development of Chinese orchestral music. They just wanted medals, recognition, and an enhanced school reputation.... I think the only ones who really cared for the development of the students who were involved in the CO were the external instructors who were hired to coach them. But even now, almost all Chinese orchestral coaches are medal-driven. It's the fault of the SYF... the students only know how to play the pieces taught to them for the competition; other than those, they don't know anything else.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ CO veteran, informal interview, May 2006, Singapore.

¹⁰⁴ In 1967, the MOE introduced the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF), a festival that involved 24,000 students from primary and secondary schools in a two-week celebration. The SYF subsequently provided a platform for schools to "demonstrate their commitment to social integration and racial harmony" (Ministry of Education 2006:7). At the first festival that boasted a judging competition for the school arts Extra-Curricular activities, there were only two Chinese orchestras, namely the Huayi Government High School Orchestra and Bartley School Chinese Orchestra (Chia 2007:5).

¹⁰⁵ Singaporean CO veteran, formal interview, February 2007, Singapore.

In the 1970s, many schools became obsessed with the winning of medals in the SYF competition which was reported in the MOE's commemorative book on the SYF:

The "examination syndrome" eventually crept into the psyche of many in the early '70s. The hours of preparation that went into the event slowly took its toll on its participants, resulting in an outcry from schools, parents, and students. As a result, the festival was scaled down to a one-night event in 1975 (Ministry of Education 2006:11).

In spite of the early concerns about the impact of the SYF's Judging Competition, it continues to trigger competition, rivalry, and tension among young Chinese orchestral musicians to unparalleled heights today. The adverse effects of this competition and examination-oriented culture will be further examined from the individual perspectives of the stakeholders in Chapter 4.

Non-School Chinese Orchestras

Apart from schools, other organisations were also active in the formation of COs. During the early 1970s, the Chinese orchestral genre was booming and many non-school amateur COs that were formed were targeted at youths: this demographic group constituted and still constitutes the bulk of Chinese orchestral practitioners and learners. Amateur COs usually comprise current or freshly-graduated students who have participated in the CO as an activity while in school and are keen to continue making music. The remainder of the participants consist of working adults who are enthusiasts in Chinese instrumental music. For the most part, these amateur CO musicians look upon the CO as a recreational activity. Nonetheless, there are a few amateur orchestral members who have opted to further their education in Chinese music and play professionally.

Amateur COs usually come under the umbrella of a community centre or clan association, while others are self-sustaining, with the members paying for the expenses themselves. Although community centre orchestras enjoy government funding, the sum allotted to an orchestra is usually not generous, nor sufficient. In fact, in the 1990s, many amateur orchestras were forced to shut down due to financial problems: the rising cost of running an orchestra, instruments, and hiring instructors. As a result, the number of amateur orchestras began to decline. While many amateur orchestras were affected by this slump,

there were also some that were still able to expand and grow through this period.¹⁰⁶ The three orchestras that will be covered below are the few that have managed to thrive and are of considerable renown in the CO scene in Singapore: the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra, the Singapore Broadcasting Chinese Orchestra (City Chinese Orchestra), and the Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra.

Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO)

The orchestra was formed under the auspices of the MOE's ECA Branch in 1969 and made its debut at the SYF in July 1970 (SYCO 2000). It was conducted by Zheng Sisen at that time, and then later by Li Xueling in 1971. In 1972, the orchestra performed to an international audience in Switzerland at the International Youth Festival, making it the first Singaporean amateur CO to perform abroad. The performance in Switzerland took place under the leadership of Li Xueling, Wu Shunchu, and Wu Shiming in July that year (Goh 1998:67-68).

When it became an independent arts organisation in 1980, the orchestra subsequently came under the purview of the Young Musicians' Society.¹⁰⁷ Since then, it has grown from 30 pioneers to a present strength of 60, with members ranging from 14 to 28 years old, coming mostly from schools, tertiary institutions, and the National Service (SYCO 2003).¹⁰⁸ The orchestra's pioneer members have gone on to become professional musicians in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. To date, the orchestra has performed in Britain, Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, the U.S., Canada, and Egypt, among other countries. The SCO took over the orchestra in June 2003 and currently assumes responsibility for its training and management.

¹⁰⁶ These orchestras include: the Chengsan Community Centre Chinese Orchestra, the Toa Payoh West Community Centre Chinese Orchestra, the Bukit Batok Community Centre Chinese Orchestra and the Braddell Heights Community Centre Chinese Orchestra.

¹⁰⁷ The Young Musicians' Society (YMS) was formed in 1969 under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education to promote ensemble music-making among the youths of Singapore

¹⁰⁸ Singaporean males, at the age of 18, are required to do compulsory military training for a minimum of two years. This training is termed "National Service".

Singapore Broadcasting Centre Chinese Orchestra (City Chinese Orchestra)

The Singapore Broadcasting Centre's (SBC) Chinese Orchestra was founded in October 1974 (Goh 1998:97), following the great success of the broadcasting centre's music competitions. At the time, the then-Chinese programme director for the broadcasting station, Wu Jiabi, expressed an interest in forming an orchestra. Spurred by the success of the Chinese music programmes broadcast by the SBC, Wu thought that it was a good idea for the broadcasting station to have its own orchestra (Goh 1998:103).

With the help of a Chinese orchestral veteran, Tay Teow Kiat (already mentioned above), who assumed the conductorship of the orchestra, members were recruited from many existing musical organisations in the 1970s, such as the Ziquan Music Society (Ziquan Yinyueshe) and Jurong Secondary School Chinese Orchestra Alumni (Yulang Zhongxue Huayuetuan Xiaoyou) (Piao 2003:168-71).

Although the SBC Chinese Orchestra was an amateur group, it had a professional air largely due to Tay who kept its members motivated and committed (Goh 1998:102-04). As the orchestra was formed by the SBC, it had numerous performance opportunities and became highly-publicised (Chia 2007:4); the orchestra gave regular performances on television (Goh 1998:102-04). The orchestra was also able to enjoy the use of SBC's facilities by practicing at suitable venues and holding recording sessions on a regular basis (Chia 2007:4). Within a year, the orchestra held its first public concert.

In spite of the success of its concert, some of the orchestra's members left due to the conflicts between factions within the orchestra.¹⁰⁹ Those who were extremely unhappy left the orchestra for others. Ultimately, the SBC gave up on the orchestra during the 1980s as Chinese music was no longer popular and as commercially viable as Western pop music. The broadcast centre also stopped showing Chinese music programmes (Goh 1998:103).

In 1993, Tay revived the orchestra and it went under the umbrella of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. The orchestra was renamed the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Chinese Orchestra, and then again as City Chinese Orchestra.¹¹⁰ Today, the orchestra has a

¹⁰⁹ CO veteran, informal interview, July 2006, Singapore.

¹¹⁰ The orchestra took on the name of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Chinese Orchestra. However, it was not an orchestra that came under the jurisdiction of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. As a result, it was renamed City Chinese Orchestra. Singaporean musicians, personal communication, Singapore.

membership of 150 members, mostly alumna of the Dunman High school where Tay also conducts.¹¹¹

Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra

Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra began in 1974 as a nine member ensemble. Made up initially of Chinese music enthusiasts who gathered at the Keat Hong Community Centre to make music (Tan 1994), the ensemble eventually became a fully-fledged orchestra numbering over 80 members. It has performed on many occasions via the platforms of radio and television, as well as at concerts.

Since its inception, the Keat Hong Community Centre Management Committee has provided financial support for the purchase of instruments, promoted the orchestra, as well as sponsoring the orchestra's various activities (Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra 1979:11). Its support has ensured the continued existence of this orchestra.

The orchestra was first conducted by Yeo Chau Hing, who was later succeeded by Chew Keng How, Sim Boon Yew, and Yeo Siew Wee; currently, the orchestra is conducted by Sim Boon Yew (Cheng 1982:11). Since its founding, the orchestra has received the Singapore National Youth Service Award in 1983 for its outstanding performance in promoting Chinese music and four consecutive first-place prizes for ensemble performance in the National Chinese Music Competition in 1987, 1989, 1992, and 1993. Many of its members have also gone on to become professional musicians and instructors. Currently, the orchestra has a strength of 70 members and rehearses regularly at the Choa Chu Kang Community Club.¹¹²

¹¹¹ City Chinese Orchestra. <http://www.cityco.com.sg/english/aboutCCO.asp>, accessed on 17 March 2008.

¹¹² Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra. <http://keathongco.tripod.com/index.html>, accessed 17 March 2008.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to provide a broad overview of the historical development of the CO in Singapore. Throughout the discussion of the CO's development, it is evident that there is a complex interaction between the socio-political context and the trajectory of the development of the CO in both China and Singapore. This observation shows that it is important to place the discussion of the CO within a larger context and take into account non-musical factors. In particular, the role of the government in both suppressing and fostering the development of this genre of music has exerted a significant impact on the respective COs.

Since the following sections of this thesis cover the social processes that occur within the COs in Singapore, this chapter has also provided a concise chronological account of the socio-political landscape of Singapore and the Chinese orchestral scene. In this discussion, the unique dynamics of the Chinese orchestral scene are highlighted: the high level of amateur activity; the government's use of the CO as a tool to foster racial harmony and cultivate a cultural reputation; the prioritisation of political agenda above musical pursuits; and the internal conflicts within the COs in contrast to the façade of success and popularity.

This chapter has provided a macro-perspective of the CO music scene; the proceeding chapter will adopt a micro-perspective by delving into the heart of the COs to study the factors that affect the quality of the COs and their performances. In Chapter 4, I will be presenting an insider perspective of the CO by delving into the motivational factors of individual CO musicians and the social processes that govern the interactions of the CO musicians within the COs observed. More specifically, I will discuss how the attitudes, relationships, and interactions of the CO musicians are influenced and shaped by their surrounding environment both within and without the COs. Due to the significance of amateur COs in Singapore as part of the CO scene in Singapore, the attitudes of the CO musicians in the amateur, school, and professional COs will be examined, along with the social processes and the external factors affecting COs in Singapore. In spite of the obvious differences in the factors that affect the different types of COs, certain common denominators will also be identified such as the focus on the quest for prestige and the immensity of the stresses faced by the CO musicians.

**Section II – Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra
in Contemporary Singapore**

4. Social Processes and the Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore

Introduction

At the beginning of my research journey to conduct an ethnomusicological study of COs in Singapore, I had wanted to capitalise on my knowledge and experience as a CO musician to study the phenomenon of the extraordinary development of the CO music scene in Singapore. First of all, Singapore is one of the countries that have the highest number of COs in the world and boasts of many reputable CO musicians. Moreover, in spite of its difficult beginnings, there had been a sudden surge in the number of COs during the 1970s to 1990s – a period that has been dubbed the “Chinese orchestral boom” by many local CO musicians.¹

As a student, I was impressed by the mega orchestras that had memberships of 500, as well as the magnificent concert staged by the SCO at the Indoor Stadium in 2000, which featured over 1,000 performers (including me). Intrigued by this phenomenon, I had wanted to find out how COs in Singapore could have developed so progressively and rapidly by tracing its development historically. Thus, my mission was to identify and explore the underlying factors that contributed to the CO boom in Singapore.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, because of the lack of document archives, I decided to base the bulk of my research and fieldwork on interviews and informal interactions with diverse participants in the CO music scene. Conductors, musicians, and historians who were also CO pioneers provided an oral history of the CO scene in the past. My interviews with their counterparts in contemporary orchestras, as well as my participation-observations in the amateur and professional COs, enabled me to construct a comprehensive representation of the contemporary CO scene. For this aspect, I interacted with contemporary Chinese music practitioners of various ages and capability levels, ranging from professional musicians to young learners in CO music. Mostly, drawing from my experiences, I picked

¹ See Goh (1998) and Quek (2002) for more information.

people from as varied and as diverse a background as possible to allow for the most comprehensive representation of the CO scene in Singapore.

With such a research approach, I had to adopt an open stance towards my research findings, i.e. I really did not know what I would uncover along this journey. My original intention was to identify musicological factors underlying the rapid growth of the CO scene in Singapore through its history and contemporary development. However, in the research process, I gathered considerable data on the social characteristics and interactions within COs in Singapore. They revealed that the “Chinese orchestral boom” presented a rosy picture that belied the actual reality of the current CO scene in Singapore. Research for this chapter was carried out in the contemporary environment of the CO in Singapore (as mentioned in Chapter 3) and during the timeframe of 2005 to 2009. Using this period, my research showed that the contemporary CO music scene in Singapore is characterised by:

- dissatisfied musicians whose creative impulses are not fulfilled;
- high levels of competitiveness and in-fighting that have led to gross disunity;
- a preoccupation with generating income above all else;
- the projection of an ideal image in the public eye; and
- a current lack of quality performances.

In addition, information was also found on the COs’ interactions with outside forces within the unique socio-political and cultural context of Singapore’s society. Kingsbury (1988) sheds light on my findings when he argues:

Musical meaning is social meaning, and musical structure a social structure.... Social relations are integral to the meaning of musical performance. Musical meaning is both product and producer of structures of social power relationships (1988:110).

One of the chief reasons is that musical entities depend on the broader societal context for their survival:

Since music is not of itself an activity of economical potential, its realisation in society demands either that it somehow develop such potential, or else that it be sustained by a social factor that can provide the necessary resources (Supicic 1987:238).

As a consequence, musical entities such as COs cannot engage in the pursuit of music and the artistic process without taking into consideration their existence within their environment: “the influence on the creative act exerted by the social and political context in which creativity occurs cannot be disregarded” (Throsby 2001: 95).

Therefore, although I had thought that I would find musicological factors that could explain the CO music phenomenon in Singapore – my original intent for this thesis – I ended up gathering considerable materials on the social characteristics and interactions within and without COs in Singapore. The sheer amount of information I had obtained in my research process made it integral to discuss these issues in the thesis. I have thus chosen to identify and explore the fundamental characteristics of and relationships within the COs, which interact with one another, to encapsulate an authentic picture of the CO music scene in Singapore.

Such characteristics, relationships and interactions bear similarity to the studies of Faulkner (1973), Cottrell (2004), Kingsbury (1988), Hendon (1988) and Westby (1960), where the social aspects of the symphony orchestra as an ensemble and its musicians were analysed. As such, their work will be used to parallel and counterpoint my own research findings of the CO scene in Singapore. Additionally, the works of Moulin (2004) and Avorgbedor (2001), in their research in music and dance in Tahiti and Africa respectively – seemingly distant creative ensembles from the CO – show that such interactions are not exclusive to the realm of western music, and that their research replicated aspects of my findings on the CO in Singapore. The findings in the chapter are also found to be non-exclusive to orchestral, musical or even creative entities, as further similarities from my research could be compared to findings in the sociological works of Becker (1982), Shibutani (1955), Norman (1956) and Strauss (1956). Their research on workplace interactions, career flows and reference groups could also be applied to this study.

While the abovementioned works played an important part in focusing the chapter and while multiple parallels are drawn, this chapter is still uniquely distinct as the fieldwork and analysis will show that the social interactions in the CO are governed by a greater environment where Chinese cultural characteristics take precedence. The social interaction is therefore both a cause and outcome of the Chinese orchestral environment.

The chapter will be divided into four smaller sub-chapters for clarity and organisation. The structure of this chapter is as follows:

- **4.1 Formal Structures, Roles, and Tacit Rules of Interaction:** To provide a framework of comparison with the actual social processes and interactions within the COs in Singapore, the formal structures, roles, and tacit rules of interaction of both the professional and the amateur/school COs will be presented. These are the relatively stable elements that supposedly govern the interactions within the COs to allow CO musicians to work harmoniously with one another in a collective artistic endeavour. The tacit rules of interaction derived from the Chinese culture – *guanxi* (relationships) and *ganqing* (feeling in relationships) – and their relevance to the types of relationships within the COs will also be described and applied.
- **4.2 Motivation and Agenda of Individual Musicians:** For professional musicians, the motivation and agenda that have been identified are: the pursuit of creative growth as a musician; the pursuit of CO as a livelihood; and the pursuit of reputation and prestige. In the case of the musicians in amateur and school orchestras, the pursuit of creative growth, and in particular the gaining of reputation and prestige, are strong motivational factors. For those who strive towards a future as a CO professional in the not-too-distant future, their establishment of an early reputation has a particularly useful function for launching their career. For others, being a part of a CO primarily gives them a sense of individual pride and enables them to gain the adulation of their peers and family. This factor alone can also motivate them to take part in their CO activities. For student musicians, the CO is also a means of earning invaluable CCA points² that can enhance their prospects of entry into good universities in the future and boost their portfolio of Extra-Curricular Activities.
- **4.3 Social relationships in the CO:** Against the backdrop of rigid hierarchical structures and clearly-delineated roles, there are social processes governing the relationships. They include: hierarchy and respect, a competitive culture, and the existence of cliques.
- **4.4 Impact of External Forces of the CO:** External forces play a significant role in determining the development of the COs at the professional and amateur/school

² Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) points, as mentioned in Chapter 3, are a non-academic requirement for every Singaporean secondary student to graduate.

levels. Governmental agencies, school administrations, and the general public assert their influence over the COs through their provision/withholding of economic resources. Competitions and examinations are also powerful elements of the external world that define the experiences of CO musicians in Singapore.

Although these factors are explored under separate headings for the clarity of discussion, it is important to acknowledge their complex interaction with one another. Therefore, throughout the discussion, the interaction of some of these factors will be highlighted. Just as importantly, the impact of these interactions on the individual musicians (eg. their level of satisfaction and fulfilment) and the orchestra (eg. the morale and the quality of their performances) will also be illuminated. Due to the sensitive nature of this chapter, names of all fieldwork participants and interviewees will be omitted. I will begin the discussion by describing the formal structures and roles of the professional and amateur/school orchestras in Singapore.

4.1 Formal Structures, Roles, and Tacit Rules of Interaction

David Throsby (2001) puts forth the concept of *culture-as-process*, where an ideal orchestra should consist of members who are simultaneously dedicated and committed to the practice of their individual instruments and the production of music as part of a collective entity. Music-making as a collective is a practical organisational achievement that rests on a method of doing things in a recognised and sanctioned manner (Faulkner 1973a:147). By working together, musicians in an orchestra transcend their individualistic goals and objectives to “express the beliefs, aspirations and identification of the group” (Throsby 2001:13). Their individual production of music becomes integrated and transformed into a musical sound that is infinitely richer and more dynamic than anything that they could accomplish on their own (*ibid.*:14).

To create this sense of collectivity, COs, as with other types of orchestras, have rigid hierarchical structures that delineate various roles with clearly-demarcated boundaries, as well as the relationships between them. Accompanying these structures and formal roles are the tacit rules of social interactions that affirm and reinforce the validity of this rigid hierarchy. The underlying assumption is that so long as these structures and roles have been erected appropriately and the people abide by these rules of social interaction, the ideal orchestra, as described above, would be established. For instance, within the CO industry, the respect for seniority defines CO musicians’ interaction with their teachers, conductors, and more experienced/talented musicians, and translates into a key rule that governs the interactions among the musicians. A more comprehensive description of these structures and roles will be given in the subsequent section.

The reality, in contrast to the ideal conception, is that the aforementioned structures and roles are not characteristics that are cast in stone. Rather, they are fluid entities that are constantly “evolving, shifting, diverse and many-faceted” (Throsby 2001:7). In fact, within the COs in Singapore, it is apparent that the collective aspiration and the sense of unity/community are often subsumed by the competing motivation and agenda of the musicians as individuals; the competitive relationships within the orchestra from all parties involved; and the significance of outside forces that affect the development of the orchestra.

Formal Structures and Roles

Chinese orchestras are in a world similar to that of a symphony orchestra, an environment that is extremely complex, competitive and organisationally stratified (Faulkner 1973b:336). Stratification within organisations provides information and specified roles where one is to be situated socially and musically. In fact, ethnomusicological research has shown that stratification of roles in musical performance occurs even in small-scale and informal musical ensembles (Stock 2004b). Therefore, other than most musical cultures having hierarchies of repertoires, musical cultures also rank musicians more frequently by their roles in musical and social life than sometimes by their personal accomplishments (Faulkner 1973b.:342).

Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO)

At the top of the hierarchy of the SCO, Singapore's only professional CO, is the Board of Directors that consists of 10 to 15 individuals. They are responsible for obtaining funding for the orchestra. Heading the respective administrative and artistic arms of the orchestra, the Board wields the executive decision-making powers of hiring and firing senior staff (Please refer to Figure 3.1 for a diagram of the overall hierarchy of the SCO).

Moving down the chain of command, the executive director is in charge of the overall administrative responsibilities of the SCO. The executive director determines the hiring and dismissal of administrative staff. At the operational level, the executive director is expected to collaborate with his/her counterpart in leading the artistic arm of the SCO – the conductor/music director. The conductor/music director is responsible for: a) determining the overall artistic direction of the orchestra; b) cultivating the musical development of the musicians; and c) conducting the orchestra. He/she decides which musicians should be hired and dismissed.

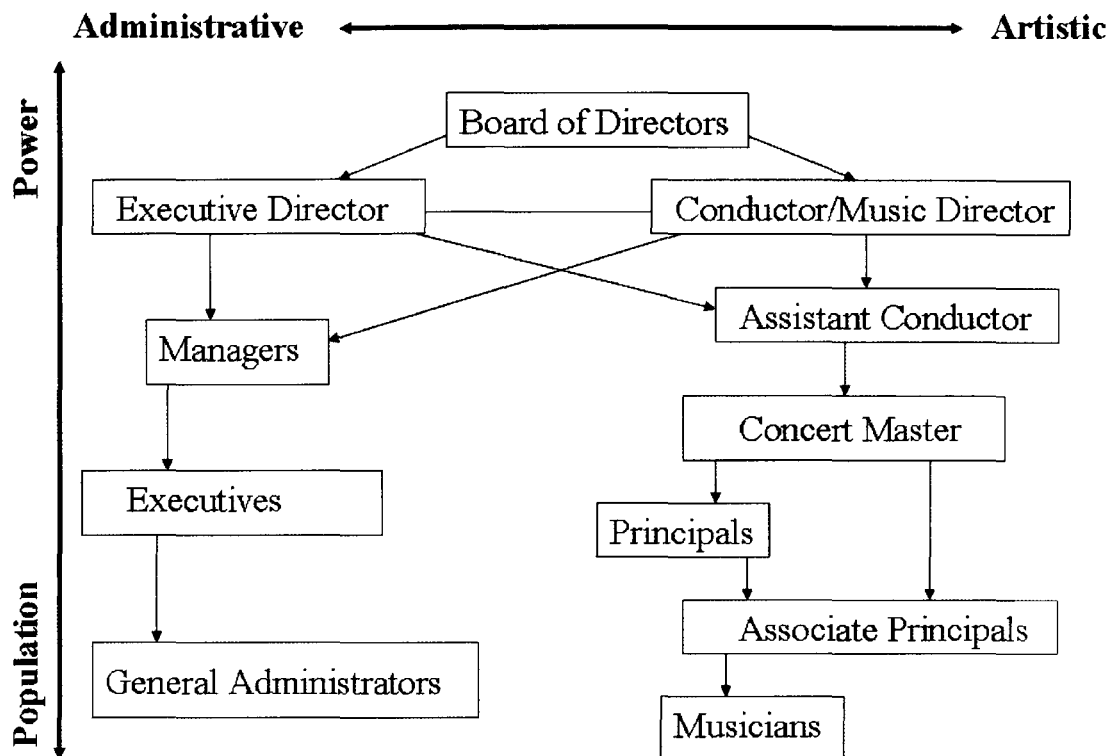


Figure 3.1 *Power Structure of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO)*

Although they are supposed to work closely together, the administrative and artistic leaders may clash because of the incompatibility of their agenda. For instance, the executive director's priority of generating revenue may not always match the musical direction of the conductor. At the same time, when either party gives way to the other readily without upholding their respective priorities, the orchestra as a whole will also suffer. For example, a conductor who gives in to the executive director's desire to generate revenue may only pursue a musical repertoire that appeals to the popular masses in order to generate ticket sales. This will ultimately undermine the cultivation of the quality of the orchestra's performances and the development of the individual musicians. On the other hand, the executive director who does not assert the importance of generating revenue will mean that the orchestra may not be able to continue to sustain its existence. These inherent tensions that already exist within the roles of the administrative and the artistic leaders will highlight the challenges faced by an orchestra in achieving a balance in its priorities. These challenges will be apparent in the discussion of the SCO, as well as the amateur/school COs later in the discussion.

Reporting to the executive director are the five to seven managers specialising in various administrative departments such as accounting, human resource, and marketing. At the same level as the managers, in the artistic domain of the orchestra, is the assistant conductor. The assistant conductor assists the conductor in the latter's responsibilities. When the conductor is not around, the assistant conductor will fill in for him/her. Although, on paper, the executive director has control over the assistant conductor, while the managers are accountable to the conductor/music director, this formal structure is rarely enforced.

The following individuals beneath the management levels are directly responsible for the hands-on implementation of the decisions of the management. On the administrative side, there are 10 executives reporting to their respective managers who handle the administrative affairs of the SCO. These executives are assisted by general administrators.

In the case of the artistic domain, there may be one to two concertmasters who are in charge of almost all artistic affairs and work closely with the conductor and assistant conductor to implement artistic decisions. When both conductors are not around, the concertmaster takes on the task of making artistic decisions and conducts rehearsals for the orchestra. The concertmaster's role is to represent the interests of the musicians. Supporting the role and work of the concertmaster are the 10 to 15 principals, who lead the 75 musicians in their respective instrumental sections. They are the ones who delve into technical and artistic aspects of implementation revolving around musical techniques such as fingerings and the need for additional practices. They report to both the concertmaster and the conductor.

Parallels can be drawn from Faulkner (1973a) and Herndon's (1988) works on the symphony orchestra. Like the Symphony orchestra, the CO ultimately becomes, according to Faulkner (1973a:156), "a network of interacting human beings, each transmitting information to the other". These transmissions are sifted through evaluations based on the musicians' beliefs and standards, and the meaning and credibility of the conductor is also appraised through such transmission networks (*ibid.*). This communication between performers therefore affects each musician's tacit and explicit understandings about music and music-making under different conductors. A viable balance of power must also be maintained within a symphony orchestra among the agendas of the musicians, union, conductor, management, board and community, which are often competing (Herndon

1988:137). Hence, programmes created must be responsive to the preference of the audience, the style of the artistic director and the available musicians' abilities (*ibid.*).

This basic description of the structure and the roles practised by the SCO indicates that they closely resemble those of a conventional symphony orchestra; therefore, I only offer a bare outline of the structure and the roles.¹ Yet this objective description of the structures and roles is important as it offers a baseline picture that can be compared with reality. This picture will also provide a means for identifying the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the structure and roles as it pertains to the development of CO music within the unique socio-cultural context of Singapore.

Amateur and School Orchestras

One of the unique characteristics of the CO landscape in Singapore, compared to the other Asian countries, is the significant number of amateur and school orchestras. Their structures and roles are also different from those of the SCO.

At the top of this hierarchy is the senior administration that wields the ultimate decision-making power over the existence of the CO (See Figure 3.2). In the case of the school COs, it is the school's principal, while community centre managers occupy the leadership position in the amateur COs that are typically created under the auspices of government-run community centres. It is important to note that unlike the Board of Directors in a professional CO dedicated to its preservation and development, the senior administration oversees decisions concerning a wide variety of activities and programmes within their respective organisations. The CO thus constitutes only one of the many programmes and activities that are vying for attention and consideration from the senior administration. Because the senior administration has a broad organisational agenda that may not include the CO as a priority, it may feel that it is not feasible or worthwhile to continue with the CO at any time.

¹ In other professional COs in China and Taiwan, the concertmaster also takes on administrative roles and responsibilities, and the orchestras follow a different formal hierarchical structure from that of the SCO. The structure of the SCO is highly similar to the one in the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra.

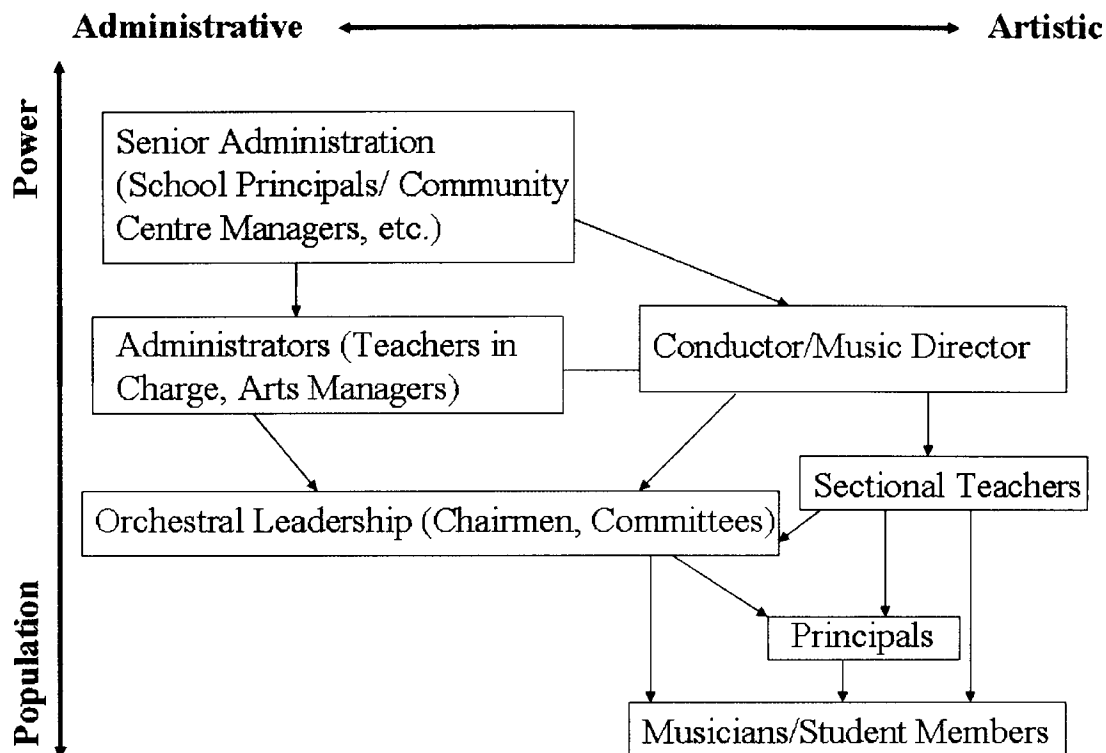


Figure 3.2 *Power Structure of Amateur and School Orchestras*

Beneath the senior administration are the respective leaders of the artistic and administrative divisions of the CO. The conductor/music director is typically employed by the senior administration or administrators to lead the musical development of the orchestra. The conductor/music director is in charge of programming, teaching, and conducting the orchestra. As the conductor is basically an outsider who has been employed by the senior administration, he/she lacks real power. The conductor/music director's musical objectives for the CO may be undermined and modified because of the overriding priorities of the organisation. If the organisation is a school, the students' pursuit of the CO may be affected by the school administration's competing agenda, as well as the students' educational and other Extra-Curricular Activities and programmes. Essentially, the CO is not a central priority and can be overridden by all other activities because of the students and/or the school's administration.

The administrative counterpart of the conductor in the power structure are the administrators – the one to four teachers-in-charge (school COs) or the arts managers

(amateur COs). Typically, these individuals have been assigned to manage the CO by the senior administration, whether they have a genuine interest in the CO or not. Considering the fact that this role essentially means additional work to their principal responsibilities, they may be unwilling participants in this endeavour. Thus, their dedication to the cultivation of the CO within the respective organisations and their commitment to collaboration with the conductor cannot be assumed. Their level of helpfulness to the conductor, who is an outsider and thus requires help in navigating some of the social structures and processes, does play an important part in the development of the CO within the respective organisations.

Reporting directly to the conductor are the five to nine sectional teachers. Although they are employed by the institutions, these individuals have been hired based on the recommendation of the conductor/music director. They are in charge of instructing the various instrumental sections in the orchestra. Therefore, within the artistic domain of the orchestra, the conductor can still exert considerable power because of his/her authority over the sectional teachers and the student musicians.

The remainder of the hierarchy consists of positions that are allocated to musicians who occupy various types of leadership positions. The orchestral leadership comprising 10 to 12 musicians occupy the following positions: the chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer, secretary, committee members, and sectional leaders for the different instruments. They are either selected by the administration or voted into the committee by fellow members of the orchestra. As they report to the administrators and the conductor, as well as the sectional teachers, they can occupy a central and key position within the orchestra. They can directly represent the interests of the musicians, which may fall under the administrative and the artistic domains. This structural configuration also means that on paper, the orchestral leadership can bypass the conductor to report their concerns to the administrators. Whether they choose to do so or not depends on the exercise of power and authority of the other individuals within the organisation.

Just below the orchestral leadership in the hierarchy are the 10 to 12 principals who are leaders of each instrumental section. They are in charge of assisting the sectional teachers in teaching and leading their instrumental section's members. Unlike the orchestral leadership, they are strictly focused on developing the musical aspects of the members. The number of musicians may range from 30 to 100.

The Amateur and Professional Divide

Although musicians are divided between amateur and professional statuses for the sake of clarity in this thesis, in reality the boundaries between amateur and professional statuses are blurred and indistinct. Finnegan (1989:13) observes that the term “professional” initially appears to be unambiguous because a “professional” musician earns his or her living by working full-time in a kind of musical role. On the contrary, the “amateur” does it mostly for his or her passion for music and already has a source of livelihood lying elsewhere. However, complications arise as such definitions are applied to actual cases in real life. Some lie in the ambiguous concept of “earning one’s living”, while others lie in different interpretations about what “working in music” suggests or means, and others in the emotive overtones used by the participants themselves of the term “professional”. Similarly, among CO musicians in Singapore, the terms “professional” and “amateur” are not cast in stone. On one hand, some musicians who have been trained as professionals may decide to teach for leisure, without accepting fees or may choose to perform at amateur events. On the other hand, amateur musicians sometimes play for monetary income and receive a professional fee. From the above examples, it can be seen that the amateur and professional divide fall into a continuum instead and that musicians fall on different areas of this continuum at different times of their musical life.

Merriam (1964:123) writes that musicians may form a “special class of caste, [whereby] they may or may not be regarded as professionals, their role may be ascribed or achieved, [and] their status may be high or low or a combination of both”. However, he also states that in almost every case, musicians adopt social behaviours in certain well-defined ways because they are musicians and hence, their behaviour is shaped both by their own self-image, and the expectations and stereotypes seen by society generally of the role of musicians (*ibid.*). As such, for this thesis, I have grouped musicians who are viewed and who view themselves as professionals into the category of “professional musicians” and musicians who are viewed as amateurs and see themselves as amateurs into the “amateur/school” category of musicians.

Tacit Rules of Interaction

Based on this bare outline of the structural properties and the roles, it is apparent that these formal characteristics that have been set in place to allow for the harmonious production of music by a collective entity still leaves considerable room for negotiation among the many participants involved within the orchestra. However, before delving into the complex dynamics that occur in the actual social interactions within the orchestra, I would like to highlight the tacit rules of interaction that support these formal elements. As the subsequent discussion will reveal, these tacit rules, often backed by the Chinese culture that is an integral part of the CO genre, exist to reinforce these formal relationships within the COs.

Definitions of *Guanxi* and *Ganqing*

The tacit rules that reinforce this hierarchical structure within the CO are derived from the distinctive Chinese notion of *guanxi*, literally translated to mean *relationships* of any kind. This notion plays a significant role in shaping the rules of interaction and thus defining the relationships among the musicians at the same level, as well as between different levels of the hierarchy.

In order to have a better understanding of the impact of *guanxi* on the relationships within the CO in Singapore, I will offer a concise explanation of this concept. According to Kipnis (1997:23), “*guanxi* simultaneously creates human feeling and material obligation”. *Guanxi* is also closely affiliated with *ganqing*, “the feeling involved in *guanxi*” (1997:156). Therefore, the concept of *guanxi* is emotionally-charged and loaded with meaning; thus, it can lend a distinctively personal and emotional dimension to social interactions within professional settings.

The concept of *ganqing* defines “hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships” within various types of organisations (*ibid.*). In fact, work settings that allow for a “base of identification” are ideal environments for the creation and development of *guanxi* lasting into the indefinite future (*ibid.*). The *ganqing* between individuals at different levels of the hierarchy is governed by explicit notions of seniority and respect. The individual occupying the higher position adopts a paternalistic stance by being protective of his/her subordinates and eliciting tremendous trust. Conversely, juniors are expected to accord respect to their

seniors and elders (Davis 2005:232). This is prevalent even outside Chinese oriented societies as can be seen from when Rice (1994:96) expounds on the social structure of Bulgarian society. In Bulgaria, a father's authority is not only unique to him, but is under the generality of every elder-younger relationship, whereby the older person claims authority over the younger person who needs to behave subserviently toward his elders.

A relationship that epitomises such notions and is heavily involved in the CO is that of a teacher and his/her student/disciple. The term of teacher (or *laoshi*) is considered a kinship term (*ibid.*) by scholars, Chinese and the CO community and is one that connotes a level of closeness akin to one's feeling for one's parents and relatives. Kipnis, in emphasising the significance and gravity of the nature of a teacher-student relationship, quotes, "Once they teach you, you call them *laoshi* for their whole life" (1997:30). The kinship nature of the term of *laoshi* also suggests the intimacy and the personal nature of these relationships.

What is just as important about the existence of this relationship is the very public and outward displays of these relationships not only to the individuals involved, but also to others as well. For instance, social exchanges between individuals, in the form of visits, whether to provide assistance or simply to socialise, as well as the giving of gifts, are a critical part of building *guanxi*. The giving of gifts is a means by which people forge and consolidate their relationships with one another. Through gifts, the feeling of connection becomes concretised through the "material exchanges". These gifts serve as an ongoing reminder of this relationship, which "work as a linking force between past, present, and future" (Kipnis 1997:58). The giving of gifts to one's elders is also thus a public show of appreciation of one's respect for one's elders that has important ramifications. Moreover, the show of respect for one's elders is also exhibited by following "ritualised decorum like bows and *ketou*" (*ibid.*:27).² More than just a superficial and hollow gesture, these rituals are expected to be performed at appropriate moments.

Since the concepts of *ganqing* and *guanxi* are critical factors that govern the social relationships within the CO, it comes as little surprise that the atmosphere of the CO environment can be infused with profound and intense emotions that exceed the typical boundaries of professional interactions in work settings. This complex interaction of the

² A *ketou*, is a Chinese traditional custom of showing respect by bowing.

personal, emotional, social, and professional aspects among musicians within the structured context of the CO environment will now be examined in detail below.

***Ganqing* between Equals**

Within the CO, the relationship between the musicians at the same level can be informed by a closeness that goes beyond a professional or working relationship; the musicians perceive one another as part of the same family. The emotional intensity of the bonding between CO musicians at the same levels was apparent during my observation of the interactions among amateur musicians before and after a major concert performance.

In this particular instance, the orchestral members had experienced tremendous pressure from their conductor and concertmaster to perform pieces that were above their level of proficiency. Throughout the stressful preparation, they were working in an environment in which they were harshly reprimanded by the conductor and concertmaster who were yelling and screaming at them. Ironically, the period of stressful preparation only brought many of these musicians together, united by their shared experiences and efforts to do the best that they could under trying circumstances. On the day of the concert, the orchestral members bonded at the backstage of the concert with many people taking pictures to commemorate the concert experience. The musicians were exchanging gifts in the form of cards, flowers and soft toys, thus offering support to one another and cementing their *ganqing* with this material exchange that will testify to their special relationships with one another. The strong sense of support was evident among the members before the concert and the morale was exceedingly high.

As it turned out, the concert performance that was poorly attended did not garner a good reception with many of the audience leaving during the intermission. In spite of the negative outcome of the concert performance, the CO musicians still chose to celebrate the completion of the concert with a special gathering. Regardless of the stress associated with the concert, the members could recognise and celebrate the sense of camaraderie that had been cultivated during the concert preparation. They clearly appreciated the *ganqing* that was formed throughout the whole process of the concert preparation. It was not diminished by the outcome of their performance, nor was it dependent on the approval of the outside world.

In fact, after the performance, a member commented to me that she missed the madness of the concert and the friendships that were fostered: “I miss the good old times”. The importance of *ganqing* in understanding the close relationships of the CO musicians is best encapsulated by the following comment made by another amateur CO musician: “At first [I joined the amateur CO] for the learning experience, then when I stayed here longer, I realised I was staying here for the friends”.

The amateur CO musicians remain in orchestras because of their cultivation of *ganqing* with friends and peers in the orchestra, which in turn fuels their interest in the pursuit of CO music as a collective endeavour. Essentially, their creative pursuit of music is interwoven with their sense of camaraderie with their fellow musicians. Considering the fact that the CO is a collective entity, the interconnectedness is not surprising, though it is certainly heightened by the Chinese culture. Unfortunately, this positive conception of *ganqing* among the peer musicians of the CO constitutes only half of the picture. In fact, the same amateur CO musician who highlighted the friendships that she had forged within the amateur CO also spoke later of her disillusionment as she experienced a lack of support from her peers on another occasion. The negative social relationships within the CO will be discussed in greater depth and detail in another section later in the chapter.

***Ganqing* in Hierarchical Relationships**

Moulin’s (2004) work on Tahitian music and dance shows that the criteria for determining hierarchical rank are largely cultural rather than artistic and derive primarily from social meanings that lie outside artistic realms. Similarly, within the context of the CO and in a community where teacher-student relationships stretch across the different culturally structured levels of the hierarchy, strong ties may be forged among the musicians at different levels of the hierarchy. The word *laoshi* is used to address all senior musicians, conductors and elders, whether there is a direct teacher-student relationship or not. This term has such powerful ramifications that within the CO tradition, one must address former and current teachers in the CO as *laoshi* for the rest of one’s life. During my interview with a CO practitioner, I found out about a rumour circulating around the community that I was turning against my former teacher because I addressed her by her first name, instead of *laoshi*; thus I was seen as being disrespectful toward her. This personal experience, though uncomfortable, was a learning experience for me, and was a strong indicator of the

importance of showing one's respect for one's teachers by addressing them using this term, instead of their first names.

Within the CO, the conductor, the ultimate *laoshi*, commands considerable trust within the orchestra. According to Faulkner (1973a:149), a conductor is the leader of men, who "sets the tempo, maintains proper ensemble and balances, and impresses his will over a group of virtuosi". He is the focal participant in the ensemble's efforts as the on-going musical experience is shared and sifted continually through the members' evaluative standards and their pre-constituted knowledge about the particular elements of concerted playing. The respect accorded to the conductor as the ultimate leader of the orchestra is apparent at an amateur CO session. As recorded in an observation:

In spite of the racket of chatting and the tuning of instruments before the start of the practice session, the orchestra grew silent as the conductor entered the room, thus indicating the respect that was accorded to the conductor.

At the same time, a conductor's failure to act in the interests of the larger body of the musicians can also trigger tremendous personal feelings of betrayal and disillusionment. Due to the fact that a conductor is not accorded a fixed distribution of deference simply for the position he occupies, he must therefore garner respect for himself (Faulkner 1973a:149). Such instances will be mentioned later in the chapter.

Rituals of Respect for Seniority

Apart from the inherent power structure of the CO, the entrenched notion of respect and seniority is also reinforced by the integration of rituals derived from the Chinese culture. As mentioned earlier, the importance of respect for seniority is manifested by various rituals and social practices designed to bring forth the display of these feelings for one's superiors. Such a display has a distinctively public dimension, which takes place within a social space in which an individual's behaviour is scrutinised and subject to tremendous pressure to conform, regardless of one's preferences. What it means is that the failure to execute this ritual conveys a strong sense of disrespect to one's elders.

Within the CO, there are embedded rituals that are designed to demonstrate the musicians' respect for the conductor. At the end of each session of an amateur CO, the

conductor of the amateur orchestra I observed expected the musicians to stand up and bow to him, while reciting at the same time “*Xiexie laoshi, laoshi xinku le*” (“Thank you teacher, it has been hard on you”). Although one of the amateur musicians sitting close to me remarked, “It looks silly”, thus expressing displeasure with the ritual, he followed the rest in performing the ritual dutifully.

Apart from the rituals practised within the Chinese orchestral environment, CO musicians also show their respect for their *laoshi* and elders with other ritualistic practices in other contexts. For instance, during Chinese New Year, CO musicians are expected to pay their respects to their teachers past and present by visiting and giving them gifts during their visits. A professional Chinese musician went over to his first instrumental teacher to present him with a hamper, explaining: “Must give him, because he’s my first [instrumental] teacher who taught me everything that I know”.

Although this professional CO musician no longer learns from this particular teacher, he still honours this relationship, thus illuminating the deep-seated bond that exists between *laoshi* and student, which transcends the passage of time and the changes in the relationship. The relationship between a *laoshi* and a disciple never ends; a sense of obligation and indebtedness endures beyond the practical existence of the relationship.

However, his adherence to this ritual is not purely personal; in fact, it has a distinctly public dimension. This aspect is shown in his subsequent comment: “Everybody does it too, don’t you?”. Apart from his own feelings towards his first teacher, this musician was also acting in accordance with a social and cultural expectation. In other words, he was *obliged* to act in this fashion. In these social exchanges, it is apparent that intimate personal relationships become a public spectacle in which you demonstrate whether you know how to treat your elders with respect, or incur negative perceptions of others within the CO community. He would be known as a disrespectful CO musician, which is anathema in the CO community.

Moreover, if his teacher were to be unhappy that his disciple did not follow such a custom and publicise the latter’s lack of filial piety within the CO community, it would also generate bad impressions of the disciple. The resultant loss of respect for him may also have practical ramifications such as his tacit banishment from the CO community resulting in the loss of performance or promotion opportunities. Thus, his hamper is a heavily-loaded gift

that is both intensely *personal* and *public*. Within the CO community, as it is in Chinese culture, the boundaries between the personal and the public are constantly blurred. To thrive within the CO community, one must know these tacit rules and abide by them religiously.

CO musicians also show their respect to their teachers by accepting the performance requests of their teachers, which principally occur during Chinese New Year. According to a CO musician, he took up 10 gigs during the Chinese New Year period, many of which did not pay very well. As he explained it, he had to “give ‘face’ to those older musicians who approached him”. The cultural notion of “giving face” in Chinese culture means “showing respect to another”.³

Noting that he would not “get paid for some of the performances at all”, he stated that his acceptance of the gigs was mainly out of a sense of obligation he felt for the more senior musicians who approached him. Therefore, he decided that he could not reject them as they were senior in status. Based on my observation, in both instances, it is the public nature of this show of support for the teachers or seniors which is important for the CO musicians: You are seen showing respect to your teachers and seniors, regardless of your actual preferences and feelings.

Utilitarian Ramifications of *Guanxi* and *Ganqing*

The above discussion of the rituals illuminates the very public and pervasive nature of *guanxi* and *ganqing* within the CO community. Going beyond the establishment of intimate relationships that spring from personal feelings of gratitude, obligation, and respect, the cultivation of *guanxi* and *ganqing* within the networks of CO musicians in the CO community in Singapore also has utilitarian ramifications. Apart from having intense personal and emotional connections, a close *guanxi* with the *right* individuals “can be relied upon to bring economic, political, and social benefits” (Kipnis 1997:23). Within the CO context, one’s ability to forge a vast network of connections with the *right* people is widely perceived to be a means to achieving success in this particular industry, independent of one’s actual playing ability.

³ See Smith (1890:17) for more information.

Among the young musicians in the amateur COs, a common strategy is to claim an association with an established professional CO musician or teacher. For instance, at an outdoor concert of an amateur CO at the Botanic Gardens, two musicians in the orchestra deliberately approached me by walking round the lake from where the stage was situated. As I was rather far from the stage, their walking all the way to me was a deliberate attempt to contact me; this was done in full view of the other amateur orchestral musicians on the other side of the lake. While I vaguely knew one of the musicians from a previous concert, I was not familiar with the other musician. Yet the latter talked to me as though I were an old friend of his, while constantly looking at his peers on the other side of the lake. The musician whom I had known from a previous concert kept rather quiet during the conversation. The conversation was mostly small talk; there was no attempt to talk about the orchestra or its music. It was very obvious to me that they simply wanted to be *seen* associating with me, not because they had information they wished to convey to me.

Subsequently, I learnt (from another amateur CO musician) that the same young CO musician from the Botanic Gardens, whom I barely know, had been talking about me to various other players in the amateur orchestra. Apparently, he spoke extensively about his association with me and indicated that he was a very good friend of mine. Evidently, he was seeking to bolster his status within the CO community by associating himself with me. It also puts into perspective the significance of status based on *who* one knows in the Chinese music scene; thus one's reputation seems more important than a person's performance ability.

While my analysis of the observation of the behaviours of the young musicians necessarily involves a degree of judgment on my part, I would like to confess my own participation in this sort of behaviour when I myself was a young and novice musician. I am cognisant of the fact that young musicians stand to benefit from such a practice of bragging about his or her *guanxi* and networks with established CO musicians, thus gaining greater respect and admiration among fellow young musicians and raising their status and reputation among their peers. More importantly, for a younger musician, *guanxi* with established musicians could also hopefully lead to greater performance opportunities and mentorships in the future. Within the CO community, the perception of the quality of each individual young musician is very much tied to his or her *guanxi* with established CO musicians. Thus, more than a judgment of the individual young musicians, I am

highlighting a common social practice of deriving advantages through *guanxi* within the CO community.

During the practice at the amateur CO I was observing, the conductor launched into a pep talk in which he bragged about his network of CO musicians in China by name-dropping throughout his monologue. The use of name-dropping in this case allowed the conductor to assert his influence and power with the students, thus consolidating his position. The above example situated in the CO environment is similar to the work of Kingsbury with western conservatory musicians (1988) when he notes that name-dropping “has a very practical function in bolstering one’s current career position and power”. From this example, it can be seen that impressions, whether positive or negative, are formed purely on the assumption of the teachers’ reputation. Just as significantly, it demonstrates that *guanxi* is an important social concept that pervades the entire Chinese music community. Moreover, the behaviour of deriving benefits from *guanxi* is not simply confined to young musicians performing at the amateur levels. Even seasoned CO veterans engage in this behaviour to cultivate their status within the community, though it is manifested differently.

The importance of maintaining *guanxi* is also reflected in the unwillingness of musicians to criticise the quality of the performance of established or professional musicians. This was evidenced in my dialogue with my fellow musicians after watching the performance of a senior musician who was a principal in a professional orchestra. After the concert in which we were disappointed with the solo performance of a professional senior musician, none of us was willing to openly comment about its poor quality. Because the performer was of a higher seniority than all of us, we did not feel comfortable stating our genuine opinions about the concert nor her playing. When I attempted to elicit my fellow musicians’ comments by asking one of them about his perceptions of the concert, he only laughed and smiled at me very sheepishly before leaving. It appeared as though he were torn between speaking truthfully and composing a tactful answer; in the end, he chose to abstain from answering the question altogether. Once he left, another musician stated that she hated the senior musician’s playing and found it to be no different from that of amateur CO musicians. Nonetheless, in spite of her honesty with me, she still made this observation: “We can’t say anything bad about them anyway... they’re *laoshi*”.

Somehow, being a *laoshi* that is accompanied by a certain status, or having seniority, enables CO musicians to escape criticism from their students and musicians who are more junior in status. Concomitantly, adopting such a stance also ensures that the students do not jeopardise their career advancement by rupturing their relationships with their seniors and teachers through a show of disrespect.

Clearly, one can see that although the respect and authority for one occupying a more “senior” position is an important rule of interaction that lies at the core of the interactions in the CO, the unquestioning respect for the individual occupying the role of a senior or *laoshi* does not always produce positive outcomes. The unfortunate result of such behaviour is that CO music practitioners are not able to grow and change in response to constructive criticism because no one wants to be viewed as being disrespectful. However, at a practical level, this superficial adherence to the expertise of the *laoshi*, when it is unwarranted, can ultimately affect the development of the musicians and the work of the orchestra.

The negative impact of the respect for one’s *laoshi* was demonstrated during my observation of a sectional practice of an amateur CO under the guidance of the sectional teacher who is a professional CO musician. Because of her professional and her *laoshi* status vis-à-vis these amateur CO musicians, she was given tremendous respect. Throughout the session, the students kept very quiet and complied with her frequent requests to change their fingerings and vary the dynamics. Even when it became apparent that she was fraught with uncertainty, hence her frequent changes of mind and interruption of the playing of the musicians during the sectional, no one spoke up to raise their concerns. After the practice, some of the musicians only voiced their perceptions about the sectional teacher’s uncertainties to me privately without informing her directly.

Another detrimental impact of the entrenched notion of seniority was the distribution of the seating positions of the musicians. Dealing with western orchestras, Kingsbury (1988:49) notes that with conservatory musicians, a player’s seating position is of great importance and that seating placements may be derived from the result of political manipulation. Similarly, instead of assigning the first chair to a musician based on his or her actual playing ability, COs have a tacit expectation that the notion of perceived seniority should be a chief criterion. On an occasion, I observed an amateur CO musician readily give up his first chair seat to a returning player, the former first chair who was considered to be

more senior than him. However, the returning player had been absent from practices for an extended period of time because he had gone to the army for mandatory National Service.⁴ Given the fact that he would not have had the opportunity to practise for a long time during his army stint, one would assume that he would lack the practice and the technical dexterity to perform the musical instrument at the same level of proficiency as he had once done prior to his army stint. Nonetheless, he automatically assumed his previous position according to expectations of seniority, with no objections from anyone in the CO. Hence, with no one publicly voicing their disagreement with this decision, it would clearly affect the performance of the CO.

This attitude of abstaining from a critique of the quality of established performers is also found among established professional musicians, not just younger CO musicians. After the concert by established, but aged professional CO musicians, three of the most influential CO musicians in Singapore invited all the performers out for dinner. In spite of the obvious fact that these professional CO musicians' skills had worsened considerably due to their age, no one spoke honestly about their lacklustre performance out of respect. In fact, one of the influential CO musicians even outright lied by celebrating their performance and claiming that it was technically outstanding. His comments testified to the importance of connections and networking in the CO music scene as these aged professional CO musicians also occupied important positions in the CO community in Singapore. Thus in praising them, the commenting CO musician wanted to maintain cordial relationships with them.

All the above examples capture the hidden costs of *guanxi* borne by the CO community. Masked behind the façade of showing respect to one's seniors is the reality that CO musicians are refusing to speak the truth, or engaging in outright dishonesty, in order to protect their status within the CO community. It is significant to note that even though CO musicians are unwilling to express their criticisms openly, particularly in front of the targeted musician, they may choose to express their criticisms behind the musician's back. Thus, they are simply engaging in compliments and sweet talk for fear of jeopardising their status. Instead of bolstering the quality of *ganqing* and relationships within the community, such practices are only undermining the integrity of the *laoshi*-disciple relationships and the development of the CO. In fact, in the previous example, one of the aged professional

⁴ All Singaporean males have to go through mandatory military training or "National Service" at the age of 18 for a period of two years.

musicians confided in me about the established CO musician who had been lavishing him with praise earlier that night: “XXX (an influential Singaporean musician) is a two-headed snake, he would say sweet things to you, but talk behind your back”. Based on his comment, it is evident that CO musicians are not deceived by false compliments, just as I was aware of the hidden intentions of that young musician who had approached me at the Botanic Gardens. Given many of the CO musicians’ awareness of these realities, it may be important for CO musicians as a community to re-examine the high prioritisation that we place on *guanxi*.

The above discussion has shown that social structures and rules that are supposed to generate positive outcomes and bolster relationships can be marred by the self-centred intentions of the CO musicians. Furthermore, the involvement in musical practice is not solely an individual matter or a social withdrawal, but relates to social action and relations with other people in society. It is not to say that this involvement is either free of problems or consistently harmonious, because in music, as in any social process, there is all the expected mix of agreements and struggles typical of human affairs (Finnegan 1989:329). Undoubtedly, some analysts would go further to argue that more than bringing people together, music should be seen as divides of a perpetuating nature, above all, through divisions of class (*ibid.*). Therefore, it is critical to delve into the inner workings of the minds of the CO musicians by learning about their motivation and agenda, which play an important part in shaping their attitudes and behaviour within their orchestras.

4.2 Motivation and Agenda of Individual Musicians

Apart from the social structures, roles, and the tacit rules of interactions, the social interactions and dynamics within the CO is also shaped by the competing motivation and agenda of the individual musicians. Thus, in considering how CO musicians can come together to collaborate with one another in a collective endeavour, one must also take into account the underlying attitudes of each of the musicians within the orchestra. While these musicians may operate within the structures, the roles, and the tacit rules of interaction, they are also individuals who are governed by their *own* agenda, which they strive to pursue within the limits of their circumstances.

Pursuit of Creative Growth as Musician

Unlike other types of vocations, individuals involved in artistic careers are driven by a creative impulse. Without factoring extraneous variables such as making a living, their ability to develop their creativity in their pursuit of their artistic career is a key motivational issue due to the fact that one must grow professionally and move towards increasing expertise, not against or away from it (Faulkner 1973b:342). Throsby describes an ideal artistic environment which he terms as a “pure” creativity model. In it, it is essential for artists that their investment of time and effort in their vocation should produce artistic outcomes to merit their continuous participation in their careers. Concomitantly, if they feel that their investment of time and effort fails to yield desired creative outcomes, whether it be due to lack of talent or support in their environment, they are likely to feel extremely dissatisfied (Throsby 2001:96-97).

The latter factor, the support from the general environment, is particularly pertinent to the discussion of the CO scene that imposes various constraints on the pure cultivation of the creative impulse. Such constraints “serve both to define the artist’s expressive scope and to challenge his or her ingenuity” (*ibid.*:97). In the context of the CO, musicians have to operate within their specific art form – the playing of the instruments as part of the larger entity – as well as the formal structures and the tacit rules that govern behaviours and interactions in the CO. The CO musicians’ ambition and desire to play pieces to advance

their creative growth is affected by the type of music that has been chosen by their conductor. Finally, whether the CO musicians perceive that they are pursuing their music careers within a nurturing and supportive learning environment is another factor that determines their creative growth as musicians.

Professional CO Musicians

In Singapore, a professional CO musician is viewed as one who teaches or performs for a living.¹ With the inception of the SCO, Singapore's only professional CO, numerous mainland Chinese alongside Singaporeans make up the professional Chinese orchestral circuit in Singapore. A recurrent creative concern that was raised throughout my interviews with professional CO musicians in Singapore, particularly those from mainland China who had come to work as musicians in Singapore, was the inadequate creative stimulus of the CO scene in Singapore. The perceived absence of a sufficient creative stimulus varies from musician to musician, depending on their country of origin and/or the breadth and depth of their previous experiences of CO music.

According to a principal of the SCO, who is from mainland China, she was tempted to return to China because she felt that she had not improved her standard of performance as an individual musician since coming to Singapore a year ago. This musician's fear that she will worsen was also affirmed by another mainland Chinese professional CO musician who made this comment, "It's very obvious that if anyone goes into the [SCO], their skills will worsen, and it is very obvious that I am one of them". Some of these top musicians from mainland China, including the principal from the SCO mentioned above, ultimately leave the SCO in order to cultivate their creative aspirations to be world-class musicians. Not surprisingly, the principal quit SCO and upon her return to mainland China, the principal was able to realise her creative goals by performing at well-received concerts, eventually winning an international competition and earning a prestigious honorary professorship at an arts institute. Another musician from mainland China whom I interviewed also noted that she was considering moving to Australia because she could not stand living in the creativity-impooverished CO environment in Singapore.

¹ Akin to Finnegan's (1989:13) description, "A 'professional' musician earns his or her living by working full time in some musical role, in contrast to the 'amateur', who does it 'for love' and whose source of livelihood lies elsewhere".

For many of these mainland Chinese professionals who have a point of reference beyond the SCO, one of the biggest problems with the SCO is that there is a dire lack of impetus and opportunity.² Due to the overall poor quality of the CO musicians within the SCO compared to their professional counterparts in mainland China,³ the individual musicians do not experience sufficient impetus to push them to improve themselves. As a principal in SCO pointed out, her whole section is useless; when she is not playing, there is “no sound”. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that there is a lack of opportunity for individual musicians to showcase their talents because there is only one professional orchestra in the country and that Singapore’s arts scene is comparatively smaller than that of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.⁴

In my dialogue with one of the well-known CO musicians in Singapore, he concurred with the aforementioned mainland CO professionals by stating that some of the Singaporean SCO musicians think the world of themselves and that Singapore has an encapsulated and ignorant Chinese music community.⁵ According to him, this level of ignorance is particularly prevalent among the older generation of CO musicians who do not know about the latest developments and the high standard of CO music in China. Since they have not left Singapore, they are unaware of the overall quality of CO music performance and newer repertory vis-à-vis other countries such as China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Their established status based on their seniority and comfortable *laoshi* status in Singapore could have made them complacent about their creative development. Such insistence on staying in one's comfort zone is further observed by Becker's (1952:470-77) work on career choices when he notes that once settled in an environment, one will find it comfortable and will avoid instability in one's career.

Unfortunately, the beliefs of these older professional musicians about the high standard of CO music in Singapore are not challenged by their fellow SCO musicians from mainland China who think otherwise. When I asked these mainland Chinese musicians why they had not asserted their perspectives, they offered various reasons. Some stated they were concealing their perceptions out of courtesy and respect for their local host. Others cited more pragmatic reasons of their fear of offending their local colleagues and in turn the

² Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, November 2005, Singapore.

³ Professional CO musician, formal interview, April 2007, Singapore.

⁴ Professional CO musician, informal interview, January 2006, Singapore.

⁵ Professional CO musician, informal interview, November 2005, Singapore.

local management, which would mean losing their work as professional musicians in Singapore and undermining their work portfolio.⁶

However, it is important to know that this sense of complacency is not reflective of the perceptions of all Singaporean SCO musicians. In my interviews with some Singaporean musicians, particularly the younger professional CO musicians who have had opportunities to travel abroad, I learnt that they make it a point to travel to China to upgrade themselves on a regular basis in order to cultivate their artistry. They are keenly aware of the overall quality of the repertory and the performance of CO music in Singapore.

At the same time, these young, driven professional CO musicians also cite another factor that undermines their pursuit of the creative impetus in CO music – the tremendous stress from the heightened expectations that accompany the professional nature of the work, which can take away any pleasure in making music. An SCO musician laments about the diminution of his love for Chinese music since he turned professional:

It's a job hazard... I can't help it.... When you become professional, everything becomes so much harder. When you play the correct thing, people will think it's expected of you; but when you play something wrongly, people will accuse you of being unprofessional.⁷

For this particular musician, his experience of playing in an amateur CO was far better than that of his professional experience. Feeling too stressed by the extra expectations that are placed upon professional CO musicians, he has simply lost his joy and desire for playing his instrument: “I used to be able to practice for hours before turning professional. And now, I just look at the instrument or be with it for an hour and a half in an orchestral session before the break and I get restless... I keep thinking about going for a break”.

Impact of Diminished Musicians' Creative Impulse on SCO

The absence of a nurturing environment that supports the absence of a creative stimulus does not only affect the cultivation of the artistry of the individual musicians, but also translates into an overall lax atmosphere in which musicians display a lack of passion and commitment towards CO music. As one SCO musician complained, “Everyone in SCO

⁶ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore.

⁷ Professional CO musician, formal interview, October 2006, Singapore.

doesn't practice at all; to them, it's all about *mahjong*,⁸ fun, and earning money, but where is the Art?". In fact, their sense of their identity as artists seemed to be virtually missing – a sad state of affairs that is captured by this disillusioned SCO musician's comment: "In the SCO, no one improves at all; no one ever talks about music; it's become like a factory and we are its workers". Uninspired by their work, the musicians feel as though they are just going through the motions of performing rote work, no different from factory workers:

We treat this job now like factory work. There is a bell that goes off during our break to signal for us to return to our seats at 11am each day. We reach at 9 am every day, break at 10.30am and scoot off at 1pm each day. By 1.05pm, you won't see a single musician in the building. Work for many of us has become like a routine... all of the musicians can't wait to get off work.⁹

The musicians' feeling of being just factory workers was also exacerbated by the indifference of the administrative staff to their musical ideas and direction:

I think we are treated like workers. The administrative staff and the musicians don't get along. They don't seem to understand what our music-making priorities are.¹⁰

The diminished creative impulse and the dearth of a sufficiently stimulating environment in the CO music scene in turn exert an impact on the quality of the overall performance standard of the orchestra and the musicians themselves. Although most people who do not know CO music may not be able to discern that there were any deficiencies in the SCO performances, CO musicians (both amateur and professional) in the audience were highly disturbed by the quality of several of the SCO's performances. Two visiting professional CO musicians from mainland China that I spoke to attending a SCO concert told me that they felt very disgusted as the musicians "had no life" while they were playing and that their standard was not as high as they had expected:

When viewed by others, SCO seems to be doing well, but few know of the internal struggles that we have. We had a complaint before that the musicians were lifeless when they were playing in the orchestra. Imagine that! It really does speak a lot about the orchestra's morale, doesn't it?¹¹

⁸ *Mahjong* is a Chinese tile game, frequently used for gambling

⁹ Professional CO musician, formal interview, March 2006, Singapore.

¹⁰ Professional CO musician, formal interview, May 2006, Singapore.

¹¹ Professional CO musician, formal interview, June 2006, Singapore.

The comments of these musicians indicate that the negative attitudes of the musicians are evident from the quality of the sound produced by the orchestra as well as the “lifeless” playing of the musicians.

The issue concerning the poor attitude of the SCO musicians was further established when it became widely known within the CO music community that the SCO had attempted to recruit an established non-CO musician to serve as a motivational speaker in order to motivate the orchestra. Although the management of the SCO informed the motivational speaker in his engagement brief that it needed someone to lead the orchestra to “greater heights”, many within the CO community commented that the real reason for the motivational speaker was the low morale and enthusiasm of the SCO musicians, who had essentially lost their drive to play. What eventually transpired was that the musician rejected SCO’s offer to serve as a motivational speaker, simply informing the management that this was an issue that should be addressed internally within the SCO itself.¹² As of now, the SCO has yet to address its musicians’ concerns.

This incident illuminates two interesting points about the SCO management and its treatment of the SCO musicians. First, the management concedes that its musicians did not have the right mindset for their pursuit of CO music. Second, it did not strive to study the underlying causes of the mindset of these musicians. Based on my interviews with the SCO musicians described above, it would seem that a genuine endeavour to modify the working conditions and environment of the SCO musicians would have done considerably more to address the general lethargy and unhappiness of the musicians. However, instead of addressing the root causes underlying the low morale of the musicians, the SCO management simply attempted to hire an outside individual to give a one-off boost to the orchestra.

Amateur CO Musicians

In contrast to the professional CO musicians, some of the CO musicians in amateur orchestras who have chosen to pursue CO music out of a genuine passion for it display a marked difference in appreciation and enthusiasm for their pursuit of CO. It must be pointed out that the amateur CO musicians referred to in this section are musicians who join the CO

¹² Professional musician, informal interview, June 2006, Singapore.

over and above their school and work commitments. Young amateur musicians, especially, feel tremendous pride in their ability to play a Chinese instrument. As one *guzheng* player stated, “I have a skill that most people are envious of, and it makes me proud sometimes to tell people that I play the *guzheng* because they’ll be amazed”. Moreover, she was excited that at 18, she had the opportunity to pursue a creative career path.

The enthusiasm of some of these young amateur musicians was apparent during my observation of a rehearsal for a combined concert involving both the SCO and the SYCO. During the rehearsal break, the eager SYCO members continued practising by themselves. They also exhibited considerable confidence when playing alongside the *laoshi* at the SCO, clearly treasuring the opportunity to work with their role models in the SCO as a means of improving their playing ability. Their enthusiasm and commitment was especially remarkable considering the fact that it was not reciprocated by many of the SCO musicians whose demeanour reflected a lack of enthusiasm or interest.

From my fieldwork observations, I realise that most amateur CO musicians, especially young CO musicians who join amateur COs outside of their school curriculum, possess a strong love for CO music and enjoy a strong sense of *ganqing* with people in the amateur CO. However, in spite of this positive image of enthusiastic amateur CO musicians who are eager to learn, it is important to point out that there are several factors within the CO music environment that undermine the cultivation of the creative stimulus of amateur CO musicians.

The first factor concerns the CO training received by the amateur CO musicians. Currently, amateur CO musicians in Singapore receive their training via three options: music departments of arts institutes, their schools through their school COs, and/or through instruction in the amateur COs. Of the three types of learning options, the music departments with Chinese music faculties that are primarily responsible for training amateur CO musicians for a professional CO music career are supposed to have the highest quality of CO training for amateur CO musicians. However, during a meeting with an administrator at the SCO, he expressed his dismay that the standards of the recent music graduates from a leading Singaporean arts institution were low, particularly in comparison with graduates from conservatories from mainland China. While the standards of these mainland Chinese graduates seemed to be increasing, the opposite was occurring in Singapore.

The administrator's concern with the performance standards of the music graduates was also confirmed by a concert performance put on by the students from a Singaporean arts institution. In fact, after the concert, an amateur student interviewed expressed her disappointment at the quality of the performance put on by the graduates from the Chinese music department. Other audience members including professional CO and amateur CO musicians were also surprised by the poor quality of the programming and standard of the concert; while some others attributed the poor performance to the dearth of good CO teachers at that institution.

Apart from the inadequacies of CO training, a second factor that deters the cultivation of the creative impulse of the amateur CO musicians is the temperament of the conductor. The conductor's attitude towards the CO musicians plays a significant part in shaping the orchestral environment of the amateur CO. One of the key issues is whether CO musicians are learning in a supportive and nurturing environment, which makes them feel safe to make mistakes and grow in the process. In my periodic observations of the practice sessions of an amateur CO, the conductor was frequent and harsh in meting out criticisms of CO musicians who made mistakes in their playing. For example, in one incident, the conductor scolded an amateur musician who kept coming in wrongly on the *guzheng*. Attributing her mistakes to her absenteeism from the sectionals, he threatened and scolded her harshly: "If you don't practice, we'll kick you out". Besides this particular player, the conductor also made other disparaging comments to the rest of the orchestra throughout the session such as "Your learning curve... terrible". He even made a reference to me in his criticism of the musicians: "Look, Samuel is watching how lousy you all are". Evidently, this last comment only made the orchestral members feel even more uneasy about their playing. In fact, my periodic observations of the amateur CO orchestras in practice indicated that the atmosphere of fear, nervousness, and anxiety is further supported by specific practices deliberately instituted within the session by the conductor.

Such practices have also contributed to the development of destructive, self-critical attitudes, and low self-esteem. This is exemplified by the self-deprecating comment of some of the musicians in an amateur CO I was observing: "We're so lousy; thank goodness you didn't come to watch our sectionals". By making this statement as though it were a big joke and nothing to be taken seriously, the amateur CO musician displayed an attitude that derived from working in an environment in which they are constantly criticised to the point that they lack pride in their efforts.

An even more detrimental effect of such an environment is its impact on the musicians' commitment to the pursuit of CO music, even at the amateur level. My interview with a serious and dedicated amateur CO musician shows that long-term exposure to an unsupportive environment, characterised by constant criticism and competitiveness, can also erode away the creative stimulus. Amidst our discussion, she suddenly posed this question: "Is it too late for me?". She sought my opinion of her playing standard and the feasibility of her pursuit of CO music as a professional career. It dawned on me that her self-confidence as a CO musician was *inversely proportional* to the length of time she had spent pursuing CO music. In fact, the more progress she had made in CO music, the less confident she was. Instead of taking pride in her own progress, this student had become ever more conscious of the competition around her with other CO musicians who are considered to be far better players than she was. Without receiving encouragement from the conductor, her teachers, and peers (all indicators of a lack of a supportive and nurturing environment), she was feeling extremely discouraged. Feeling that her investment of time and effort had not produced the outcome she had wanted – being a top-quality player at her level, she felt disinclined to practice so hard anymore.

Although I did my best to elevate her depressed mood about her level of playing, I was compelled to reflect on her perceptions in reference to my journey as a young and serious CO musician. Considering the fact that one's self-image is often created in the early years, it is evident that student musicians who constantly receive encouragement, praise, and approval from the teachers and their peers during their formative years of playing tend to develop better self-confidence, regardless of their actual playing standard. However, within the CO music environment, this type of encouragement is rarely given. In fact, it is only offered selectively and rarely. In a typical Chinese society, approval, encouragement, and praise are not doled out liberally. What this means within the CO music context is that the majority of CO musicians including those who are above average do not receive the positive feedback that would support them in their pursuit of CO. In short, these student musicians do not even realise that they are above average, only that they are inferior to the top musicians.

In reflecting on my learning process as a *pipa* student, I also experienced the dearth of praise. Thus, I could empathise with the plight of the student and could not help but wonder whether the CO community's general attitude towards amateur CO students should be more balanced in order to provide sufficient encouragement for serious CO student musicians with a strong ability to persist in this field of work.

The fact that amateur CO musicians become so discouraged by the lack of support in the orchestral environment was illuminated on a specific occasion. During my visit to a practice session, I observed that the attendance at a particular amateur CO was rather dismal. There were only two *huqin* players present, instead of 10 to 15, and the total attendance was less than 20 out of approximately 60 to 70 people in the orchestra. Asking one of the musicians about the poor attendance, I found out that the members had gradually dropped out partly due to lack of support from the conductor and an increasing school workload.¹³

Thus, it would seem that the growth in creative impulses in students in amateur orchestras is highly dependent on the approval and affirmation which they get from their peers, conductors and teachers. This is unlike the case of professional CO musicians in which the standard of fellow musicians in the orchestra and Chinese orchestral artistry are of central concern. Certainly, the teachers and the conductor, because of their leadership positions and authority, would also play an important role in shaping the relationship environment. After all, incompetence, charlatanism, abuse and excessive posturing are viewed as a result of lack of expertise and bad conductor character (Faulkner 1973a:154). Hence, such lack of support from friendships, and teachers or conductors would result in the premature departure of amateur musicians from the orchestra.

School CO Musicians

School CO musicians are a subset of amateur musicians, and orchestras in schools are a CCA where students are graded for their attendance and participation. Based on my fieldwork findings, most school CO musicians currently play in an environment that is not conducive for the cultivation of creative stimulus in the CO. It is important to recognise that school CO musicians are subject to competing pressures that detract from their creative impulse. One of the first obvious reasons is that their pursuit of CO takes place within the school context; for these student musicians, their main priority is their studies. In other words, their pursuit of the CO will always be secondary to their studies. Thus, when they are under tremendous pressure to complete tasks related to their studies, while facing

¹³ Amateur CO musician, informal interview, October 2006, Singapore.

heightened expectations due to preparations for an upcoming CO concert, these student musicians may feel too overwhelmed to derive any joy from this creative pursuit.

Before delving further into the discussion about the school CO musicians, I would like to provide some background information about the school COs, which would shed some light on their creative pursuit of the CO. CO musicians at schools can be generally categorised into three groupings:

- A small group of school CO members may not have voluntarily joined the CO of their own accord. Rather, they have been assigned the CCA due to a prior musical background or experience with the CO. However, they are unable to leave the CO as they may forfeit their CCA points should they quit.
- The biggest group in the school COs consists of students who are neutral toward the genre. This group generally loses interest after their school participation unless they make an effort to join an amateur CO.
- A minority of outstanding school CO musicians also join amateur COs outside of school.

Based on the above description, it is evident that unlike amateur CO members who have usually graduated from schools and wish to continue playing in a CO, school COs consist of a combination of willing and not-so-willing student practitioners of CO music.

School orchestras usually rehearse twice a week: once in a full orchestra formation, where musicians are led by the conductor, and another in sectionals, where musicians are led by their respective sectional teachers. Each rehearsal session lasts three to four hours; they increase both in length and frequency prior to major performances and competitions. Some school COs have had rehearsals lasting eight to 10 hours a day for a week in preparation for the SYF.

Situating these practices within the larger context of the students' other commitments including their heavy academic workload, it is not difficult to imagine the level of stress imposed on these students. In such situations, school CO musicians can find it hard to enjoy their pursuit of the CO music. Just before their school CO concert, a few

students came up to me to complain about how unhappy they were about the number of practices that they had to attend and the pieces they had to learn. As one of the student musicians put it, “Two whole weeks, everyday after school! By the time we get home, it’s about 8pm and we have yet to finish our homework and study for tests!”. Although the concert performance was fine, the students’ unhappiness persisted after the performance.

Yet another student who is one of the top CO players at the amateur/school level also expressed the fact that he had been extremely stressed over the last week as he had had to juggle his multiple responsibilities of doing his school work, going for tuition, and attending orchestral practices everyday. He felt that it was not humanly possible for him to cope with so many practices within such a stressful education system that imposes a heavy workload on its students.

Based on what I could discern from the above-mentioned student CO musicians (who are above average and serious CO performers), it is evident that all of them are committed to their pursuit of the CO. Interacting with them, I can also attest to the fact that they do not belong to the group of school CO musicians who are just participating in the CO as a means of gaining more CCA points. In a more realistic situation, without the combination of having to do a lot of schoolwork and attending tuition, along with the intense practice schedule for the concert, they would have enjoyed their pursuit of CO.

However, their struggle to keep up with this punishing schedule is what is undermining their cultivation of their creative impulse. Just because they have to do so much, they do not have the luxury of enjoying what they are doing. As noted earlier in the chapter, what distinguishes artistic pursuits from other types of activities and vocation is that the component of enjoyment is critical to an individual’s decision to persist with such an activity. Therefore, the student CO musicians’ cultivation of their creative impulse is undermined by unrealistic schedules that do not take into account their multiple responsibilities as students.

One key reason why these schedules are imposed on students is the schools’ pursuit of prestige and fame. Concerts and competitions are considered to be serious affairs that showcase the schools’ talent and reflect on the school; student musicians are thus expected to rise to the occasion at these concerts. However, although the purpose of competitions is to discover and nurture talent, in reality, they operate in the opposite direction (Small

1998:31). To achieve their objectives, the school administration and the conductor sometimes force-feed students with repertory and techniques above their levels, with the aim of impressing the public and/or winning competitions.

Moreover, sectional teachers hired by the school orchestra are sometimes explicitly requested by the conductor and school management not to take time and effort away from practising the songs that will be featured in concerts and/or competitions to teach the students basic techniques. Because of their attachment to the income generated from this source, these sectional teachers submit to the request of the school administration “to teach their students just two pieces for the competition and that’s all”.¹⁴ In my dialogue with a professional CO musician who recently came back from her music studies abroad and teaches at a school CO, she informed me that CO teachers are feverishly making last-minute preparations for the SYF that would be happening the following week. Although she had not been in Singapore for a significant amount of time, she already realised the importance of getting a “Gold” award.¹⁵ For the teachers and the conductor, achieving a “Gold” would translate into power, prestige, and additional income. Another professional CO musician teaching at a school stated frankly that if his school did not get a “Gold” award, he was in danger of being sacked: “It’s just like the winds changing after every competition – where conductors and instrumental teachers change schools with such volatility”. Many CO teachers who are aware of the importance of teaching the students basic techniques are alarmed by these schools’ blatant disregard for the appropriate training of the students. However, they comply with their instructions for fear of losing their jobs (More will be covered in the following section, **Pursuit of CO as Livelihood**).¹⁶

In fact, a Chinese orchestral competition judge commented that the technique methods of Singaporean CO students are not very sound and that most of them have weak fundamentals. This outcome is clearly understandable considering the fact that the students do not receive any training in basic techniques, since conductors and sectional teachers train musicians in compliance with the school’s request.

The focus on the learning of individual songs out of the context of CO music also means that many of these students do not know anything about the history of Chinese music

¹⁴ Veteran CO musician, formal interview, February 2006. Singapore.

¹⁵ The SYF Central Judging Competition awards the following honours to COs in decreasing order of merit: Gold with Honours, Gold, Silver, Bronze and Certificate of Participation.

¹⁶ Professional CO musician, informal interview, May 2006. Singapore.

and its inception.¹⁷ The understanding of the origins and the development of Chinese music would at least provide them with a keen appreciation of the essence of this particular type of music. In this way, the students' love of the CO music and their creative stimulus can also be considered to be attenuated by this incomplete training experience or process.

Pursuit of CO as a Livelihood

More than their motivation by the creative stimulus, many of the professional CO musicians in Singapore appear to be governed by the economic stimulus in their pursuit of the CO. Before discussing the specific context of the CO, I would like to present Throsby's extended creativity model, introducing economic variables that offers a framework for studying the tension between the pursuit of the creative and the economic stimuli faced by artists from various fields and its problems in relating with the CO scene in Singapore. Although Throsby's model aptly highlights the key categories in which CO musicians can fall in, a number of observers have also noted that there is a systematic inconsistency between theoretical models and actual practices (Weber 1964:247, Bourdieu 2004:7). Economic agents often make choices systematically different from those predicted in the economic model: they either do not work in accordance with a preconceived theory, or resort to strategies that are practical in nature, or they conform with a sense of justice (*ibid.*:8). Thus, it is not possible to predict the exact ways in which musicians with a creative impulse, pursue economic variables in their livelihood, and Throsby's extended creativity models are, at best, rendered idealistic, impractical and utopian.

Throsby's Extended Creativity Models and Its Problems

As mentioned earlier, Throsby puts forth the concept of a "pure" creativity model from which he also realises that the "production of art took place in some sort of a vacuum" (2001:98), in which the artist did not have to worry about the "daily necessities of life" (*ibid.*). Therefore, we must take into consideration economic issues. There are certain situations in our contemporary society in which the artists are able to pursue their artistic dreams because they have obtained a sufficiently large grant from a charitable foundation or

¹⁷ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

a government agency. However, for most artists, the challenge of balancing their artistic pursuits and their economic needs is an ever-present aspect of their lives. Given this reality, it is evident that “[i]f creative work in the arts and culture results in the generation of both economic and cultural value, then it might be expected that economic as well as cultural influences will affect the way creative ideas are formed and rendered” (Throsby 2001:94).

To incorporate the realities that apply to most artists, Throsby also created extended creativity models that specify “the income from artistic work” (*ibid.*) as an explicit variable and put forth four ways in which income enters the “pure” creativity model of the creative process: income as a constraint; income as a joint maximand; income as a sole maximand; and multiple job-holding. These models aptly capture the different levels of compromises that individual artists make in their attempts to reconcile the creative impulse with the economic need.

- **Income as Constraint:** At the first level, the “income as constraint” model posits that the artist is focused primarily on pursuing his/her creativity impulse. Artists in this model only divert a small portion of their time and effort to earning an income needed for subsistence purposes and other minimal material obligations. Thus, although the need to earn income imposes an additional limit on the artistic pursuit of the artist, it does not play a significant role (Throsby 2001:99). According to Throsby, classical musicians would fall under this category.
- **Income as Joint Maximand:** The artists in Throsby’s (2001:100) “income as joint maximand” model, as with other people engaged in other types of vocations, may want to generate earnings that extend beyond the level of subsistence. In this case, these artists are actively striving to achieve their artistic aspirations *and* generate revenue for themselves at the same time. In their efforts to balance their competing obligations of pursuing good art and earning income, these artists would rely on their subjective valuation of each of these competing variables, thus affecting the overall quantity and quality of their work.
- **Income as Sole Maximand:** In the case of Throsby’s (2001:101) “income as sole maximand” model, the artists’ creative pursuit is subsumed by their principal interest in generating income from their artistic work. When this occurs, “the

maximisation of economic value has become the sole motivation for creativity” for the artists in this model (Throsby 2001:101).

- **Multiple Job-Holding:** Finally, in Throsby’s (2001:101) “multiple job-holding” model, artists face the reality of not generating sufficient income from their artistic pursuits even to sustain themselves; this situation especially matches the realities of artists during the early stages of their career development. In order to survive, these artists will likely pursue other forms of lucrative income that could allow them to generate sufficient revenue “quickly and efficiently” so that they could devote the “maximum of residual time for non-lucrative arts work” (Throsby 2001:102). Thus, the artist’s income will be derived from a combination of “artistic goods” and “non-arts goods” (Throsby 2001:102). Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the non-arts work produced by artists solely serves as a tool to allow their clear-minded pursuit of their artistic goals and aspirations.

Despite being impressionably accurate, it is important to note that the abovementioned theories are abstract and as Weber (1964:247) notes, abstract economic theory illustrates synthetic constructs which have been perceived as “*ideas*” of historical phenomena. Weber adds that economic models at times offer an ideal picture substantially like a *utopia*, which has been predicated from certain elements of reality, and that an ideal type is related to the idea which may be found to be expressed there. Subsequently, one can further portray a society in which all branches of economic and even intellectual activity are ruled by a general truth so that it becomes convenient to work the idea into a utopia by arranging certain traits (*ibid.*).

However, although utopian, the models do not discredit the influence of both economic and creative impulses and as Bourdieu (2004:8) says, “the most basic economic dispositions – needs, preferences, propensities – are not [...] dependent on a universal human nature, but... on a history that is the very history of the economic cosmos in which these dispositions are required and rewarded”. Therefore, Throsby’s extended creativity models, in particular “income as joint maximand”, “income as sole maximand” and “multiple job-holding” that take into account the significance of economic variables, are highly applicable to the professional CO musicians in Singapore but need to be understood in tandem with what *actually* happens on the ground. From observations in the field, a continuum interlocking Throsby’s economic models seems a better depiction of the

economic situation of CO musicians in Singapore. CO musicians cannot be fixed exclusively into Throsby's moulds of creativity as they move to different points of Throsby's models at different points in their career, all the time. Examples and evidence of such shifts will be provided in the following sections.

In spite of the fact that the government does provide grants for COs, the SCO musician's salary is clearly insufficient to allow the musicians in the orchestra to pursue their career as CO musicians exclusively without seeking alternative sources of income. In the following sections, I will be situating the discussion of the economic concerns of the SCO musicians in Singapore and provide examples of the inadequacy of Throsby's models.

Inadequacy of Salary of Professional Musicians

To begin with, it is the consensus of all the professional CO musicians I interviewed that their salary as orchestral musicians within the professional orchestra is inadequate, especially when they are the primary breadwinners in their household. Many Singaporean CO musicians are resentful of the fact that, in spite of their artistic expertise, they still generate an income that is akin to that of a low-income family in Singapore, compared to their counterparts working in other vocations.¹⁸ Many of these CO musicians stay and work in the SCO because they feel that they have no alternative means of making a living in CO music:

Because we are the only professional Chinese orchestra, there is nowhere else to go if we quit. Many of the Chinese musicians here are holding on because we have mouths to feed and families to take care of.¹⁹

However, as the musicians in the SCO do not perceive that their primary salary at the SCO is adequate, many supplement their salary by teaching at schools or by taking on private clients in the afternoons after morning rehearsals with the SCO. Thus, it is common practice to see many of these musicians rushing off for their teaching work immediately after the rehearsals. Considering the fact that there are times when SCO musicians are called back for additional rehearsals at night, the working hours of a typical professional musician in the SCO may go from 9am to 10pm.²⁰

¹⁸ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, February 2006, Singapore.

¹⁹ Professional CO musician, formal interview, March 2006, Singapore.

²⁰ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

Therefore, on the whole, musicians in SCO are overworked and underpaid. Due to a lack of alternative choices such as other professional orchestras, many stay on in the orchestra simply because it constitutes a relatively steady source of stable income to the musicians, while supplementing it with alternative sources of work that are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Supplementary Income 1: Teaching Schools and Private Students

Teaching is one of the primary sources of supplementary income for the professional CO musicians in Singapore. These musicians may derive their teaching income from being either conductors or sectional teachers in schools, or instructing private students in a music school, studio, or home. Of all of these sources of revenue in teaching, *teaching at schools* by far is the most profitable.²¹

However, many of these professional CO musicians, particularly the ones who teach at schools, stated that they feel creatively and physically depleted by their experiences, due to the following reasons:

From their perspective, investing a tremendous amount of time and effort to teach students in an environment that does not strive to cultivate a genuine love and passion for CO music can undermine their creative pursuit of CO music. As mentioned briefly earlier, both the schools and many of the students are participating in the CO for reasons that have little to do with their love for CO music. Thus, these professionals expend considerable time and effort on individuals who display a negative attitude towards CO music. A professional CO musician expressed her concern that her skills would deteriorate if she kept on teaching bad students. Many of these students are not genuinely interested in learning CO music. Stuck in a never-ending cycle of training students solely for the purposes of school performances, she feels no creative stimulus that supports her own artistic progression. In an ideal situation, she would rather not earn money from these students. Her perspective that her income from teaching CO comes at a heavy creative cost is also echoed by numerous other professional CO musicians.

²¹ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

This factor is often compounded by and interrelated with the sense of fatigue and stress from working in difficult external circumstances beyond their control and the high expectations of the school administration. Each year, these CO musicians are heavily engaged in the intense preparation of students for competitions such as the SYF and concert performances. This task is immensely challenging due to the continuous changes in the CO's membership due to students graduating and new students arriving. This means that these professional CO musicians who invest tremendous effort in the students that have been trained for a few years to play at a decent standard will see them leave, only to be replaced by novice CO musicians. Therefore, it is evident that there would be significant gaps in standards among student members in the school COs, which need to be addressed by the professional CO musicians working as sectional teachers. Yet they are expected to train this new batch of new students and bring them up to par for the SYF and performances in order to protect the prestige of the school. Thus, CO musicians find themselves teaching the same basic skills over and over again under the tremendous stress of producing good results in the competitions year after year. With the passage of time, this can lead to creative fatigue and frustration. In spite of the gruelling nature of the work, these CO musicians persist in working as sectional teachers in order to maintain their income.

In my interview with a Singaporean professional CO musician, he complained of being so tired after taking over the teaching of several schools: "I am working myself to the bone", despite not getting much money. Nonetheless, he was persisting with this work because he was seeking to build a reputation that could be derived from his association with a good school CO, which would in turn increase his chances of getting other more lucrative jobs in the future.

Nonetheless, he commented that his involvement in the Chinese music scene in Singapore ultimately deprives him of the opportunity to satisfy his creative impulse: "I'm busy almost everyday and sometimes, I don't know why I am so busy... I just go to the orchestra in the morning and then I teach from noon all the way till the evening". While he acknowledged the fact that this line of work in teaching still provides one with a decent standard of living, he was still resentful of the fact that all his talent, hard work, and effort would not translate into substantial wealth.

Another professional musician from Singapore lamented: "My life everyday, is just practice in the morning, and teaching in the afternoon... Singapore is the only place that is so successful in its COs among schools". When I asked him whether he still likes his

instrument, he replied, “I can’t even bear to play [my instrument] anymore”. Yet, even though teaching has taken a toll on him, he still teaches because the school teaching ensures the musician’s source of income. According to him, money is a priority in all the musicians’ minds in SCO.

Thus, it is not surprising that in spite of the adverse impact of teaching CO music as a means of supplementing their income, CO musicians get very competitive in fighting for teaching positions at the schools. When a rumour circulated that I was going to take over CO teaching at a school, a CO musician who was teaching there contacted me right away. He wanted to verify that the rumour was untrue. I had to provide a lengthy explanation in order to reassure him that I would not infringe on his income-generation terrain due to time constraints and my performance schedule. His direct confrontation with me over this issue (which was out of character for Singaporeans) proves that the school position was very important to him. For many CO musicians concerned, the possession of a teaching position at school at least provides a measure of economic security. From the above discussion, it can be seen that all the professional CO musicians lamented their loss of creative drive in their need to use teaching to supplement their income.

Applying Throsby’s (2001) creativity model to the responses of the professional CO musicians indicates a vast gulf between theory and reality. Although teaching CO music can be considered to be an artistic pursuit, thus falling under the “income as joint maximand” model, it is apparent from the comments of the musicians that their teaching work does not feed their musical aspirations. In fact, the attempt by these CO musicians to balance their conflicting priorities of pursuing their CO music career and teaching CO music essentially exerts a tremendous toll on their passion and love for their performance of CO. Under such circumstances, a continuum is required to gauge the motivation and agenda of a CO musician in Singapore because musicians who fall under the “income as joint maximand” model often fall into the “income as sole maximand” model over some time, as the overriding significance of earning a good income takes complete precedence over one’s creative pursuit in the cases of some professional CO musicians. This example is evidence, and further emphasises the need for a continuum to be put in place in Throsby’s current extended creativity models.

In my interview with a professional CO musician from Singapore, he opined that CO musicians, especially the ones from mainland China, are willing to suspend their creative pursuits for the sake of earning money:

It's normal for the mainland Chinese to want to come to Singapore to earn money rather than to practise or advance in their music. If not, why would they want to come all the way to Singapore for? If you go [as a Singaporean] to China to work, the main purpose for you is also money, right?

The predominant concern about making money that overrides the creative stimulus is also echoed by a professional CO musician from mainland China who arrived at this conclusion after playing in the SCO for two months: "The people here don't practice. They don't need to... it's like machinery, the songs played by the orchestra are too easy for them to handle. Everyone is busy making money... nobody bothers that much about their music".

The professional choices of some CO musicians within the community also reflect the shift in priority towards earning money. For instance, some CO musicians do not even teach the students to play the instrument that they themselves are playing, i.e. the instruments that are their primary passion and interest. Rather, they base their decision on the demand for the learning of this particular instrument, as well as the ease of teaching this instrument. According to the Chinese CO musicians in Singapore, there is a high demand for *guzheng* teachers. As a consequence, musicians playing other instruments are responding in droves to match the high demand. A CO musician remarked about this phenomenon: "There are so many *guzheng* students in Singapore... It's ridiculous... the number of non-*guzheng* majors teaching *guzheng*!" She also conceded that she considers teaching *guzheng* to be a means for her to earn a "quick buck" and have a "profitable job". Her comments reveal a complete absence of any passion or desire to transmit her love for CO music and her instrument to her students. Only economic calculations seemed to matter in her perception of teaching, such as how rich her clients are, rather than the latter's interest in playing music.

The most explicit example of how a professional CO musician literally fell under Throsby's "income as sole maximand" model was related to me by a professional CO musician who had just taken over the position of conducting a CO at a primary school. He recounted the unethical actions of his predecessor who occupied the school CO conductor position. This professional CO musician had been dismissed by the school for siphoning off money from the school in various ways. Over the past one and a half years, he had made money by paying amateur CO students who had no professional training \$50 a day to teach his school's CO students. In his actual reports to the school, he claimed that he had employed 11 professional instructors whom he was paying at a rate of \$50 per hour. To

make even more money, the former CO conductor also changed all the instruments in the school orchestra and insisted that the school bought instruments from his music company, telling the school that his instruments were of a higher quality than their previous instruments. While the reason may or may not be valid, his chief motivation was to pocket as much money from these sales of instruments as possible. As a result of these moves, the professional CO musician who had taken over the work from him stated that the primary school CO was currently playing at a horrible level. He was amazed at the extent that this CO musician would go to make money: “It’s correct that all of us are out to make money, but [the former primary school CO conductor] is earning money too viciously!”.

Overall, the CO musicians whom I have encountered, whether amateur or professional, seemed really distracted by their endeavour to make a decent living in the CO scene in Singapore. For some CO musicians, because of their difficulties in generating adequate income in any one area, they exhibit an overwhelming concern with making a living and generating sufficient income. For them, they have little choice, but to abandon their artistic aspirations just so that they can make a living. Other more successful CO teachers strive to capitalise on lucrative teaching opportunities to generate revenue at the expense of cultivating their orchestral playing skills. For both groups, their teaching work takes greater precedence over their orchestral playing because the former has the possibility of increasing since they can earn more income by teaching more students or schools. Whether they focus on earning their income by necessity or choice, these CO musicians have not been able to successfully reconcile the two competing impulses of creativity and money in teaching CO music.

Supplementary Income 2: Repairing and Sales of CO Instruments

Apart from teaching, musicians also earn additional income by repairing CO instruments.²² For some professional CO musicians, performing this type of work can be extremely arduous. One of them told me that he was feeling the physical stress of repairing instruments due to his age: “It’s SYF season.... Everyone wants to have their instruments in top condition.... I can’t help it if I’m tired. Anyway, I have to make money”. As with the other musicians who teach to supplement their income, he also noted that it is difficult to

²² Professional CO musician, informal interview, March 2006, Singapore.

make money in this industry; therefore, CO musicians have little choice but to seize all money-making opportunities, often at the expense of their well-being.

Other professional CO musicians make money through the sales of CO music instruments. They may generate revenue by setting up instrument shops on the sideline and selling instruments, while others earn commissions by selling instruments imported directly to the musicians at a profit to dealers and distributors. Musicians often enlist networks of distributors and manufacturers to sell their musical instruments at a discounted price, only to sell these instruments later to their students at far higher marked-up prices.

One of them expressed his discomfort with this seemingly blatant pursuit of revenue that seems to detract from the creative pursuit of CO music, particularly within a teacher-student relationship: “I feel quite bad doing it, but it’s common practice.... I just made 200 dollars, just like that... [the seller] said that he was going to sell me the *guzheng* at 500, and told me to sell it to my student at 750”. Regardless of how they feel about it, these CO musicians still feel compelled to pursue this path as a means of earning supplementary income.

A more common practice is when school conductors forge alliances with instrument shops or dealers. The conductor will purchase instruments for his school (amounting to large sums of money) from a shop and the shop will invoice the school, the school will then make payment for the instruments. Unknown to the school, after money has been received by the shop, a commission will then be handed out to the conductor behind closed doors to encourage him to “bring more business”.

Supplementary Income 3: Playing Gigs

Another common way for CO musicians to supplement their income is by playing gigs. Gigs for Chinese orchestral members happen mostly during the Chinese New Year period, where CO musicians would play for events, earning a one-off payment for their playing. However, the market for CO gigs is small and niche and prices for gigs vary from musician to musician. Although some gigs pay quite well, the majority of gigs for CO music do not and it is widely acknowledged that CO gigs command a lower price than jazz, pop or western instrumental gigs. Therefore, gigs do not provide substantial income for many CO

musicians.²³ Many CO musicians who play gigs teach or play professional performances to supplement their income. For the CO community, gigs are not considered a stable source of livelihood, but occasional occurrences.

Some Conclusions on the Tension between Economic and Creative Stimuli

To a great extent, the CO musicians in Singapore do not resemble the classical musician or the artist described in Throsby's creativity models, specifically the "income as constraint" and "income as joint maximand" models. Essentially, for these CO musicians, their pursuit of their CO career has become tainted by their pursuit of money such that income generation has a higher priority than their creative pursuit. Thus, economic factors play a disproportionately greater role in their pursuit of work in the CO music field, which deviates considerably from the theoretical conception of the artist as put forth by Throsby.

Apart from the professional musicians who were driven by the economic stimulus, the young musicians with whom I interacted also considered the overall prospect of pursuing CO (whether as musician or as a teacher) exclusively as a livelihood to be bleak. They stated that being a professional musician in Singapore would never provide security and money to keep up with its rising standard of living. In spite of the fact that they were studying Chinese music full-time at conservatories in mainland China or Singapore at the time of our interaction, none of them intended to join the orchestra when they graduated. Rather, they planned to set up their own businesses that have nothing to do with Chinese music; their involvement in Chinese music would only be limited to teaching on the side. They even had low expectations of teaching Chinese music as a living as "the market in Singapore is too small [and] soon the number of teachers will become saturated; [hence, they] will have no jobs". They then informed me of many professional musicians who deal with insurance, serve as tour guides, or conduct other types of businesses besides teaching and performing.²⁴

Their comments were supported by yet another Singaporean student who is currently studying CO at a leading conservatory in China. Upon graduation, she planned to leave the music scene and "set up a shop to sell clothing". From her perspective, her studying stint in China has been largely useful in enabling her to establish a network for

²³ CO musician, informal interview, May 2006, Singapore.

²⁴ Amateur CO musicians, informal interviews, June 2006, Singapore.

creating her clothing business in Singapore. Her practical attitude underlying her decision to abandon her interest in CO music is perfectly encapsulated in this comment: “I don’t think I can survive well as a Chinese musician in Singapore... so what if you’re professional, you can’t get jobs that easily.... I think it’s best that I plan for myself”. Thus, the lack of economic security of a life of a professional CO musician in Singapore may drive many away from CO music altogether to pursue other vocations that have greater economic benefit and security. Therefore, the external context in which the CO music community is situated (the societal culture, values and economic factors) can also play a large role in influencing the CO musicians’ choices between striving for creative stimulus or a lucrative income (more will be covered later in, **4.4 Impact of External Forces**).

As can be observed from the above case studies, although CO musicians in Singapore might initially fall under the “income as joint maximand” category, after realising the increasing importance of money, they will move towards the “income as sole maximand” model or switch to the “multiple job-holding” model even if for some of these CO musicians, their non-arts work is their primary preoccupation, while their artistic work is relegated to the support work that they do on the side. This further makes the concept of a continuum, as also mentioned above, of Throsby’s models a more ideal model to apply to CO musicians. However, it is also likely that these musicians will fall back into the “income as joint maximand” model for various reasons, such as their realisation for their creative impulses which ultimately landed them in the CO scene. It is thus also possible for them to fall back into the other two models as mentioned, depending on the prevailing economic environment.

Pursuit of Reputation and Prestige

The micro-politics of authority and hierarchy, which often arises from the collaboration of musicians, their dependence on each other and competition, is a major factor when ideas are played through musical networks. Hence, reputation becomes a pervasive theme in the lives of most performers (Gerstin 1998:386). “Reputation” in this sense would mean the informal and consensual evaluation and judgement of one another’s competence and relationships in a social network among performers. These judgements include a combination of elements such as aesthetics; membership in various large-scale social groups (or social identity); and alliances within performance networks. With this, it becomes a concern which is ever-

present for most performers (*ibid.*:387) because they form relationships with one another based on competition, hierarchy, cooperation, respect and affection. During performance, performers become aware of those relationships especially in the process of evaluation (*ibid.*:398-99). This then develops a local reputation, which can lead to a sense of satisfaction (Faulkner 1973b:345).

Becker (1982) notes in his book *Art Worlds* that reputation is important to the world of art, which has an interest in what individuals have done and what they can do. Becker also draws attention to the fact that a good reputation can help some people stand out as more worthy among the masses, which proves to be a crucial outcome in the workings of reputation in the CO sphere, especially among professional musicians, where an enhanced reputation may mean better economic prospects.

Professional Musicians

For professional CO musicians, the pursuit of prestige and ambition is inextricably interwoven with their pursuit of CO as a viable long-term career. A professional CO musician explains: “The Chinese music scene puts a lot of emphasis on your reputation”. In fact, having a strong reputation within the CO community is more important than one’s actual playing ability is. Having a reputation is not solely symbolic; rather, it can lead to professional growth and opportunities.

Apart from distinguishing oneself as a professional orchestral musician, CO musicians can also build their reputation through teaching, which have lucrative ramifications. For example, as a CO teacher, I stand to gain from having my students audition successfully for an exclusive music camp organised by the Ministry of Education that is limited only to top student musicians. If my *pipa* students were accepted by the exclusive camp, it would testify to my successful and efficient teaching methods. This outcome would bolster my reputation not only as a teacher, but also as a professional CO musician as my successful teaching would be evidence of my “superior artistry”. As a result, it is likely that many more people would recommend me as an outstanding teacher. Therefore, for a professional CO musician, having successful students enables me to have a larger and more extensive portfolio than my work as a performer, which would translate into more power and economic strength in the CO industry.

The importance of having a good reputation is also reflected in the fact that CO musicians may be willing to put up with unsatisfying work environments in a bid to build their work portfolio and reputation. They want to be perceived as professionals who have worked successfully in a wide variety of environments. Even an ambitious musician may be willing to remain in a post given to them, as long as it builds up their network or gives them the chance to acquire certain skills and gain experiences, and as quoted from Becker (1956), “part of the bargain in staying in given positions is the promise that they lead somewhere” (258). A good example is a SCO musician from mainland China who first came to the SCO in order to gain a year’s work experience and enrich her portfolio. Being a CO musician of a high standard, she struggled in the SCO due to a lack of sufficient creative stimulus, finding the standard of the repertory and the playing among her fellow musicians in her section to be below her expectations. Nonetheless, she continued to work in the SCO for about two years before returning to China. Moreover, when she was asked in an interview by the media in an interview about the SCO, she only gave positive feedback about the SCO. Knowing her true feelings, I queried her about her response. With me, she spoke candidly: “Because I still want my job while in Singapore.” She realised that it would not be wise for her to speak ill of her employer and jeopardise her reputation; within the CO community that prizes loyalty to the collective above all else, any comment against the SCO might jeopardise her future job prospects in teaching or with other professional COs.

The pursuit of prestige and reputation is also fiercely competitive; after all, one’s reputation is derived in relationship to others in the same field. In one episode, a conductor of an amateur CO was afraid that other musicians in subordinate positions with more impressive performing biographies might upstage him. Thus he resorted to asking the concert administrator to modify the content of the biographies of the soloists in the programme booklets of an upcoming concert to ensure that his supremacy was proclaimed over the performing soloists. Specifically, he told the administrator to reduce the length of the bios of the soloists playing at the concert and increase that of his bio. Then, he expressly instructed this administrator not to tell the other soloists about these modifications until the day of the concert when it would be too late for any changes to be made. Although this administrator had no choice but to comply with the request of the conductor who occupied the senior position, she did go against his will by apologising to all the soloists beforehand. Thus the soloists were made aware of the conductor’s behaviour. The soloists who found out were surprised to see that this professional CO musician, regardless of the high position he held, could still feel so insecure that he would go to such lengths to ensure that his

reputation remained intact, if not boosted. Although this incident made them lose respect for this conductor, they were not able to openly express their displeasure or challenge him. As pointed out by Halliwell (2004) in his article, "Groupism and Individualism in Japanese Traditional Music", hierarchical groupism within the music world rewards those individuals at the highest echelons of the hierarchy with "musical freedom, recognition, power, and money" (2004:45). Within this context, since the conductor occupies a high position within the CO community and holds the key to many other performance opportunities, all of the soloists have to be willing to put up with his behaviour so as not to jeopardise their future within the community.

Amateur and School Musicians

In Chapter 4.1, I mentioned the varying judgement of a musician's professional status, although in almost every case, musicians behave in certain well-defined ways in a social manner because as musicians, their behaviour depends on their self-image, and the expectations and stereotypes of the role of a musician as seen by society generally (Merriam 1964:123).

In the case of the younger musicians, they derive tremendous pride and prestige through their association with a reputable amateur CO. Generally speaking, CO musicians in amateur COs are playing at a higher level than their counterparts in the school COs. Usually school CO musicians who have a continued passion for their instruments join amateur COs outside curriculum time; an audition is sometimes required for a musician to become a member in an amateur CO. Thus, their success in landing the position in an amateur CO is accompanied with tremendous prestige. These amateur CO musicians want members of their school COs to know about their association with the amateur CO, which means that they are working together with CO musicians who are playing at a higher level than those only performing in the school COs. Apart from enjoying the attention, these amateur musicians also feel that their association with an amateur CO will elevate their status as orchestral musicians in the CO community. This has practical implications by enabling them to establish a foundation for their possible subsequent pursuit of CO at a professional level.²⁵

²⁵ Informal observation of amateur CO, June 2006, Singapore; Amateur CO musician, informal interview, June 2006, Singapore.

Public concerts thus present a golden opportunity for these amateur CO musicians to celebrate their talent in front of their families, friends, and members of the public. For instance, when the tickets were made available for an amateur CO concert, the members of the amateur orchestra, mostly students, purchased almost 90% of the tickets. One of the amateur CO musicians purchased 60 tickets, most of which were sold to members of her school orchestra, while another sold 90 tickets to family members and her school orchestra members, inviting them to watch her perform.

Another way in which amateur and school CO musicians gain prestige is to win a place in the annual MOE music camp – a CO camp organised by the Ministry of Education for school CO musicians held in June for a week where students of different schools come together to make music. The entry to this prestigious camp is determined by audition only and thus, it is highly competitive. Students from all schools compete for a small number of places in this fully-paid camp. My students were in a flurry to practise in an effort to make it into the music camp. When I asked them why they wanted to get into the camp, one ultimately admitted, “It’s hard to get in and when you do, you can get famous *whad* [singlish]... that’s the main reason why I want to apply for the camp”. Thus, my students were primarily seeking the prestige that came from being associated with the camp, which would lead to fame and “bragging rights”. More than just giving them prestige, this camp would also allow these school students to garner additional CCA points – an issue that will be discussed in the next section.²⁶

Pursuit of CO for CCA points

Although some of the amateur musicians, particularly the younger ones described above, are highly motivated by their pursuit of prestige in the realm of the CO, many school CO musicians are motivated by something that has little to do with CO music in and of itself. For these musicians, they are primarily interested in earning invaluable CCA points allocated to compulsory CCAs, which will look good in their portfolios and give them bonus admission points to gain entry into colleges and tertiary institutions. As they explained, the frequency of performances and competitions that occur in the CO, which enables them to gain high points, is one of the reasons for them to choose this particular

²⁶ School CO musicians, informal interviews, June 2006, Singapore.

CCA over other options.²⁷ For instance, good results at the SYF determine the number of CCA points awarded to student CO musicians. According to a student, CCA points were the ultimate goal for her in the participation with her school CO: “If I didn’t get CCA points, its not worth it. Why do I work so hard even?”.

The above discussion thus provides a glimpse into the mindset of the CO musicians in Singapore, who are distracted by motivational factors and agenda that are not related to their creative pursuit of the CO music. In fact, it would appear that the pursuit of money, prestige, and – for school CO musicians – CCA points, seem to have distracted them from their creative pursuit of the CO. To arrive at an even more complete picture of the CO scene in Singapore, we will now to turn to consider the social relationships within the CO, which essentially involve the interaction of each of the musicians with their own motivation and agenda.

²⁷ School CO musicians, formal interviews, June 2006, Singapore.

4.3 Social Relationships in the Chinese Orchestra

The social environment of the CO is a highly contested domain because the CO is a large organisational entity characterised by role specialisations and the collaboration among musicians and non-musicians at the same and different levels of the hierarchy. As a result, there is a constant negotiation of formal roles and structures that take on a far more fluid aspect than they look on paper. In the following discussion, the complex interactions and interrelationships of the CO musicians at the same and different levels of the orchestral hierarchy will be explored in detail.

Hierarchy and Respect

Based on the structure of the CO, the conductor who occupies the top of the hierarchy of the musical arm of the CO, along with sectional teachers, are the *laoshi* (“teacher”) of subordinate CO musicians. As mentioned earlier, *laoshi* is a kinship term that connotes a level of intimacy closer to one of family than of professionals in work settings (Kipnis 1997:30) and that the temperament of a conductor is largely responsible in cultivating an environment conducive for creative growth in the CO. Thus, teacher-student relationships are charged with intense and personal overtones. In ideal teacher-student relationships, the teacher who demonstrates protective care of the student will win the trust and respect of the latter. On the other hand, when the teacher behaves in a way that violates the trust of the student, this could have adverse outcomes. Therefore, while entrenched notions of seniority and respect are supported by the structure of the CO, the actual reality of hierarchical relationships is further influenced by the impact of good and bad examples of authority; and the relative power disparity between musicians from different COs.

Impact of Good and Bad Examples of Authority

Within the CO community, I have encountered and heard about CO musicians who can be considered outstanding and negative examples of authority. Many school CO musicians

speak highly of a conductor who went above and beyond the scope of his work with a school CO to help his students. When the school CO was preparing for the competition, he offered his home every weekend to school CO members to practise their instruments, particularly those who played loud and blaring instruments, making it difficult for them to practice at home. Even though these sessions were out of his work time, this conductor would make use of these weekend sessions to personally instruct the weaker members of the orchestra and help them to cope with the competition pieces. Inspired by his dedication, the members of the school CO became willing to work doubly hard on their instruments and display their positive attitudes in their practice sessions and concert performances.

In contrast, in one of the amateur COs that I observed, the conductor showed a lack of consideration for others in the CO, claiming absolute authority and constantly imposing his authority on others in all matters. Even when the decisions involved others, he would either force his decisions upon them, or go behind their backs to execute his preference unilaterally. In one of these instances, a committee member in charge of venue hire for the concert went to considerable pains to gain access to the prestigious Esplanade concert hall as the performance venue by filing the necessary paperwork and liaising with the relevant officials in charge. This was a remarkable feat as she succeeded in persuading the Esplanade officials to accept the amateur CO as a performing candidate in spite of its comparative lack of a performance portfolio. Yet the conductor unilaterally chose another performance venue – a decision that should have been made collectively with the administration and the committee and thought nothing of his abuse of authority; feeling that it is granted for a person with his status and position. Although everyone in the CO agreed and empathised with the committee member, they had no choice but to comply with the conductor because he occupied the most senior position in the CO.

Apart from initiating venue changes, this conductor also abused his authority in his treatment of CO musicians. At a practice session just before a concert, he made the decision to cut out sections of a soloist's repertory without consulting the soloist. Abusing his authority as the conductor, he presented his decision to the soloist and the rest of the orchestra as a *fait accompli*. Although the soloist was infuriated and the other CO musicians were inwardly resentful, they merely complained to me about his behaviour, while no one dared to openly defy him due to his high position in the hierarchy and no one left the orchestra for fear of offending this *laoshi* and the repercussions that might follow.

Although this conductor has been able to get his way in all the previous instances, he has been instrumental in creating an unpleasant orchestral environment that has exerted a negative impact on the attitudes of the musicians and the overall quality of the orchestra. The musicians have no respect for him, in spite of his senior position. In my interviews with these amateur musicians, many reveal that they are only going through the motions of performing the outward rituals of respect to him during the practice session. Deep inside, they do not respect him because of his overbearing and pompous attitude. One musician put it bluntly: “He acts like he is the king, making his own decisions without caring for anyone’s feelings or needs”. Others, particularly those in the orchestral committee, stated that they had lost their enthusiasm for the CO, knowing that they have no real voice as part of the orchestral leadership. They feel disempowered as their perceptions, whether positive or negative, have no real validity in the face of a conductor who has a stranglehold on the decision-making process.¹

Although they dare not disrespect the conductor openly, the musicians express their unhappiness in different ways. When this conductor was not around and the concertmaster was delegated with the responsibility of leading the CO, the CO musicians took advantage of the situation by venting their frustration on the concertmaster who was seen as the conductor’s surrogate. On this occasion, the concertmaster screamed at the orchestra for failing to keep quiet in a state of readiness for their practice session. The musicians were deliberately showing outright disrespect with their noisiness. Faulkner (1973a:151) and Goffman (1961:105-115), in their study of symphony orchestras, both note that “a conductor’s poor leadership... [results in] conducts such as an open display of disrespect, sullenness, deliberate decrease of work effort, selective attention given, sarcasm and generally, the making and taking of role distances”. Based on the abovementioned example, the conductor’s bad leadership contributed significantly to the CO musicians’ deliberate flouting of discipline and authority when the opportunity presents itself.

Even more significantly, some of the CO musicians have left the orchestra, including the committee member mentioned earlier. She resigned from her position and left the CO and as a result of this, she stopped playing in COs altogether. Later, she found out that the conductor had announced to the CO that he had fired her from the position and the orchestra. The conductor’s deliberate misrepresentation of the truth is a perfect example of someone trying to “save face”, or salvage his pride. Smith (1890:18) offers a powerful

¹ Informal observation of amateur CO, June 2007, Singapore.

explanation of “saving face”: “To be accused of a fault is to ‘lose face’, and the fact must be denied, no matter what the evidence, in order to save face”. In a CO industry that places a strong emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, for a senior teacher to admit that his student had walked out of him would have been an embarrassment for him, which would have undermined his image as an ideal teacher.

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that the respect accorded to a higher-ranked person in a hierarchy is premised on the assumption that he or she will behave in a fashion that befits the position. Thus, when this person fails to live up to these expectations, he or she also undermines the validity of the orchestral hierarchy and the tacit rule of respect for seniority. From my interviews and observations, I can see that the practice of respect for seniority is not cast in stone; rather, it can evolve and change based on the behaviours and the interactions of the individuals involved. When a conductor treats his musicians with care and consideration, they will in turn respond by striving to live up to his expectations. On the other hand, when a conductor pushes for his own self-interests at the expense of the other musicians, as in the latter case, he will not be effective in eliciting the best from the musicians in his CO and achieving positive outcomes.

Relative Power Disparity between Musicians from Different Orchestras

Hierarchical relationships of COs are also redefined when there is a mixture of professionals from a professional CO and an amateur CO. During a rehearsal for a combined concert involving professional CO musicians and an amateur CO conductor, I observed that the professional CO musicians were extremely disrespectful to the conductor of the amateur CO, despite the fact that from a hierarchical perspective, the conductor is occupying a higher position than the musicians. However, from the perspectives of the professional CO musicians, this conductor did not have the capability to lead them musically because he typically works with amateur CO musicians. Two professional musicians openly displayed their irritation with the conductor by walking out for their break early, while glaring at him. Speaking with them during the break later, I learnt that these musicians did not like the conductor and felt that the rehearsal was not productive.² What was just as significant was that none of the rest of the professional CO musicians, including the conductor, acknowledged the musicians’ outright defiance of authority and simply

² Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, December 2005, Singapore.

continued with the rehearsal. Yet as the rehearsal progressed, the remaining orchestral musicians also got increasingly irritated. Even though the break was scheduled at 10.30am, most of the professional CO musicians put down their instruments 10 minutes beforehand and dashed out for their break. Through the remainder of the rehearsal, the professional CO musicians appeared to be playing independently of the leadership of the conductor. Each of them wore a deadpan expression and assumed an indifferent attitude to their performance.³ Not surprisingly, the conductor demonstrated a lack of confidence during the actual concert the next day, as a consequence of the lack of support from the orchestra.⁴

As one of the professional CO musicians explained, “I think our orchestra looks at the conductor and respects the conductor if we are pleased with him... but with people like [this particular conductor]... he has no seniority and a lot of the musicians are not going to listen to him”. Because the orchestral members were following the conductor unwillingly, they did not do their best when they performed. This argument thus illuminates the fact that in spite of the establishment of the hierarchy and the formal roles and structures, it can still be disrupted in reality by the musicians’ attitudes towards their music leaders.

A Competitive Culture

Aside from the notion of seniority, another characteristic that affects the relationships in the COs is the existence of a competitive culture. As described earlier, the formal structures and roles of the orchestral hierarchy were designed to enable the orchestra to foster harmony among the musicians so that they could collaborate effectively to produce a collective sound. However, in reality, the unity of the COs is often undermined by extreme competitiveness among the members of the COs at all levels. Herbert (1992:116) states that in any competitive situation or in this case, a situation that has been made competitive by the people constituting it, the feelings of the contestants who are highly motivated will be intense, which results in reactions that may sometimes lack rationality, as can be seen in the following observations. A veteran CO musician and a teacher lamented to me “Why has the Chinese music scene become like that?”. He reminisced about old times when a few of the older musicians would go to Malaysia for concerts, or would meet up with one another at

³ Formal observation of CO rehearsal, December 2005, Singapore.

⁴ Formal observation of a concert, December 2005, Singapore.

competitions, which they considered to be a form of gathering. In contrast, the competition environment today exudes tremendous hostility: “Now it’s like... ‘I want to kill you’, everyone is your enemy in the competitive field”.

In my research, I found that this unhealthy competitive spirit pervades all levels of the hierarchy. This phenomenon is as prevalent in the professional CO as in amateur/school COs. An amateur CO musician reveals that there was significant dissension among musicians from her instrument section due to the competition for prized roles. For example, one player no longer talks to another player after losing the place of the principal to the latter. An extremely serious CO musician, she also revealed her fear that she would be displaced from the orchestra by new musicians who can play better than she can. Two musicians from one instrumental section of an amateur CO were unhappy when one of the players from their section who was deemed to be “lower in seniority and reputation” was granted a concerto opportunity.

Not surprisingly, the jealousy and the competition are just as heated among CO musicians at the professional level. One of the professional CO musicians expressed her disappointment at the hostility directed at her after the orchestral management put up a notice highlighting her successful promotion as principal. Although she worked hard for her promotion, she saw that the notice triggered tremendous jealousy from the other members of the orchestra. Prior to her, the principal position had been left vacant and she had managed to get the position against many musicians’ assertions that it was impossible for her to do so. A fellow musician from mainland China actually came up to her during the break and told her to “go find another job” in a very sarcastic manner.

Apart from the fight over the position for the principal, other musicians compete for the ranking with the remaining positions. Within the CO, the seating positions reflect an orchestral member’s status and performance ability.⁵ With the first chair normally assigned to principals, the rest of the orchestral members will compete for second, third and fourth chairs and so on. None of them wants to be positioned at the last seat. The seating arrangement becomes a public display of their “inferior” standard and proficiency in the instrument and a “loss of face” within the Chinese context. This reflects what Avorgbedor (2001:273) says about “avenues for viewing competition and conflict as an embodiment of social expectations and the construction of differences”. Hatred and envy may brew as

⁵ Formal observation of amateur CO, June 2006, Singapore.

musicians disagree and become openly competitive with each other when it comes to attaining prestigious or better positions (Faulkner 1973b:336-337).

It is ironic that the very structures and roles – the existence of the principals and seating positions – that have been designed to bring about unity and cooperation also contain elements that create dissension among individual groups of instruments. The competition over the position of the principal with each competing at the expense of others can thus create tremendous disunity within each section. The lack of unity and the ruptured relationships in the orchestra in turn undermine the quality of the practice sessions that often reverberate with tension. For instance, during an amateur CO practice session, I noticed that during a fast passage, everyone wanted to prove his/her worth by playing faster and louder than people around them, thus failing to produce an integrated sound.

What is most disturbing about this state of affairs are the individualistic values and attitudes of these CO musicians, which strike against the very spirit of an orchestral entity that requires musicians to work in harmony with one another – the collective should be of greater importance than the aspirations of the individuals. On one occasion, young players at an amateur CO which I was observing challenged me to play faster than their top musician in their orchestra; I declined their request. To me, their request highlights their disconnection from the essence of a CO music performance; the speed of playing is a shallow indicator that does not reflect a more developed artistry. Furthermore, their desire to pit one CO musician against another in a competitive situation for their own amusement reveals their failure to grasp the essence of the performance of CO music, which requires musicians to work together with one another. Therefore, it is indeed sad that the camaraderie of the veteran CO musicians has been replaced by relationships that represent its very antithesis – competitiveness and in-fighting.

Existence of Cliques

In the social world, the choice of groups to refer to or be in is based on personal loyalty to significant other people of that social world (Shibutani 1955:566-68). People within a group or clique are continuously supportive of each other's perspectives by responding to one another in expected ways (*ibid.*:564). How much is learned about which relationships are of

value and which are not is a matter of experience, and because of this, although each individual has their own ideas of relationships, those that are held by members of the same social group all tend to be similar and in that way, it tends to be self-reinforcing. Hence, it can be said that that is the purpose that social groups serve (Small 1998:131).

The COs that I observed were also divided into various cliques based on two major types of group affiliations:

- **Teacher-student groupings:** Groups can form when musicians identify with each other's playing styles, or when they have the same teachers. A strong attachment between teachers and students in CO, due to the system of respect for *laoshi* and seniority, leads musicians with the same teacher to bond together to form cliques, due to their shared artistic values, as well as learning and playing experiences.⁶
- **Friendship groupings:** As with any other groupings, there are certainly individuals who gravitate towards one another for personal reasons and forge close friendships. What is more interesting is how these friendships that lead to the creation of additional cliques within the CO affect the group dynamics within the orchestra.

The importance of these groupings in influencing group dynamics with the CO stems from the strength of these bonds. If one musician were to quit the orchestra, the friend of this musician from the same clique may quit as well, likewise if a musician were to reaffirm his/her loyalty with the orchestra, the others in his/her clique might do so as well.⁷ Such personal loyalties that precede the sense of commitment towards the orchestra can literally lead to the loss of good CO musicians or a gain in loyal musicians in the orchestra. Thus, it is not difficult to see how the existence of these cliques may create tremendous disunity within the orchestra or foster strong bonding. In one of the amateur COs I observed, there appeared to be some long-term conflict and divisions between two clear and distinct groups.⁸ This disunity became even more evident when a musician brought in a birthday cake to celebrate another member's birthday. Instead of including the entire orchestra, the celebration was only confined to the member's clique – being one half of the orchestra. The rest of the orchestra that was excluded acted as though nothing untoward was

⁶ Informal observation of amateur CO, May 2006, Singapore.

⁷ Amateur CO musician, informal interview, June 2006, Singapore.

⁸ Informal observation of amateur CO, July 2007, Singapore.

happening, thus highlighting the extent of their divisiveness; these individuals did not want, nor did they expect, to be included in the celebration.⁹

These divisions are then further cemented when the groups split up after the rehearsal and break into cliques that then go out for gatherings or supper. Typically, these outings turn out to be gossip sessions that foment greater divisiveness within the groups.¹⁰ During these gossip sessions, individual musicians would complain about the other musicians within the CO from the opposing clique, while others lend their listening ears. As one amateur CO musician explained, “We must listen to her *wad* [singlish], because she’s our friend”.

More than just groupings of friends based on personal preferences, these groups also constitute power blocs that enable musicians to exert pressure on excluded musicians. For example, an amateur CO musician occupying a leadership position among the musicians in the orchestra expressed the fact that she felt oppressed by the other group of musicians. In one instance, when there was a breakdown in communication with the administration of the orchestra, which led to the orchestra having to perform unexpectedly, this amateur CO musician came under attack from the other musicians who ganged up on her. Although the incident was not entirely her fault, these musicians mocked her with sarcastic comments such as “Don’t be sad because you messed up” and expressed displeasure with her. She felt that these musicians “harboured a grudge against” her because she occupied this leadership position and as they perceived themselves to be comparatively more senior musicians. By ganging up on her and contributing to her growing unhappiness in working within such an unsupportive, if not outright hostile, environment, these musicians ultimately contributed to this musician eventually leaving the orchestra altogether.

Certainly, one can say that these cliques form a source of support for the CO musicians, akin to Kingsbury’s (1988:42) observation of a conservatory’s social organisation in terms of cliques. They can be considered to be micro-communities in which musicians band together, support, defend and grow with each other. However, such cliques can also be extremely negative in causing divisiveness within the orchestra. The play of politics internally can create conflicts and anxiety, whereby executives who are not members of cliques may be short-circuited and undermined. As a result, organisational

⁹ Informal observation of amateur CO, July 2007, Singapore

¹⁰ Informal observation of amateur CO, July 2007, Singapore

efficiency may suffer (Norman 1956:106). Instead of bonding with one another as a large united community involving the entire orchestra, I quote aptly a fellow CO musician's comments: "CO musicians are extremely divided".

4.4 Impact of External Forces on Chinese Orchestras

External forces exert a significant impact on the development of COs in Singapore. As depicted in Chapter 3, the Singaporean government, through its various agencies – the Ministry of Education, the arts agencies, the schools, and the community centres – is heavily involved in the establishment and development of the CO entities. Because none of the COs in Singapore, including the SCO, has a steady and sustainable source of funding, they are at the mercy of the aforementioned agencies. They in turn exercise their power and authority in shaping the CO music scene.

Westby (1960:223) identifying with the external pressures of symphony orchestral musicians writes that they are “caught between the potent forces of general public apathy, a management dominated labour market, and a union that in some ways works against [their] best interests”. Although Singaporean Chinese orchestras do not have a union, the relatively weak position of the CO scene in Singapore within the larger socio-political context of Singapore’s society faces other external forces such as the artistic priority of the government and its related agencies, particularly the Ministry of Education and the National Arts Council, and even the competitive culture that is ever-present in Singapore, as has been discussed earlier in Chapter 4.3 to be the imputed decadence of creative motivation and unity among people like CO musicians. These will be explored in greater detail in the following section. Although the SCO and the amateur/school COs will be addressed separately for the sake of clarity, there will be some areas of overlap in this discussion.

Professional Chinese Orchestras

Government and Related Agencies

As suggested in Chapter 3, the government does not consider the CO to be an important artistic priority. An administrator at SCO felt that the low priority placed on the CO is evidenced by the organisation of the courses at the government-initiated School of the Arts:

The government always places emphasis on Western music first, with the department of voice, composition, violin.... Chinese music is grouped together with all the folk music – like Malay and Indian music – and they don't even consider it a department.¹

This administrator's comment illuminates the Singaporean government's conception of the CO music as a political tool for cultivating racial harmony, rather than a musical genre. Although it is true that the Singaporean government does not rate the arts highly in general, CO music still occupies a lower position compared to the development of Western music. When I interviewed an educational officer from the MOE responsible for overseeing the CO programmes in schools, he admitted that the government does not have a genuine interest in cultivating CO as a musical genre in Singapore: "We're trying to make changes, but there is so much politics in the Chinese orchestral scene... the ministry thinks of the orchestra as a character development activity more than a musical one". Professional CO musicians I spoke to highlighted the frustration with the fact that individuals like these officials who do not understand Chinese music, are given the power to ensure the preservation and development of the CO music scene in Singapore.²

The lowly position occupied by the CO in Singapore's society today as compared to the 70s vis-à-vis other artistic activities can also be seen in its relative obscurity as a CCA at schools compared to the band and the choir movements that are found in every school. The overall number of COs in the schools in Singapore is considerably less: currently, there are only about 120 schools³ (from the primary, secondary, junior college, and university levels) that have COs, which is a small percentage considering the over 450 educational institutions in Singapore that have bands and choirs. This discrepancy is most evident when juxtaposing the different types of musical entities competing in the SYF with one another. While there were about 135 school choirs and 150 school bands, there were only 60 COs at the Central Judging in 2007.⁴

In spite of the widespread acknowledgement of this fact, the CO community has not been able to change this reality. Some feel that the budget allocated by the Ministry of Education is highly limited.⁵ However, this perception was refuted by another education

¹ Administrator at SCO, formal interview, December 2005, Singapore.

² Professional musicians, informal interviews, April 2007, Singapore.

³ There are an additional 30 or so non-school COs in Singapore, bringing the total number of COs in Singapore to approximately 150.

⁴ Professional musicians, informal interviews, April 2006, Singapore.

⁵ SCO administrator, informal interview, December 2005, Singapore.

officer who stated that it is ultimately the decision of the principals to determine how they choose to allocate their substantial CCA budget:

The government in Singapore gives a lot of money to schools to develop their niche area... it's among the highest in the world, if the schools say that they don't have money, it's all rubbish... they have a lot of money, it's just where they choose to invest it in.... Each school is almost run like a corporate organisation, and each school has a lot of money in funding for Extra-Curricular activities – and this funding has increased in the last few years.⁶

His comment makes more sense to me than the others when I consider the bigger picture. If schools really do not have sufficient funding for COs, some will not be able to hire the many professional CO musicians who are turning to teaching at schools as their main source of income. The lack of funding would not be able to explain why schools that have COs have flourished. To achieve this outcome, the schools would have invested in hiring good teachers, buying quality instruments, and cultivating the students. Therefore, based on my observations and piecing of information, it would appear that schools have sufficient funding. Thus, the real crux of the issue lies in the principal's decision to cultivate the CO within his/her school.

When assessing the situation, a principal, with a given budget, is confronted with a wide array of CCA choices that require an investment of varying sums of money. Having a CO as a CCA choice entails high expenses of establishment and maintenance. A CO requires music instruments, uniforms, sectional teachers, and a conductor. Since the budget allocated to schools for CCA activities can be distributed to a wide variety of other CCAs, it is understandable that principals may decide to exclude the CO as a CCA activity from their lists of CCAs. For instance, their decision to start wind bands that are even more expensive than COs can mean that the school may only offer the band as a core musical CCA because it is perceived to be a more popular option than the CO. If they do have a CO at the school, principals may also choose to dissolve it, depending on the changes in their priorities and issues that impinge upon the budgets.⁷

Without a substantial pool of student CO musicians, some of whom may opt to pursue CO as at a higher level, the CO community also finds it hard to consolidate its position in the society. Thus, it is caught in a chicken-and-egg dilemma. The CO

⁶ MOE official, formal interview, May 2007, Singapore.

⁷ Professional musicians, informal interviews, May 2007, Singapore.

community needs to have an increased number of student musicians and people who would be interested to pursue CO as a career in order to expand the CO music scene and create more professional options in Singapore. However, because it is a musical genre that occupies a lowly position in Singapore society with poor career prospects, the CO music scene has difficulties attracting more participation from young people.

According to an administrator from the SCO, there could be approximately 6,000 student CO musicians in Singapore at any one time (calculated by considering an average of 50 student CO musicians in the 120 COs in the schools in Singapore). Typically, the CO musicians who are likely to pursue CO music more seriously throughout their schooling tend to be those who occupy leadership positions such as the chairmen, vice-chairmen, treasurers etc. of the orchestra, while the rest are likely to drop out of Chinese music. Therefore, only an estimated 5% of student Chinese musicians will stay on in the school orchestra and continue pursuing Chinese music. Such a small number of student CO musicians means that only a small pool of potential candidates is available, who are sufficiently qualified to be recruited by amateur COs and possibly the SCO in the future in Singapore.

However, even such a small pool of candidates may find it difficult to pursue CO as a livelihood. Though the SCO administrator when interviewed stated that it would like to hire Singaporean CO musicians, the SCO can often look to countries such as China whose many conservatories train CO musicians from a young age. The situation has been of such a case in recent times – for the past 5 years, any new members in the SCO have been musicians from mainland China. They often offer a more invaluable source of talent for the SCO than the local pools of candidates from amateur and school COs. Considering the limited supply of work as it is and the external competition from CO musicians from China, Singapore does not have a readily available supply of work in the CO industry to support a growing population of budding CO musicians.⁸

From another angle, one could say that the CO music world in Singapore is caught in a vicious cycle in which the lack of supply of CO musicians is fuelled by the dearth of sufficient jobs that in turn gives little incentive for students to pursue CO music seriously from young. This absence of demand of the CO at the school levels also communicates to the government that there is insufficient demand for CO music to justify its provision of

⁸ SCO administrator, informal interview, July 2006, Singapore.

funding or support for a more viable CO music scene in Singapore. Put aptly by a CO musician: “The future of the CO musician in Singapore and the CO music scene is very bleak”.

Amateur and School Chinese Orchestras

At the amateur and school levels, the CO music scene is also heavily influenced by the involvement of the government via the MOE, other related governmental agencies, and the schools. Instead of cultivating the students’ inherent love for CO music, these institutional entities have created a stressful environment that is characterised by high levels of competitiveness among the musicians and the pursuit of private or institutional prestige. These organisations and their expectations that are manifested in areas like the MOE camp, annual competitions, and accreditation examinations have been instrumental in pressuring students to be result-oriented and preoccupied with outperforming their peers, rather than pursuing CO music out of a genuine love for their instruments or the musical genre.

The Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education’s directives for CO has played a significant part in influencing its growth. Its prominent policies include:

- Recognition of the CO as a performing art CCA that is suitable for schools, thus paving the way for the establishment of COs as a CCA in primary and secondary schools;
- Inception and organisation of the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) that has been instrumental in establishing a culture of competition (more discussion on the SYF will be provided later in the chapter); and
- Formulation and implementation of specific directives pertaining to the development of the school COs.

An example of how the MOE has shaped the development of the school COs with its directives is best represented by the outcomes of its inclusion of the *guzheng* ensemble as a competition category (to the exclusion of other CO music ensembles) for school

participation in the SYF. This directive led to the widespread development of *guzheng* ensembles throughout Singapore.⁹ Other ensembles such as *erhu* ensembles and *pipa* ensembles, which were once popular in schools, have now been totally eliminated by school managements because they are not eligible for participation in the SYF. The choice of *guzheng* ensembles and not other ensembles is purely a MOE decision, without consultation with the CO community, and is a question that baffles many in the community.¹⁰ When asked about this decision, a MOE official said that he just accepted it “as it is”. What is more disturbing is how a non-artistic entity such as the MOE and the school administration can determine the artistic development of the CO community in Singapore.

Apart from these directives, the MOE has also influenced the CO music scene with its annual MOE Music Camp held during the school holidays in June. This camp is considered to be a prestigious camp that is reserved solely for the best student musicians. This achievement of being selected for the camp increases the student’s standing and reputation among his/her peers and gives him/her additional CCA points in an MOE-accredited activity. Thus it boosts the esteem of the student and affirms the student’s proficiency in the instrument in the competitive environment of the CO in Singapore. It is little wonder that student musicians are particularly anxious about making it into the camp. What is disturbing is that their primary focus is not on the opportunity to pursue their love of CO music, but the achievement of making it into the camp so that they can brag to others about it.

The competitiveness does not end with the entry into the camp as the camp experience culminates in a concert at the Singapore Conference Hall, where CO students and teachers throughout Singapore are invited to witness the work of the camp participants. Having been a sectional teacher in the camp, I found it, particularly the final concert, to be more of a promotional vehicle than a pure celebration of music. However, for the participants, the concert is extremely important as it offers the prospect of instant fame among their peers, as well as increased reputation and affirmation of their artistic ability, due to the exclusivity of the event and the public celebration of their association with this occasion. Many of these participants will thus invite as many of their peers as possible to come to the performance and tickets are usually free.

⁹ As mentioned earlier, many CO instructors are shifting to *guzheng* teaching as a result of this directive by the MOE.

¹⁰ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, January to May 2006, Singapore.

As some of my students who made it into the camp describe, it is “extremely stressful and competitive”. Students are given a set of eight to ten pieces to work on intensively for a two week period (the duration of the camp) in order to perform them at the CO concert. Students have to work through technically difficult pieces and to make matters worse, the camp participants perceive one another as competitors for the sought-after position of the principal, instead of bonding together to help one another in this challenging endeavour. Thus, it is no surprise that my students did not seem to enjoy the camp at all. Throughout the camp experience, they were constantly worried that they could not cope well, i.e. play faster or better than the student musician next to them. Their greatest concern was their reputations as players; they were afraid of “losing face” and that other members in the camp would look down upon them if they did not do well.¹¹

The National Arts Council

The National Arts Council (NAC) is an important external force for amateur CO development in Singapore. While schools get their funding from the MOE, amateur COs which are not under the purview of the education system in Singapore obtain their funding from the NAC. As such, the NAC is responsible for the allocation of grants and funds for the various arts groups, concerts, and arts events in Singapore. Such funding is pivotal to amateur COs as it pays for concerts, operational costs and instruments among other expenses as ticket revenue from concerts is not enough to cover the costs incurred by the amateur COs. Simply put, the NAC provides for the existence and survival of the amateur COs in Singapore. However, in order to qualify for funding by the NAC, an amateur CO must meet a quota of performances in a year and must obtain a specified quota of ticket sales. A senior musician who also does administration for his orchestra indicated that:

Meeting the quotas each year is very stressful. We come here to play for leisure, and we end up being stressed by all this.... What to do? We need the money to survive, so we have to follow the regulations set by them [the National Arts Council]. We worry enough about the concert production, and the artistic problems already, and then we also have to worry about hitting an audience quota and selling tickets. Many times when the audience quota is not yet met, the members of the orchestra have to end up buying the tickets to make up the numbers required.

¹¹ School CO musicians, informal interviews, June 2007, Singapore.

From the above comment, it can be seen that the funding decisions that the NAC makes dictates the survival or demise of amateur COs. COs that do not have the NAC support have often folded and disbanded.

The competitiveness that is cultivated by the MOE camp is also mirrored and amplified by the culture of competition that has been established by government entities in charge of the arts such as the NAC. In my interview with a top NAC official about a recent restructuring in the National Chinese Music Competition 2006, she stated that the NAC was focused on pushing the standards of the CO to greater heights. For this particular competition, this official informed me: “We are exploring the possibility of regionalising the competition... to include Chinese musicians all around Asia. We also hope to enable solo (Open Section) participants to experience performing concertos with a good-sized Chinese ensemble”.

Although the restructuring of the competition in and of itself was a good move that provided a creative challenge to amateur CO musicians, it was undermined by the unhealthy competitiveness and in-fighting of the musicians and their teachers. Obsessed with getting results and outperforming their competitors, they forget about the learning process that is an integral part of these competitions. This obsession with winning is most apparent on the competition day itself, when results are announced for each category. Student CO musicians and their parents show great displeasure at the competition venue when they realise that they did not manage to make it into the finals or win prizes. Instrumental tutors and parents can be heard arguing with the competition officials at the end of the competition. They would go to the extent of accusing the competition organisers of being biased and unfair. Thus, it is clear that the intentions of the organisers to elevate the standard of the playing have produced side-effects that ultimately deflect from this objective and the cultivation of the love of the CO.

School Administrative Leadership and Competitions

The deviation from the creative and artistic pursuit of CO is also manifested in the attitude of the school administration. From the perspective of the school administration, its investment in the CO is meant to produce prestige and recognition for the school.

The most obvious indicator of the school administrative leadership's pursuit of the CO as a tool for gaining prestige is evidenced in the culture of competition that pervades the CO music scene at the school level in Singapore. From a practical standpoint, the winning of awards would lead to additional recognition and funding from the MOE and the government.¹² This obsession with winning competitions is passed from the school leadership to the professional CO musicians hired to teach the student musicians and to the student musicians themselves. Thus, the negative impact of the culture of competition can be felt at all levels of the school CO hierarchy, with ramifications for the CO music scene in Singapore.

For the student CO musicians, competitions are a source of anxiety. In my personal communication with a few student CO musicians who attended a lecture that I gave on Chinese music, I learnt that their greatest worry was for various reasons the SYF Central Judging. According to them, their performance at the SYF constitutes a form of accreditation of their performance standard relative to other schools. The fact that the students go "crazy" over the competitions testifies to the amount of pressure placed on them by their school and CO teachers.¹³

However, such a heavy emphasis on playing the CO musical instrument to win competitions has also alienated some student musicians from their CO instruments. In my dialogue with a CO music store owner, he recounted a conversation with a young student CO musician who had bought an instrument from him a few years back and who wanted to quit her school CO. Apparently, she was so sick of her CO instrument because she had been forced to join competition after competition with the school orchestra. An administrator with the SCO remarked that some student CO musicians in the school COs have actually developed an aversion to touching their instruments: "Junior college students can just learn two songs in one year, without any basics, and they are forced to learn those pieces". In spite of the fact that some of these student CO musicians do win the competitions, the pressure they experience from the culture of competition robs them of their enjoyment of these instruments.

Moreover, as indicated earlier, the focus on winning competitions also means that the student musicians are taught to play specific songs without receiving proper training in

¹² Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, April 2006, Singapore.

¹³ School CO musicians, informal interviews, March 2007, Singapore.

techniques. Yet at the same time, they are expected to play pieces that push them beyond their level of technical proficiency. Without proper training on the instrument, it is impossible for students to advance to repertory of a higher standard; thus, some of them have poor performance standards.¹⁴

Singapore Youth Festival Central Judging

Nowhere else are the debilitating effects of the culture of competition more evident than at the SYF Central Judging itself. The SYF Central Judging, held biannually, is the most important competition and event for school COs. School COs all around Singapore participate to get grades in the respective award categories (i.e. Gold with Honours, Gold, Silver, Bronze, Certificate of Participation). Performances in the Central Judging determine the number of CCA points awarded to the Chinese orchestral musicians, as well as influence the job security of the conductor and the sectional teachers. Thus, the stakes are high for all the stakeholders involved.

The negative effects of the emphasis on competition can be seen in many aspects of the festival experience. During the concert, when schools of a lower standard were playing in the SYF Central Judging, the Chinese music professionals in the audience were constantly sniggering.¹⁵ They also openly ridiculed conductors whose school COs performed poorly, while lavishing praise on conductors leading impressive school COs. Their behaviour also illuminates the amount of pressure that is placed on the conductor whose reputation hinges on the perceived quality of the performance and the success of his/her school CO.¹⁶ The outcome of the SYF extends beyond the scope of the competition to reverberate within the larger CO community. If the conductor led a school CO that performed poorly, many CO musicians would deem the conductor to be a lousy CO musician with low artistry because he could not elicit a gold medal performance from his students. Fellow musicians would not “give face” to such a conductor, and he/she would find it hard to get jobs in the future.

¹⁴ Professional CO musicians, informal interviews, April 2007, Singapore.

¹⁵ Formal observation of the SYF, April 2006, Singapore.

¹⁶ Formal observation of the SYF, April 2006, Singapore.

Another negative effect of this competition is the schools' obvious attempt to gain attention and make an impression with their repertory. This was the observation of both professional and amateur CO musicians whom I interviewed after the performances. They highlighted various COs' use of crowd-pleasing tricks during the SYF such as having the whole wind section stand up midway during the piece to make the song "look" more impressive. Others pointed out that a few COs played rousing and loud songs that required a lot of percussion as a way of impressing. One of the interviewees joked that he now understood why the SYF is often compared "to a circus act", with each orchestra trying to outperform each other with "flashy gimmicks". For other interviewees, the chief problem with the gimmicks was that they had little to do with the technical merits of the CO music genre. As musicians, they all know that the judges would be evaluating the COs based on their technique, ensemble work, precision, tonal colour, stylistics, performance practice, and interpretation of the work by the COs. The fact that the orchestras still resort to gimmicks suggested that they are being led by decision-makers who have no real knowledge of COs such as the supervising teachers or the school administration.

Graded Examinations

Apart from the culture of competition, the pervasive culture of examinations can be considered to be another key component of the amateur/school CO scene, which is depriving student musicians of their enjoyment of CO music. In the CO music setting, graded examinations are offered in Singapore in a formal endeavour to raise the level of musicianship in Chinese music by various institutions such as the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing and the National University of Singapore. Only student/amateur CO musicians participate in these examinations.

Unlike competitions where there is only one winner, examinations can offer many distinctions, merits, passes, or failures, as each student is graded on a set of fixed benchmarks, instead of vis-à-vis one another. Thus, these examinations offer a seemingly objective assessment of a performer's playing ability by a registered board or an internationally-recognised music institution. Upon the completion of the examinations with a pass grade and above, the student receives a certificate that constitutes an additional qualification for the future pursuit of the CO. According to one of the local organisers of the

graded examinations, a diploma obtained from the examinations could be used to gain direct entry into a leading arts institution in Singapore.

More than just a certification process, the examinations are also a means of obtaining prestige for various individuals in the CO music scene. I have heard from CO students about their peers and their parents showing off about their success in the examinations. I have also learnt of CO conductors who have forced their whole orchestra to take graded examinations en masse. Examinations also play a large part in the lives of professional CO musicians who do not take the examinations. Many derive their income from teaching student musicians in preparation for these examinations. Their success with their students, based on the latter's performance at the exams, is a source of validation of their ability both as a teacher and as a CO musician. The CO musicians I interviewed told me that it is a common practice among some of these teachers, usually at the request of the parents, to push their students who have not reached an adequate standard to aim for certificates at higher grades. One of the professional musicians made this statement:

This CO musician I know told me that he has no choice but to do what the parents want. The parents pay the fees, so he has to listen. But he also said that if his student goes for higher grades, it also makes him look good in the CO community. And then he gets good referrals leading to more work.

A local organiser of the graded examinations I interviewed stated that many of the participants, even more so their parents and teachers, would complain to her about the inadequate number awarded a distinction grade. To her, their preoccupation was with getting the distinction, regardless of whether the student participants earned it.

Participation in these examinations is also an extremely stressful ordeal that can strip the students of their enjoyment of the CO music. I accompanied one of my students to the examinations at a local arts institution. While waiting, I observed that, apart from the younger children, who did not seem to be fully aware of the gravity of the situation, the rest of the participants (aged 12 and above) in the examinations room were terrified. Some of them brought their entire family with them for moral support. After my student finished her examination, she came out of the room on the brink of tears, stating that she had played badly. I had to spend a considerable amount of time to comfort her.¹⁷

¹⁷ Informal observation of examinations, December 2006, Singapore.

Although I can empathise with her because I had also experienced these pressures and expectations as a student CO musician, I was also appalled by the negative emotional impact of the examinations system on a young musician's pursuit of the CO.¹⁸ Her subjective assessment of the situation turned out to be inaccurate as she passed the examinations with a merit; in fact, she was among the higher scorers in the examinations. What this example shows is that this student CO musician's self-perception has become marred by her stressful preparations for the examinations; the excessive regard she holds for their significance; as well as her fear and anxiety of the examiners and the examination body.

The fearful and anxious reaction of the student musicians to the examinations experience was also revealed when I brought my students to see a professional CO musician who occasionally comes to Singapore to adjudicate examinations and competitions for a masterclass. This masterclass is particularly significant for two reasons: a) my students' reactions to someone who is an examiner; and b) the examiner's awareness of the impact of examinations on student musicians. In front of this examiner, even in this informal setting, my students froze; they were incredibly nervous and dared not play in front of her. I had to coax them as though they were little children to play for her. Querying them later about their reaction, they revealed that they were afraid of being scolded for their lacklustre skills. They also felt embarrassed about displaying their lousy skills in front of this examiner who was a professor in Chinese music. To me, their reaction at playing CO instruments in front of an examiner shows the extent to which they are intimidated by the examination-oriented culture and the absolute and unquestioning fear they have for seniority and reputation. Considering the fact that I had meant their encounter with this professional CO musician to be a nurturing learning experience, their adverse reaction to the situation was very revealing of their deep-seated fear of examiners.

Even this examiner acknowledged the negative impact of the examinations system on the students. According to her, she received a directive from the local organiser of the graded examinations to be to be less stringent in applying the assessment criteria to "encourage" the students. Essentially, she could not expect professional standards from these students; a clear distinction has to be made between a professional standard and an amateur standard. According to her, these local organisers of examinations have learnt that student musicians who do not succeed in passing the examinations typically stop playing

¹⁸ I myself had never taken any graded examinations.

the instrument altogether and do not take the graded examination at the next level. She also highlighted the economic motive underlying the local organiser's request. For the local organiser, examinations constitute an important source of revenue; without applicants, the institutions' revenue flow would be affected from the loss of these fees.¹⁹ In instructing the examiner to be more "encouraging", the local organiser is also afraid that the students may go to other examining bodies that are more likely to give out good grades. My perception regarding this issue was subsequently supported in my interviews with one of the representatives of the local organisers of exams. One of them admitted that the income generated from the graded examinations was sufficient to run the whole Chinese music department for the year at her institution.

Moreover, there appears to be a fierce competition among the various organisers of these examinations for these students. One particular representative mentioned how the grading system of her institution was better than the others. However, her comment needs to be qualified by the fact that the examiner whom I interviewed had worked with this organiser and noted that there were problems with the grading system. Hence, this local organiser's statement stems more from her competitiveness than the outright superiority of the grading system at her institution.

The leniency of the examinations has an even darker side – the possibility of ingratiating oneself with an examiner to obtain a good grade. A professional CO musician recounted the fact that another professional CO musician who served as the examiner for the graded examinations asked him whether he wanted to use the "backdoor" for his students in the graded examinations due to their close *guanxi*. In other words, this examiner hinted at the possibility that this professional CO musician could "cheat" to help his students earn a good grade. As mentioned before, by having many students who earn a good grade, professional CO musicians stand to gain by bolstering their reputation within the CO community. This professional CO musician discussed this matter with me in a nonchalant fashion, not at all fazed by the implications of his description of this encounter with the examiner. Considering the fact that I know both of these individual musicians personally, I was extremely disappointed, not to mention disillusioned by the existence of such unethical practices.

¹⁹ Professional CO musician, informal interview, December 2006, Singapore.

This incident proves that the graded examinations implemented in Singapore are not as fair and legitimate as they are perceived to be. The fact that professional CO musicians seek to derive benefits from the outcomes of these examinations, because they affect the CO musicians' self-esteem, reputation and livelihood in Singapore, is a disturbing indicator of the negative impact of the examinations system. Sadly, the concept of *guanxi*, as mentioned earlier, is abused by CO musicians who manoeuvre and manipulate this external system to enable themselves to gain prestige, seniority and economic worth.

The General Public and the COs

Without a stable sufficient source of funding, all the COs in Singapore, except for the school COs, do not receive sufficient governmental support or other forms of sponsorship for their survival. Thus they are extremely dependent on the general public that offers an important avenue for generating needed revenue through ticket sales or donations.

One of the challenges faced by COs in Singapore is the difficulty in reaching out to the public and attracting people to its concerts. Within mainstream society in Singapore, CO music is undermined by its stereotypical conception as a second-rate musical genre compared to Western music. In my dialogue with non-CO musicians, they mentioned that while most people (not in the CO industry) have a good impression of the professional CO, they look down on Chinese music in general. With the ethnic label of "Chinese" music, the CO is stigmatised as a backward type of art form by most people in society who prefer Western music.²⁰ The challenge is heightened by the fact that large segments of the general public do not typically attend orchestral concerts. Finally, COs are also competing with other artistic entities for an audience in the small market of Singapore. Thus, the need to go beyond regular orchestral concertgoers to expand the population of available concertgoers has been embraced as an important marketing strategy by all COs.

The COs' efforts to reach out to the general public have yielded different outcomes for the professional CO and the amateur COs in Singapore. The SCO, in turning to the public for part of its revenue, has made artistic compromises and other changes to appeal to the public's taste. These compromises also exert a direct impact on the CO musicians and the orchestra as a whole. For instance, the leadership at SCO tends to create and modify CO

²⁰ Professional musicians, informal interviews, September to December 2006, Singapore.

pieces to include elements of pop music that please the audience in order to increase ticket sales.²¹ As a result of the leadership's attempts to identify with the preferences of the public, the musicians find that they are constantly practicing songs with compromised artistic integrity and bemoan the repertoire that the CO would be playing in the upcoming concert seasons.²² This repertoire has contributed to the disillusionment of many professional CO musicians who feel that their orchestra has deviated significantly from its artistic direction. As one professional CO musician commented, the SCO lacks an artistic spirit because it is playing too much low-quality work. Moreover, these orchestral pieces are often technically simple, which means that the musicians in the SCO are not challenged to improve themselves.²³ In fact, because they are constantly playing such pieces, the CO failed to perform adequately when they played a rather simple, but traditional, piece for a concert during one observed concert. After the concert, an SCO musician exclaimed in shock: "*Women zeme le?*" ("What has happened to us?"). Another SCO musician summed up the musicians' unhappiness with the SCO leadership's choice of the repertoire: "Our orchestra is doing too much bad music, it's taking out a lot from our orchestra, and many of us are forgetting why we got into Chinese music in the first place".

One of the ways that amateur COs have sought to address their marketing challenge is to formulate and implement creative strategies. In one instance, the committee of an amateur CO came up with a publicity stunt to invite disadvantaged people to come to the performance and use it as a selling point to the media so that there would be more coverage for the concert.²⁴ The solution to the amateur CO's marketing woes was beneficial all-round, while the disadvantaged concert-goers were treated to a free concert and were introduced to CO music; the amateur CO fostered goodwill with the community and its concerts were also well-publicised due to its unique selling point. Effective as it were in generating publicity and attention, such marketing gimmicks are one-off measures that cannot be repeated on a long-term basis. Essentially, they do not resolve the lack of funding of the CO for the long term.

Amateur COs also seek to impress the public by programming pieces that are far too difficult for the musicians within the amateur CO in order to attract a larger audience. From my observation of the rehearsals, the preparations for these concerts impose tremendous

²¹ SCO administrator, informal interview, June 2006, Singapore.

²² Professional CO musician, informal interview, November 2006, Singapore.

²³ Professional CO musician, informal interview, November 2006, Singapore.

²⁴ Informal observation of a production meeting of an amateur CO, June 2006, Singapore.

pressure on the younger and less advanced students who are made to feel inept because they are unable to play pieces that are clearly too challenging for them.²⁵ A common practice when confronted with the fact that the orchestral musicians are unable to manage the task of convincingly playing their repertory for the concerts as they approach the concert date is the invitation of guest musicians from other orchestras. Guest musicians can amount to half the performers on stage and they would usually participate in intensified practices two to three weeks before the concert.²⁶ This reality in turn means that the performances put up by the amateur orchestra are a façade that masks the actual quality of the orchestra itself. Thus, the amateur CO is presenting a false image of its orchestra and erecting expectations of standards that it can only fulfil in the future by using guest musicians and stretching its limited budget.

²⁵ Informal observation of an amateur CO, June 2006, Singapore.

²⁶ Informal observation of an amateur CO, June 2006, Singapore.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to offer an insider glimpse into the specific characteristics and social relationships that are found in the different types of COs in Singapore. This discussion is juxtaposed with the frameworks of the orchestral hierarchy, the notion of *guanxi* and *ganqing* in Chinese culture, relations with other musical ensembles, the sociology of work settings and proposed economic models. These theoretical frameworks provide a perspective and a point of reference for analysing, interpreting and understanding the unique CO environment in Singapore.

Although formal structures and roles, as well as cultural notions of Chinese cultures, exist to support and promote the collaboration of CO musicians, they seem to be inadequate in the face of other competing factors. For many of the CO musicians, their discontent with an oppressive work environment characterised by excessive work with little creative stimulus and pay means that many are dissatisfied and frustrated. Instead of cultivating their creative aspirations, many are sidetracked by their need to generate sufficient income to make a living, or striving to make as much money as possible through alternative means such as instrument selling; Singapore's high living standards and increasing costs of living make it important for them to earn money.

CO musicians at the amateur level, especially school CO musicians, are also frustrated by the stressful preparation for concerts, the SYF, and competitions. These events are marred by unrealistic expectations of their prestige-hungry school managements that in turn impose unrealistic expectations on CO conductors.

Coupled with the fact that relationships at the same level, as well as relationships between various levels are dominated by cliques and competitiveness, it would seem that the COs in Singapore are extremely divided by internal conflicts. This is in stark contrast to the impressive façade of unity, excellence, and award wins they put up for the outside world that is unaware of happenings and problems within the orchestras.

While my research identified instances in which CO musicians bonded together and showed the appropriate respect for those higher in seniority, they are far outweighed by the many other examples of in-fighting, discontent, and disrespect within the COs.

However, the status quo of the COs in Singapore cannot be attributed solely to the CO musicians and administrators themselves. The discussion of the impact of the external forces on the SCO and the amateur/school COs demonstrates how the COs are just as influenced by outside agents as their internal dynamics. The CO music genre is buffeted and shaped by these external agents that do not have the interests of the CO music community at heart. Yet, unfortunately, they are the ones who possess the funds and the infrastructure that are needed by the COs to survive in a society that is not particularly nurturing for CO music.

As a result, these external forces wield a disproportionate amount of influence over a musical genre in which they possess little knowledge nor experience. Worse still, their involvement in CO music is not based on passion and commitment, but the desire to elicit results. Their establishment of a culture of competition and the examinations system has been instrumental in warping values of amateur/school CO musicians, stripping them of their joy in the musical instruments, while encouraging them to play CO music for the sake of winning competitions and earning distinctions. The inadequate support by the government for CO music in Singapore, which has resulted in poor pay and an impoverished creative atmosphere at the professional level, means that there is no real incentive for young CO musicians to dedicate themselves to this musical genre.

This bleak conclusion is certainly light years away from my original research intention of studying the successful phenomenon of the CO scene in Singapore. In going beneath the media publicity and the showiness of the big spectacles, I realise that they have simply served as a consummate cover-up of the deep-seated unhappiness of many CO musicians and their limited prospects.

In the following chapter, I will integrate the findings of this research with my overall experiences as a CO music practitioner and examine how my research work has transformed my perspectives as a native music practitioner and the CO scene in Singapore. Moreover, I will also reflect on the ramifications of my unflattering exposure of the CO scene in Singapore on my future within this community.

5. Conclusion

Introduction

Summary of Thesis

This thesis has provided a comprehensive coverage of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore, beginning with my personal journey of becoming a CO musician. Going beyond the traditional approach of a CO native practitioner studying the music of his own culture, I employed a multicultural ethnomusiological approach – the study of musical elements within the social and cultural contexts that have created the musical products. Although I had begun the research process thinking that I would identify unique musicological characteristics of the Chinese orchestral genre in Singapore, I ended up gathering substantial data on the social processes that take place within and without the COs in Singapore. The multicultural ethnomusiological approach thus offered the most suitable framework for the analysis for the data. I also endeavoured to add another dimension to this exploration of the interactions of CO musicians by offering an insider's perspective. Thus, the thesis provides a unique glimpse into the ever-evolving and fluid negotiations that occur within orchestral environments.

In order to contextualise this discussion of the Chinese orchestral scene in Singapore, I offered a concise overview of the origins of the development of the COs in mainland China. The coverage of the historical development of the CO in China from its early stages to its contemporary state provides background information about the CO and a comparison with the development of the COs in Singapore. Because of the significant impact of the socio-political scene in Singapore on the development of the CO music scene, I also provided a relevant account of specific characteristics of Singapore society such as its emphasis on economic development at the expense of cultural development; the use of the CO as a tool for racial harmony; and the excessive emphasis on results, examinations, and competitions. Moreover, the discussion about individual COs in Singapore also contributed to the comprehensive context for studying the current status of COs in Singapore.

Through my native participant-researcher observations, I identified specific characteristics and social relationships that were found in the different types of COs in Singapore. In spite of the existence of formal structures and roles, as well as tacit rules of interaction derived from Chinese culture, there was tremendous disunity and discontent within the orchestral environments observed. At the individual level, CO musicians revealed their disillusionment and frustration with an unsupportive work environment. Confronted with a lack of pay and creative stimulus, many of these CO musicians were preoccupied with earning as much money as possible through alternative means such as teaching. Even CO musicians at the amateur level experienced tremendous stress from excessive preparations for concerts and competitions with pieces that were above their level of proficiency. In the case of school CO musicians, such stress came from the unrealistic expectations that were placed on the CO conductors and the musicians by school administrations seeking prestige. The unhappiness of the musicians at the individual level was further compounded by the competitive and cliquish relationships identified in this research process. In spite of the façade of unity and excellence projected to the world outside the CO, the COs in Singapore were characterised by extreme divisions and in-fighting.

To further exacerbate the situation, the dysfunctional internal environment of COs observed can be partially attributed to external forces. These external forces – the governmental agencies such as the MOE, the NAC, and the school – wield considerable power over the COs because they provide major sources of funding. Unfortunately, driven by their own agenda that includes the pursuit of racial harmony, prestige, or impressive results, these institutions establish expectations and practices that undermine the cultivation of a love for CO music. The culture of competitions and the examinations system – the products of their involvement – have led to the creation of a competitive environment that places winning competitions and getting good grades at exams above learning how to play CO instruments properly. As a consequence, CO musicians and professionals are concerned about the lack of talent among the younger generations of local CO musicians. Such an environment has not fostered individual creativity and initiative, which are necessary for the cultivation of artistic talent.

My Reflections on the Research Findings

I started writing this thesis with the intention of constructing an authentic picture of the CO community in Singapore, of which I was a part. For years, I have held this community dear to my heart. My involvement in CO over the last 12 years has given me many good friendships and indelible music-making memories. Because of my wonderful relationships within the COs in Singapore, I wanted to study the CO community in Singapore, explore its social relationships and processes, apart from its musical components, and identify the factors that have shaped the CO music scene in Singapore.

However, in the course of doing fieldwork for this thesis, I uncovered certain realities that were unexpected. In my in-depth interactions with the COs and their participants, I was made privy to the world of orchestral politics; gossip among cliques of CO practitioners; competition over matters of pay, reputation, and orchestral positions; and a tremendous sense of unhappiness among many of the practitioners in Singapore today.

As a native practitioner, I had always known that politics and infighting existed in the CO community, but I did not realise its significance and large scope of influence and its pervasiveness in all sectors of the CO community in Singapore, hence some of the findings - specifically the large influence of politics on social interactions - of the thesis were surprising to me. My training in ethnomusicology, especially through the analysis of fieldwork, taught me to look deeper into the social and musical interactions from an objective and an outsider perspective, and to think critically about such interactions. First of all, I did not realise the extent of politics and its impact on the social lives of CO practitioners until research and analysis was carried out on it. This could be due to my involvement in the field as an insider, where I had taken for granted that such social interactions were small common issues that were part of the larger CO community, and that the magnitude of influence that politics had on the social scene of COs was supposed to be a minority issue. My pre-conceived notions as an insider had actually worked against me, and my fieldwork produced consistent findings that depicted a CO scene in Singapore, which deviated from my previously perceived notions of the community in Singapore.

I was proud of the CO community, and had always thought that it was developing artistically and in size at a comparable rate to China. I even thought that our CO community in

Singapore was more advanced than those of other countries. I had also thought that the CO scene in Singapore was blossoming with talent and increasing in numbers of musicians, only to be proven wrong with the findings that have resulted from my research. The “Chinese Orchestral Boom” concept might have possibly been true in the 1970s and early 1980s, but it can no longer be said to be reflective of the status of the COs in contemporary Singapore.

As a result, I struggled considerably with compiling my findings and drawing my conclusions because the data I gathered produced an unflattering picture of the CO community in Singapore. Yet there was no denying the fact that themes with a great amount of negativity kept reappearing in my data. In particular, as a CO musician who intends to pursue my love of CO music for the rest of my life, I was particularly saddened by the attitudes of the older and established CO music practitioners. Many of them were becoming jaded and unhappy with what they were doing; their love for CO music had dwindled, instead of growing, over the years. Moreover, I discovered that economics plays a far larger-than-expected role in the perceptions of the CO musicians who are often more preoccupied with generating an income from CO, rather than fulfilling their creative aspirations.

At the same time, I can also understand why they have developed such a jaded attitude as the CO music scene in Singapore presents a rather challenging environment for CO musicians to pursue an orchestral career exclusively. Confronted with an insufficient salary as orchestral musicians and the absence of creative stimulus and performance opportunities due to a lack of positive government support, CO musicians have had to fight tooth and nail to continue to work in this field. Sad as it may be, the CO musicians’ pursuit for teaching income, reputation and prestige has distracted them from their orchestral playing is something I recognise as necessary evils in order to enable them to stay in this field. Teaching, a nurturing profession and a supposedly powerful complement to a performing career has become an obstacle to performance because of the CO community’s constant pursuit for reputation, prestige and livelihood.

Nonetheless, it is my hope that my thesis will set the stage for change and transformation, which will improve the quality of the work environment for CO musicians here in Singapore. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the ramifications of my research method as a native practitioner-researcher, while considering its implications for me as a native practitioner in the CO music community and for the CO music community itself.

Just as importantly, I will highlight the applications of my research study as a springboard for further research on the CO music community in Singapore. Additionally, I will offer suggestions for further research that will cultivate greater understanding of this under-rated art form in Singapore.

Being Researcher - Native Practitioner and Implications

In the first chapter, I identified the key advantages of being a researcher-native practitioner in terms of gathering invaluable data that would not be accessible to a researcher who is a non-native music practitioner. At the same time, I also highlighted the complications of maintaining a sufficiently objective stance and dealing with a deluge of information from diverse CO sources at all times, whether I was doing research or not. What has been even more challenging was going through revelations that have the potential to be damaging to the CO sources and the subjects to which they allude. Throughout the gathering, organisation and analysis of these findings, I had felt burdened by the weight of the ethical considerations and responsibilities on my shoulders. What I had initially envisaged to be an exciting project that would allow me to celebrate my love and appreciation of the CO music scene in Singapore took on a dark aspect that was depressing and disillusioning.

As a native CO music practitioner in Singapore, unlike a researcher studying a foreign environment, I do not have the luxury of simply walking cleanly away from my research subject upon the completion of my work. Since I have every intention of pursuing my career as a CO musician in Singapore, I am acutely aware of the ramifications of my exposé of the CO music community. I could be branded as a traitor who has betrayed the trust of the CO musicians and turned my back against the CO community by airing its dark side. Being loyal to the collective is prized as an important attribute that is integral to Chinese culture, and by extension, the CO community of which it is a part.

Therefore, I have concealed the identities of all these CO musicians so as not to betray their sense of trust. Still, it is possible that if they were to read my thesis, they would know that I was referring to them and the content of our conversations. These CO musicians may not react well to my analysis and my interpretations of their statements and attitudes.

Considering the small and tightly-knit nature of the CO community in Singapore. I could not help but be worried about the fact that my performing career could be jeopardised by the publication of my research work. Thus, there were many instances when I felt sufficiently emotionally disturbed and affected in the course of my research to think about giving up on this work and pursuing a performance practice qualification instead.

However, in the face of this incredible stress, I ultimately decided that I would move past these fears and anxieties for a greater cause – the transformation of the CO scene in Singapore for the better. Before I started this thesis, I had wanted to celebrate my love for the CO music community in Singapore and my pride in what I had done to contribute to this entity. Although I am saddened and disillusioned by my negative findings, they do not, in any way, diminish my love of CO music and my gratitude for being a part of this community that has tremendous creative and artistic potential. Moreover, I want to do whatever I can to change its current under-rated position in the pragmatic society in Singapore that still has not acquired a true appreciation of the value of CO music in its midst. As I had stated in the first chapter of my thesis, it has been my mission to do my utmost to promote awareness of CO music and carve a niche for this musical genre in our society. Therefore, this thesis has not deflected from my mission.

By looking at my thesis in the light of my love for the CO and its music, and my genuine desire for it to overcome its problems, one could see that its identification of the problems within the CO constitutes an invaluable first step in the right direction. Before the CO community can improve from its current situation, it must first be willing to accept that many things are not as they should be within the community and in some ways, there has been some regression in certain areas. In this thesis, some of the problem areas of the CO music scene have also been identified, which provides the opening for formulating solutions to address them.

My analysis has shown that the CO environment is a competitive and economically driven one, not unlike business environments, which I had previously thought were greatly dissimilar as the CO environment as they were considered “non-artistic” environments. Hence, some of these solutions may involve turning back the pages and re-capturing the spirit of the pioneers of the CO. Throughout the research process, a few of the veteran CO musicians spoke of their pride that stems from their understanding of the history of CO music:

their willingness to keep their passion for their CO music alive even when there were no lucrative gains; and the sense of camaraderie that they felt for one another even during competition settings.

This pioneering spirit needs to be rekindled in the current generations of the CO musicians who have lost touch with this sense of pride and a pure love for the CO music that can be found in some veteran CO musicians. By looking at their mindset, the contemporary CO musicians would realise how far they have strayed from the spirit of the CO with their in-fighting, competitiveness, cliquishness, and the pursuit of income, prestige, or CCA points at the expense of all else. They would certainly see through the hollowness of the culture of competition and the system of competition, which have poisoned the CO musicians' authentic pursuit of CO and deprived them of their joy. What would emerge from this communal change of mindset is a sense of collective pride and empowerment about their rightful place in mainstream society. Instead of fighting for survival as individuals, CO musicians need to be offering support and encouragement to help one another to pursue this challenging path of consolidating the CO music scene in Singapore.

With this change in mindset that is certain to transform the quality of the performances of the SCO, along with the amateur/school COs, CO musicians are better placed than ever to prove that CO deserves recognition as a legitimate musical genre in Singapore's artistic landscape. By extension, it should merit strong consideration in getting the necessary funding and relevant assistance to help the CO community to develop and grow into a world-class entity that would make Singapore proud.

More than just a political tool to bring about racial harmony, the CO is a unique musical genre that should be touted with national and ethnic pride, instead of relegated to the periphery as a second-rate form of ethnic music. By setting a good example with a change in their attitudes and catching the positive attention of the decision-makers, the government and its related agencies, CO musicians can modify the negative stereotypical image of CO music in Singapore and change public opinion. Only then will there be sufficient support for the CO music community to obtain the financial resources that would allow it to expand and grow as CO music communities in other Asian countries such as mainland China and Hong Kong have done.

Although being a native practitioner-researcher was accompanied with tremendous personal angst, it has certainly pushed me to the next level not only as a CO musician, but also as a person. To decide to persist with this research work at the risk of hurting my reputation and my role within the CO community required an ongoing journey of self-reflection. This research process tested my love for the CO music and community in Singapore.

I realised that as an insider, one often takes for granted, as I had done, the many forms of interaction as inevitable and typical, and that being an insider keeps you from noticing certain aspects of your tradition; the result of over-familiarity with the environment. Through the writing of this thesis, training in ethnomusicology and analysis of my fieldwork, I have come to appreciate the fact that there is discourse in the speech of people, and have thus become more sensitive to my surroundings, thinking critically and objectively, and forging a greater understanding of my actions and its impact on the greater musical environment. However, in spite of all the negative things I have heard and encountered that far outweighed the positive, my love for CO music is still affirmed. I realise that I truly want the best for this community and still believe in its potential to rise above the conflicts and the self-interests that currently dominate the CO music community.

Applications of the Research Study and Future Research

In conducting my research study on this subject-matter, I was breaking new ground simply in my endeavour to provide a comprehensive and authentic exploration of the CO community in Singapore. Throughout my research process, I found very little ethnomusicological literature on this subject-matter. With its publication, I hope that I will spark greater interest within the academic and the music communities to learn more about the CO music scene in Singapore – a relatively closed-up entity that is little understood by most people within the artistic world and by the public in general.

More importantly, my research study has illuminated many additional areas that need to be further investigated, along with the use of alternative research methodologies. The following are suggestions for further research in the study of the CO music scene and community in Singapore:

- **Case studies:** While my research work on the CO music scene has offered a comprehensive picture of the CO community, it would be highly informative to take a detailed and in-depth look at a specific orchestra or orchestras. With a case-study approach, the researcher will be able to follow the day-to-day workings of the orchestra, observe the interactions between the musicians and study how various factors influence the performances and the development of the CO over a designated period of time. By adopting such a focused approach, the researcher will also be able to delve into the musicological and non-musicological concerns of the members of the orchestra in tremendous detail.

An extension, or a modification, of this research approach is to provide a comparative case study analysis of several orchestras. In Singapore, this would entail a comparison of a small number of amateur COs, or school COs. The selection of the top COs could help to identify the factors that have contributed to their success in carving a niche in the CO music scene. At the same time, it may reveal underlying problems that simmer beneath the outward success of these COs, which can result in the formulation of concrete measures to address these issues.

- **Impact of External Forces on the CO music scene in Singapore:** Although I have addressed this topic in the thesis, I feel that it is definitely a subject-matter that deserves a more extensive and focused examination. Because of the wide scope of my thesis, I was unable to give due coverage to each of these external forces – the governmental agencies, the community centres, the schools and the general public – and investigate fully how they wield their influence over the COs.

In particular, I feel that the nexus between the MOE and the schools in their shaping of the CO scene at the school level clearly deserves extended research. Since school COs are often one of the most effective ways to initiate young people into the CO – the future generations of professional CO musicians in Singapore – they should be analysed within the larger context of the school environment.

Instead of studying the school CO itself, the researcher would be examining how the MOE, with its funding and the school administrative leadership influence the development of the orchestra in various ways. Specifically, the researcher could look

at: a) the school leadership's allocation of the MOE funding to the CO in relationship to other types of CCAs within the school; b) its attitudes and policies towards the conductors and teachers hired to teach these students; c) its attitudes and policies towards preparation for concerts and competitions; d) the attitudes of the teachers-in-charge who are supervising the CO; and e) the impact of all the aforementioned factors on the school CO musicians.

Another important topic that should be studied is the evaluation of the devastating impact of the system of competitions and examinations on the development of the CO musicians. In the thesis, I also touched on this topic. Perhaps, one of the best ways to document its negative effects is to conduct a quantitative survey of student musicians, which would determine their perceptions of the CO competitions and the examinations of a wide cross-section of amateur/school musicians. Hopefully, such a research study would go far in triggering modifications and revisions to these two aspects of the CO music scene.

- This thesis is primarily what Cottrell coins an “asexual ethnography” (2004:189), so there is scope for future research that takes into consideration the gender of CO musicians. I feel that future theses that focus on specific orchestras can take into consideration the issue of the gender of CO musicians. Specifically, how CO musicians of different genders perceive their experiences within the CO environment would provide interesting and useful insights into the dynamics of the COs. These insights could lead to suggestions for improvement in relationships and work conditions, which may not be apparent without considering the gender issue.
- Impressions of the CO in Singapore: While this study has focused primarily on the CO community, it needs to address the impressions which non-CO practitioners have on this art form. Based on interviews with practitioners and from my own personal knowledge, the CO is looked upon as a second-rate art form, possessing a lower status as compared to Western music by many Singaporeans. The reasons why this impression was formulated and pervaded and the cultural and social underpinnings of such a perception need to be addressed in future to formulate methods to counter such perceptions, which might hinder the development of the CO as a genre.

- The media and the CO genre: The media's influence on the development of the CO needs to be examined. From the 1980s when the broadcast stations decided to pull out of CO programming in favour of other more profitable programmes, causing the slow, decline of the COs popularity, to the media coverage of the COs through its various articles and broadcasts in contemporary society, the CO has been greatly shaped by various mass media tools of broadcast, print, radio and recording industries. As this thesis is primarily concerned with the individuals involved within the CO community, coverage of the roles that the media played and its influence as an external factor in the shaping of the Chinese orchestra today can only be touched on briefly. Nevertheless, its role in the CO has been important in its development and this research can be combined with research on the impressions of the CO in Singapore as mentioned above to form a more integrated and holistic approach.

The digital revolution, responsible for new media including the internet, web casts, and digital music, and its influence on the CO should also be explored. Its potential role in pedagogy, outreach to international audiences, and its role in new artistic collaborations should also be explored further.

In laying down these suggestions for further research, I am striving to realise my goal of building on the momentum of my research work to encourage better, more detailed and more extensive research into the CO music scene and community in Singapore. To me, there is no question that Singapore would benefit from a greater expansion in the development of its musical literature in a genre of music that can be considered to be the traditional form of the majority of its people. Considering the fact that the government in Singapore is constantly trying to encourage its people to have a sense of national pride and to speak Chinese, one can see how an understanding and appreciation of CO music can contribute to such an endeavour.

Finally, at a more personal level, I sincerely hope that my research would trigger major soul-searching among my fellow CO musician practitioners in Singapore. What my study has revealed is that CO musicians in Singapore need to step back and reflect on their participation in this field. Instead of riding on the treadmill of earning money and gaining prestige, we need to get reconnected with our love for CO music and retrieve the spirit of collaboration so that we can become united as a true orchestral entity.

Appendix

Timeline of Conductors in various Singaporean Chinese Orchestras

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|-------------|---|--|
| Zheng Sisen | The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (NTCO) | 1968 - 1972 |
| Li Xueling | The National Theatre Chinese Orchestra (NTCO) | 1972 – 1974 (Orchestra was dissolved) |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|---------------|---|--|
| Ma Wen | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1971 - 1973 |
| Li Xueling | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1973 – 1974 |
| Ng Tai Kong | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1974 - 1977 |
| Li Xueling | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1977 |
| Lim Tiap Guan | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1977 - 1980 |
| Ku Lap Man | People's Association Chinese Orchestra (PACO) | 1980 – 1993 (Orchestra was renamed Singapore Chinese Orchestra) |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| Ku Lap Man | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 1993 - 1995 |
| Qu Chun Quan | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 1995 - 1999 |
| Hu Bingxu | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 1996 - 2000 |
| Lum Yan Sing | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 2000 - 2001 |
| Xia Feiyun | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 2001 - 2002 |
| Tsung Yeh | Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO) | 2002 - Present |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Tay Teow Kiat | Dunman High School Chinese Orchestra | 1978 - Present |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Zheng Sisen | Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO) | 1969 - 1971 |
| Li Xueling | Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO) | 1971 - 1979 |
| Chew Keng How | Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO) | 1980 -2003 |
| Quek Ling Kiong | Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra (SYCO) | 2003 - Present |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Tay Teow Kiat | Singapore Broadcasting Centre Chinese Orchestra (City Chinese Orchestra) | 1974 - 1983 1993 - Present |

| Conductor | Orchestra | Length of Stay |
|------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Yeo Chau Hing | Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra | 1974 -1977 |
| Chew Keng How | Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra | 1977-1980 |
| Sim Boon Yew | Keat Hong Community Centre Chinese Orchestra | 1980 - Present |

Glossary

Group Titles

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---|
| Aitong xueyou | 爱同学友 | “Ai Tong Alumni,” Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, 1953-present |
| Baixue guoyueshe | 白雪国乐社 | “Snow White Traditional Music Society,” Beijing, 1941-52 |
| Datong yuehui | 大同乐会 | “Datong Society of Music,” Shanghai, 1920-37 |
| Dexing Company | 德兴公司 | “Dexing Company,” Singapore |
| Guoyue gaijinshe | 国乐改进社 | “Institute for the Improvement of Chinese Music,” Beijing |
| Huaqiao zhongxue | 华侨中学 | “The Chinese High School,” Singapore, 1919-present |
| Jianquansheng yinyueshe | 建泉声音乐社 | “Jianquan Music Society” |
| Jinan qianwei minzu yuetuan | 济南前卫民族乐团 | “Jinan Qianwei Military Chinese Orchestra,” Shangdong |
| Jinxing gewutuan | 金星歌舞团 | “Jinxing Song and Dance Ensemble,” China |
| Kangle yinyue yanjiu hui | 康乐音乐研究会 | “Kangle Music Society,” Singapore, 1954-1969 |
| Minzu guanxian yuedui | 民族管弦乐队 | “Folk Symphonic Chinese Orchestra” |
| Quanxin zhongxue yishu yanjiu hui | 全星中学艺术 研究会 | “Singapore Middle School Arts Society,” Singapore |
| Shaoguang | 少光 | early Chinese music group |
| Taorong ruyueshe | 陶融儒乐社 | “Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association,” Singapore, 1931- present |
| Tongluo yinyuehui | 铜锣音乐会 | “Tongluo Music Association,” |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---|
| | | Singapore, 1939 |
| Wanshun gongsi | 万顺公司 | “Wanshun Company,” Singapore, 1957 |
| Xianggang yinxin yishutuan | 香港银星艺术团 | “Hong Kong Yinxin Arts Group,” Hong Kong |
| Xinxing minzu yuedui | 新型民族乐队 | “New Modern Chinese ensemble” |
| Yinyue gewutuan | 音乐歌舞团 | “Yinyue Song and Dance Ensemble,” Singapore |
| Yulang zhongxue-huayuetuan xiaoyou | 裕廊中学华乐团校友 | “Jurong Secondary School Chinese Orchestra Alumni,” Singapore |
| Yuyu ruyueshe | 余娱儒乐社 | “Yuyu Music Association,” Singapore, 1912-present |
| Zhengfeng guoyueshe | 争锋国乐社 | early Chinese music group |
| Zhongguo minjian gewutuan | 中国民族歌舞团 | “China Folk Song and Dance Troupe,” Beijing |
| Zonghexing de minzu yuedui | 综合性的民族乐队 | “Combined Chinese ensemble” |

Personal Names

| | | |
|----------------|-----|---|
| Cai Yuanpei | 蔡元培 | Chinese educator and chancellor of Peking University (b.1868-1940) |
| Chen Jilue | 陈济略 | musician, professor, conductor (1905-2005) |
| Chen Qigang | 陈其钢 | composer (b.1951) |
| Chen Yi | 陈怡 | musician, Chinese contemporary composer |
| Chew Keng How | 周经豪 | musician, conductor |
| Chew Keng Juea | 周景锐 | Chairman of SCO, former Senior Executive Vice President of the Singapore Press Holdings’ Chinese Newspapers |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----|---|
| Chia Wei Khuan | 蔡慧琨 | Head of Visual and Performing Arts, Associate Professor, Nanyang Technological University |
| Chng Heng Thiu | 庄升俦 | Honorary Chairperson of Singapore Chinese Orchestra |
| Gan Tao | 甘涛 | musician, conservatory teacher |
| Gao Yi | 高义 | musician |
| Gao Ziming | 高子铭 | musician |
| Goh Aik Yew | 易有伍 | Founder and director of Hugo Records, musician, conductor |
| Goh Chok Tong | 吴作栋 | Former Prime Minister, Republic of Singapore (b.1941) |
| Goh Ek Meng | 吴奕明 | musician, writer (b.1949) |
| He Luting | 贺绿汀 | well-known composer, musician (1903-1999) |
| Hu Bingxu | 胡炳旭 | conductor |
| Hu Guicheng | 胡归成 | musician, conductor, educator |
| Hu Liezhen | 胡烈贞 | musician |
| Jek Yuen Thong | 叶渊鸿 | Former Minister of Culture, Republic of Singapore |
| Ku Lap Man | 顾立明 | musician, composer, conductor |
| Lee Hao | 李豪 | teacher, founder of the Lee Hao Choir (b.1814) |
| Lee Hsien Loong | 李显龙 | Prime Minister, Republic of Singapore (b.1952) |
| Lee Khoon Choy | 李炯才 | Former Minister of State, Republic of Singapore (b.1924) |
| Lee Yoke Chuan | 李煜传 | conductor, composer |
| Li Guanghua | 李光华 | Head of department in Central Conservatory of China, musician, professor (b.1947) |
| Li Xueling | 李雪岭 | conductor |
| Li Yeqi | 李业齐 | musician |

| | | |
|----------------|-----|--|
| Liang Mao Chun | 梁茂春 | professor in Central Conservatory of China, music critic (b.1940) |
| Lim Tiap Guan | 林哲源 | composer, conductor |
| Lin Yayu | 林亚玉 | musician (b.1943) |
| Liu Dehai | 刘德海 | musician, professor in China Conservatory (b.1937) |
| Liu Gongxi | 刘恭熙 | teacher |
| Liu Mingyuan | 刘明源 | musician, composer, Professor in China conservatory (1931-96) |
| Liu Sen | 刘森 | musician, conductor (b.1936) |
| Liu Teshan | 刘铁山 | composer (b. 1923) |
| Liu Tianhua | 刘天华 | musician and composer best known for his reformative work on the <i>erhu</i> (1895-1932) |
| Liu Yaozhang | 柳尧章 | musician, composer (1905-96) |
| Lum Yan Sing | 蓝营轩 | conductor, composer |
| Ma Wen | 马文 | musician, conductor from Hong Kong |
| Mao Yuan | 茅沅 | composer (b.1926) |
| Min Huifen | 闵惠芬 | musician, vice-chair of Chinese Musicians Association (b.1945) |
| Ng Tai Kong | 吴大江 | musician, composer, conductor (1943-2001) |
| Ng Tin Chung | 吴天聪 | musician, son of Ng Tai Kong |
| Peng Xiuwen | 彭修文 | Chinese conductor and composer (1931-1996) |
| Phoon Yew Tien | 潘耀田 | Singaporean composer, musician |
| Piao Dongsheng | 朴东生 | conductor, composer, chairperson of Chinese Orchestral Association (b.1934) |
| Qiao Jifu | 乔吉辅 | musician |
| Qin Pengzhang | 秦鹏章 | musician, conductor (1919-2002) |
| Qu Chun Quan | 瞿春泉 | musician, composer, conductor |

| | | |
|----------------|-----|---|
| Qu Xiaosong | 瞿小松 | Chinese contemporary composer (b.1952) |
| Quek Yong Xiu | 郭永秀 | author, composer (b.1951) |
| Ren Guangchang | 任光倡 | musician, composer, founder of Tongluo Music Association (1900-41) |
| Sim Boon Yew | 沈文友 | musician, conductor |
| Sun Yude | 孙裕德 | musician, teacher in conservatory (1904-81) |
| Tan Dun | 谭盾 | Chinese contemporary composer (b.1957) |
| Tan Swie Hian | 陈瑞献 | Poet, Sculptor, Artist, Calligrapher, Philosopher, Set and Costume Designer in Singapore (b.1943) |
| Tay Teow Kiat | 郑朝吉 | musician, conductor, President of Singapore Chinese Instrumental Music Association (b.1947) |
| Toh Koon Swee | 卓坤瑞 | Chinese music veteran and instrument technician (b.1953) |
| Wang Fandi | 王范地 | musician, professor in China Conservatory (b.1938) |
| Wang Huiran | 王惠然 | musician, composer, conductor, member of China Musicians' Society (b.1936) |
| Wang Jiahe | 王佳和 | musician, first luthier in singapore |
| Wang Zhongbing | 王仲丙 | musician, composer, reformed various instruments |
| Wee Toon Boon | 易润堂 | Former Minister for Culture, Republic of Singapore |
| Wei Zhongle | 卫仲乐 | musician, teacher in conservatory (1909-1998) |
| Wu Baoxing | 吴宝星 | author, former National Theatre Chairman |
| Wu Shiming | 吴世铭 | Ministry of Education (Singapore). |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----|---|
| | | education officer |
| Wu Shunchu | 吴顺畴 | musician, teacher |
| Xia Feiyun | 夏飞云 | conductor (b.1936) |
| Xu Li Fang | 许丽芳 | musician |
| Yang Haoran | 杨浩然 | musician |
| Yang Junming | 杨竟明 | musician, reformed the <i>yangqin</i> |
| Yeh Tsung | 叶聪 | Music Director of SCO, Music Director of South Bend Symphony Orchestra in the United States |
| Yeo Chau Hing | 杨朝兴 | musician |
| Yeo Siew Wee | 杨秀伟 | music veteran, musician |
| Yong Phew Kheng | 杨票敬 | musician |
| Yu Liangmo | 俞良模 | musician, composer, assistant conductor of China Broadcast Orchestra (b.1937) |
| Zeng Houyi | 曾侯乙 | marquis, minor state subordinate to Chǔ during the Warring States Period (b.c. 475-433) |
| Zeng Xun | 曾寻 | musician (b.1925) |
| Zhang Jingde | 张晋德 | musician, conductor |
| Zhang Zhengquan | 张镇荃 | musician |
| Zheng Jinwen | 郑瑾文 | musician, founder of Datong Music Society (1872-1935) |
| Zheng Sisen | 郑思森 | composer, conductor (1935-1978) |
| Zhou Bixia | 周碧霞 | musician |
| Zhou Long | 周龙 | Chinese contemporary composer (b.1953) |

Tune and Piece Titles

| | | |
|---------------------|-------|---|
| Chunjiang huayue ye | 春江花月夜 | Moonlit River in Spring, traditional piece |
| Dongfang hong | 东方红 | The East is Red, sung in War of Resistance against Japan |
| Hantian lei | 旱天雷 | Thunder in Drought |
| Senji dema | 森吉德马 | Horses in the Forest |
| Xibei zuqu | 西北组曲 | Northwest Suite |
| Xiyang xiaogu | 夕陽簫鼓 | Flute and Drum at Sunset, traditional piece |
| Yaozu wuqu | 瑶族舞曲 | Dance of Yao |

Performance Terms, Genres and Other Terms

| | | |
|-----------|----|---|
| Banhu | 板胡 | a Chinese traditional bowed string instrument in the huqin family of instruments |
| Bawu | 巴乌 | free reed instrument with a single metal reed |
| Bianzhong | 编钟 | a set of elaborate pitched bronze bells |
| Bo | 钹 | bronze cymbals |
| Dagu | 大鼓 | a large Chinese drum played with Sticks |
| Daruan | 大阮 | “bass size <i>ruan</i> ,” a Chinese plucked string instrument that may be played with a plectrum or fingerstyle |
| Dizi | 笛子 | Chinese transverse flute |
| Erhu | 二胡 | a two-stringed bowed instrument, also known as “nanhu” |

| | | |
|----------------|------|---|
| Erjie di | 二节笛 | a two-node bamboo flute |
| Fujian nanguan | 福建南管 | Music from the South, a traditional musical genre popular in the Fujian province of China |
| Gaohu | 高胡 | “soprano fiddle,” a Chinese bowed string instrument used in playing traditional Cantonese music and Cantonese opera |
| Gehu | 革胡 | “bass fiddle,” a chinese instrument developed with the fusion of the <i>huqin</i> and the cello |
| Guan | 管 | a Chinese reed pipe |
| Guoyue | 国乐 | “national music” |
| Guyue Gesheng | 鼓乐歌声 | “Drum and Song Reaches the Folk,” a concert series from May to September 1969 |
| Guzheng | 古筝 | a traditional Chinese musical instrument belonging to the zither family of string instruments, also known as “ <i>zheng</i> ” |
| Hokkien Nanyin | 福建南音 | also known as <i>Fujian Nanguan</i> , see above |
| Huayue | 华乐 | “chinese music” |
| Huqin | 胡琴 | a family of bowed string instruments used in Chinese music |
| Jiangnan Sizhu | 江南丝竹 | a style of traditional Chinese instrumental music from the Jiangnan region of China |
| Jiangu | 建鼓 | ancient drums |
| Konghou | 箜篌 | ancient Chinese harp |
| Liuqin | 柳琴 | a soprano range lute with two soundholes on each side of the body |
| Luo | 锣 | made of high-tin bronze, hammered |

| | | |
|------------------|-------|---|
| | | into the shape of a sifter, also known as “Chinese gong” |
| Matouqin | 马头琴 | a chordophone of Mongolian origin, played with a bow |
| Minyue | 民乐 | “national music” |
| Muyu | 木鱼 | “Chinese block,” a wooden percussion instrument similar to the Western wood block |
| Nanguan | 南管 | See <i>Fujian Nanguan</i> |
| Paigu | 排鼓 | “pitched drums,” a set of three to seven tuned drums |
| Paixiao | 排箫 | an ancient Chinese wind instrument, a form of pan pipes |
| Pipa | 琵琶 | a plucked Chinese string instrument, sometimes known as chinese lute |
| Qinqin | 秦琴 | plucked lute with a flower-shaped body |
| Qiyue erchongzou | 七月二重奏 | “The July Duet,” collaboration between the PACO and the NTCO, 1971 |
| Ruan | 阮 | a lute with a fretted neck, circular body, and four strings |
| Sanxian | 三弦 | a three-stringed fretless plucked musical instrument with a long fingerboard |
| Sheng | 笙 | a mouth-blown free reed instrument consisting essentially of vertical pipes |
| Sixian | 丝弦 | “Silk strings,” used in plucked instruments |
| Sizhu yue | 丝竹乐 | “Silk and Bamboo Ensembles,” referring to string and wind musical ensembles |
| Suona | 唢呐 | a Han Chinese shawm (oboe), also known as “ <i>laba</i> ” or “ <i>haidi</i> ” |
| Xiao | 箫 | a Chinese vertical end-blown flute |

| | | |
|----------------|------|---|
| Xun | 埙 | made of dark brown bamboo Chinese ocarina |
| Yangqin | 扬琴 | a Chinese hammered dulcimer |
| Yanyue | 燕乐 | a form of Chinese classical music that was performed at banquets |
| Yayue | 雅乐 | a form of Chinese classical music that was performed at imperial courts |
| Yinyue Zazhi | 音乐杂志 | “Music Magazine,” published for 10 issues, 1928-1934 |
| Yunluo | 云锣 | a set of usually ten small tuned gongs mounted in a wooden frame, also known as “pitched gongs” |
| Zheng | 箏 | a traditional Chinese musical instrument belonging to the zither family |
| Zhonghu | 中胡 | “the baritone fiddle,” a low-pitched Chinese bowed string instrument |
| ZhonghuaMinguo | 中华民国 | the People's Republic of China, 1949-present |
| Zhongruan | 中阮 | “tenor <i>ruan</i> ,” a Chinese plucked string instrument that may be played with a plectrum or fingerstyle |
| Zhongyue | 中乐 | known as “eastern music” |
| Zhuiqin | 坠胡 | “the bass fiddle,” a two-stringed bowed string instrument from China |

Idioms

| | | |
|---------------|-----|--|
| Chi yang feng | 吃洋风 | “eat more of the west wind,” to be influenced by the West |
| Ganqing | 感情 | “Feeling in relationships,” important social relation concept in Chinese culture |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Guanxi | 关系 | “Relations,” basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence and basic concept in Chinese culture |
| Ketou | 磕头 | “Kowtow,” chinese traditional customs of showing respect to elders |
| Laoshi | 老师 | “teacher,” an acknowledged guide or helper in processes of learning |
| Xie xie lao shi, lao shi xin ku le | 谢谢老师，老师辛苦你了 | “Thank you teacher, it has been hard on you,” a phrase used to show appreciation to a teacher |

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