



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF BEL CANTO TRADITION  
AMONG URBAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA***

**PHANG KONG CHIEN**

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**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF BEL CANTO TRADITION  
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By

**PHANG KONG CHIEN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**October 2016**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia  
in fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**October 2016**

**Chairman : Chan Cheong Jan, D. Lit**  
**Faculty : Human Ecology**

The emergence of bel canto singing among Malaysian Chinese which can be traced back in the 1930s has largely remained an unexplored field in modern cultural and literary study. This thesis represents, among others, the earliest musicological effort to look into the bel canto singing tradition appropriated among Malaysian Chinese, inquiring questions of how canto bel started initially, how it is sustained throughout the decades and in what means it has appeared to represent in the cultural facade within the Malaysian Chinese communities.

This thesis begins by outlining a chronological development of bel canto tradition which became apparent in 1930s featuring a group of Wuhan musicians and is followed by findings of recent discoveries of bel canto activities accumulating to new comprehension of bel canto singing tradition in nowadays Malaysian Chinese communities. Positioning myself in a role as a researcher-cum-practitioner, I essentially adopted Hall's reception theory in this study decoding cultural meanings from data encoded by the composers, producers/organizers in respective cultural artifacts, socio-cultural events and behaviors. Specifically, I focus on cultural signifiers of which their representation has been embraced and participated within the bel canto singing tradition.

Discussion of representative repertory contributed by selected prominent composers and the analysis of musico-poetic elements projected by their musical works are deemed the main cultural contributors in constructing Malaysian Chinese-ness in an overarching bel canto tradition. This thesis further explores several cultural signifiers in the process of constructing Malaysian-Chinese-ness in bel canto tradition theorizing this phenomenon in various musicological/sociological/cultural discourses using Nederveen Pietersen's three-paradigm cultural theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and fields.

The Malaysian Chinese bel canto tradition is indeed a unique post-modern cultural singularity of which Malaysian Chinese communities earnestly sustain and uphold. This sustenance of bel canto habitus in Chinese communities are continually enacted through cultural signifiers of musical artifacts, musical venues and musical events of which traditional ideology of Chinese-ness is largely projected and ethnic "otherness" is basically uninvolved. Albeit non-Chinese elements are incorporated in the enactments of bel canto habitus since 2000s, Chinese communities remain the central cohort in the operation projecting an atomistic social situation that faced by the current post-modern condition in Malaysia, of which cultural events are still very much ethnic and community based.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF BEL CANTO TRADITION  
AMONG URBAN CHINESE COMMUNITIES IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

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**Oktober 2016**

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Kewujudan nyanyian bel canto dalam kalangan orang Cina di Malaysia yang boleh dikesan sejak tahun 1930-an merupakan satu bidang yang sebahagian besarnya belum diterokai dalam kajian budaya dan sastera moden. Tesis ini adalah, antara lain, usaha awal musikologikal yang mengkaji tradisi nyanyian bel canto dalam kalangan orang Cina di Malaysia, bertanyakan soalan-soalan bagaimana bel canto bermula, bagaimana ia dikekalkan sepanjang beberapa dekad dan apa makna yang ia kelihatan mewakili dalam budaya masyarakat Cina di Malaysia.

Tesis ini bermula dengan menggariskan satu perkembangan kronologi tradisi nyanyian bel canto. Ia menampilkan sekumpulan pemuzik Wuhan dalam tahun 1930-an dan diikuti oleh hasil kajian yang berkenaan dengan penemuan semasa aktiviti nyanyian bel canto yang memaparkan kefahaman baru nyanyian bel canto tradisi dalam masyarakat Cina Malaysia pada masa kini. Memposisikan diri sebagai penyelidik merangkap pengamal, saya menggunakan teori resepsi Hall dalam kajian ini untuk mendekodkan makna budaya dari data yang dienkodkan oleh komposer, penerbit/ penganjur ke dalam artifak budaya, acara sosio-budaya dan tingkah laku yang berkenaan. Secara khususnya, saya memberi tumpuan kepada penanda budaya (*cultural signifiers*) yang mana representasinya telah dimasukkan dan dilibatkan ke dalam tradisi nyanyian bel canto.

Perbincangan terhadap repertori utama yang disumbangkan oleh komposer terkenal dan analisis terhadap komponen musiko-poetik yang dipaparkan oleh gubahan mereka menjelaskan penanda budaya utama yang membina ciri-ciri ke-cina-an di Malaysia dalam tradisi nyanyian bel canto keseluruhannya. Tesis ini juga menerokai beberapa penetapan budaya dalam proses pembinaan kecinaan Malaysia dalam tradisi bel canto serta menteorikan fenomena ini dalam pelbagai wacana musikologi/ sosiologi/ budaya menggunakan teori tiga-

paradigma Nederveen Pieterse dan konsep habitus dan bidang oleh Bourdieu.

Tradisi nyanyian bel canto orang Cina di Malaysia adalah satu singulariti budaya pasca-modern yang unik yang mana masyarakat Cina Malaysia telah bersungguh-sungguh mengekal dan memertabatkannya. Penyelenggaraan habitus bel canto dalam masyarakat Cina dilakukan berterusan melalui penetapan budaya artifak muzik, tempat muzik dan acara muzik di mana ideologi tradisional kecinaan diagung-agungkan sementara "kelainan" perkauman pada dasarnya tidak terlibat. Walaupun unsur-unsur bukan Cina digabungkan ke dalam enakmen habitus bel canto sejak 2000-an, masyarakat Cina kekal sebagai kohort utama dalam operasi bel canto. Ini memaparkan satu situasi sosial atomik yang dihadapi oleh suasana pasca-modern semasa di Malaysia, di mana acara budaya masih sangat berasaskan perkauman.



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Specifically, I want to dedicate this thesis to both my late parents (Mum- Chen Gain Thai and Dad- Phang Chew Hai) and my beloved primary school teacher Mrs. Kam who unfortunately passed on during the period of my writing for this study. The thesis is also dedicated to my family and I hope what I have done here is something modest that you all can be proud of.



I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 6 October 2016 to conduct the final examination of Phang Kong Chien on his thesis entitled "Social and Cultural Perspectives of Bel Canto Tradition among Urban Chinese Communities in Peninsular Malaysia" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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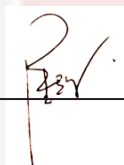
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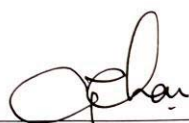
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABRSM	Associated Board of Royal Schools of Music
AMEB	Australian Music Examinations Board
DFP	Dewan Filharmonik Petronas
DPac	Damansara Performing Arts Center
EST	The Eat, Sing & Travel People
ISSCO	International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas
KLCC	Kuala Lumpur City Center
KLCO	Kuala Lumpur City Opera
KLMF	Kuala Lumpur Music Festival
KLPAc	Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Center
KMF	Klang Music Festival
MIA	Malaysian Institute of Arts
MNVC	Malaysia National Vocal Competition
MPO	Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra
PenangPAC	Penang Performance Arts Center
RTM	Radio Television Malaysia

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Overview of Study

“I would argue therefore that music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them....., acts of listening, dancing, arguing, discussing, thinking and writing about music, provide the means by which ethnicities and identities are constructed and mobilized” (Stokes, 1997: 5)

This thesis started as a quest to investigate the bel canto tradition practised by Malaysian Chinese throughout the decades and further intended to realize how canto bento tradition shapes ethnic identity uniquely projected by the urban Chinese communities in Peninsular Malaysia. As what is stated by Stokes, I intend to look in-depth how Malaysian Chinese first came to adopt such an international and cosmopolitan art of musical expression and how does the Malaysian Chinese communities maintain and sustain such a difficult and technically demanding art.

In general, bel canto, literally translated as “beautiful singing”, is a technical singing style most scholars agree to have originated from the Italian singing tradition started around 17<sup>th</sup> century. Greatly in demand in operatic productions and widely used as standard pedagogical tool, this singing style has been exported to entire Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, spread to North and South America and eventually permeated to many parts of the world through the process of global social movement especially compelled by forces of colonization and imperialism. Under such prevailing post-war social structures of modernity and nationality, bel canto has also been widely used as an important pedagogical means in vocal instruction available at many educational channels. In Malaysia, this practice is prevalent among Malaysian Chinese communities in Peninsula. Its practicality has also been appropriated over the past decades since early 20<sup>th</sup> century and bel canto tradition seems to have been ingrained in many aspects of the various music education programs in Malaysia.

Almost all public and private tertiary institutions in Malaysia, provided if music courses are offered, to some extent impart a certain degree of bel canto singing instruction in their prospectus in voice training. The practice of bel canto singing predominantly molded after its classical western repertoire has also been found in a number of foreign music examination boards, especially

so in the London Trinity and Associated Board of Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) headquartered in the United Kingdom. These examination boards, in addition to providing symbolic academic assessment in bel canto singing, are among the earliest 'formal' conduits in disseminating bel canto singing model in many Southeast Asian countries.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Bel canto activities have been in existence since pre-independence as early as in the 1930s. The urban Malaysian Chinese communities on Peninsula especially in the areas of Klang Valley, Penang and Johor, to some extent, have appropriated bel canto tradition as a means of musical expression in their daily lives. Locally composed art songs have been produced by Malaysian Chinese composers and cultural events strongly projecting bel canto tradition have been frequently and perennially organized. However, there lies a big lacuna in Malaysian literary and cultural studies in knowing and understanding the historical development of the bel canto tradition that takes place in the urban Malaysian Chinese communities. Active movers and builders of the tradition are not recorded and important bel canto events are not scholarly reported and documented. Moreover, contents of bel canto art songs and the musical components of these pieces are not thoroughly discussed and looked into. This lacuna is problematic in terms of causing negligence for conserving historical and cultural importance of events and activities which are vital cultural assets treasured by the communities.

## 1.3 Research Questions

A number of research questions are expressed during the course of investigation of bel canto tradition among Malaysian Chinese. These questions are formulated to serve specific intentions towards providing a basic but yet unexplored territory in understanding the unfolding of bel canto phenomenon among Chinese communities in Peninsular Malaysia. These questions are a combination of specific contextualized issues and broad topical discourse on bel canto singing among Malaysian Chinese versus some other geographical grounds that practise bel canto singing in their social and cultural existence.

1. What is bel canto? How did Malaysian Chinese come to form an emergence of bel canto singing and eventually disseminate this practice in its unique Malaysian Chinese cultural facade?
2. In what ways does bel canto tradition help construct musical identities that are representational to Malaysian Chinese? And how are these identities reiterated and enacted in the process?
3. What are the reasons for nurturing bel canto singing as a form for artistic expression for Malaysian Chinese?

4. To what extent can bel canto, with its strong emotive properties and textual undertone be appropriated in the urban peninsular Malaysian Chinese communities? How may this singing culture help to unfold the multi-ethnic socio-cultural inter-connectedness in Malaysia which consists of ethnic segmentation of cultural diversity especially in Peninsular Malaysia?

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

This study endeavors to investigate various topics related to bel canto tradition among Malaysian Chinese in Peninsular Malaysia. Foremost, it aims to unearth socio-cultural facts pertaining to bel canto singing enacted among Malaysian Chinese where historical development is explored, artistic repertoire analyzed, bel canto practitioners interviewed and venues as well as activities of bel canto among Malaysian Chinese looked into. It aims to scaffold the existing artistic establishment or evolvement of bel canto tradition experienced for decades by the urban Malaysian Chinese communities and to map out relevant approaches or theoretical frameworks in responding to pertinent ontological speculations of bel canto singing sinologically related to Malaysian Chinese.

My argument for such an investigation is that bel canto tradition, of which its cultural origins and aesthetic ideology are heavily rooted in the Western traditions and its singing practices are universalized and cosmopolitan; however, for Malaysian Chinese, its practice has been contextualized and specifically appropriated embedding unique local cultural meanings which can be personally interpreted or enforced by selected groups or individuals depending on their socio-economical, political and educational grounds. As such, it is these unique contextualized cultural meanings the thesis is to explore and discover.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The tradition of bel canto singing has been in existence before the independence era in Malaysia. This "foreign" technical expression for human voices since then has been unrestrainedly adopted by a mixture of Malaysian communities for their socio-cultural and educational needs. But regrettably, there exists a lacuna of musicological discourse in this subject and important ontological and epistemological issues of bel canto expression by Malaysian Chinese is by and large uninterrogated and unexplored. Questions pertaining to how bel canto tradition took ground among Malaysian Chinese communities are never scholastically probed into, and systematic and in-depth musicological discussion on the sizable amount of bel canto literature composed by Malaysian Chinese composers is basically non-existing in present scholarship. Thus, this project underpins a significant path of musicological and sinological discourse of bel canto singing among the Malaysian Chinese communities

arguing a somehow uncharted academic territory in Malaysian music studies as a whole.

## **1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

This study is a musicological discourse employing multiple disciplines of sociological and cultural theories in exploring the ontological and epistemological issues relevant to bel canto tradition sustained among Malaysian Chinese in the Klang Valley. This project is by no means a singing manual of bel canto or a comprehensive historical source of bel canto singing detailing historiography of bel canto singing in Malaysia. The scope of study is specifically limited to urban Malaysian Chinese communities in Peninsular Malaysia, and to some extent, some selected locales of which bel canto is actively practised and sustained. Selected cases and events of bel canto will be investigated. The intended historical accounts are confined from a time frame starting from the 1930s onwards. Musical incidents prior to the 1930s are beyond the scope of this study and might be only peripherally discussed if deemed necessary and relevant.

## **1.7 Literature Review**

### **1.7.1 Overview of Bel Canto Singing**

Western readings related to technicality of bel canto singing or the musicological aspects of bel canto are aplenty and voluminous (Coffin, 1980; Stark, 2003; Potter, 2006). Either pedagogical, historical or stylistically inclined, these literatures have formed a formidable academic source discoursing bel canto singing in multiple shadings of vocalism. Literally meaning 'beautiful singing' in English or 'mei sheng (美声)' in Chinese, bel canto in general is a term that has been loosely used in the training of the western classical singing and its real meaning can be vaguely understood depending on differing cultural and social contexts.

Most scholars (Jander, 1997; Stark, 2003; Potter, 2006) agree that the 'origin' of bel canto can be traced back as far as in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries of which is closely tied to the western 'high' art tradition since the Baroque era, illustrated especially by musical artifacts such as works of Italian *Arie Antiche* and by the now defunct *castrati* singing tradition. But in modern cultural and social studies, its meanings and the implication of bel canto singing can take different interpretations in various geo-political and aesthetic veins. In fact, it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that the term bel canto took on a much significant projection after a collection of songs entitled *Dodici ariette per camera per l'insegnamento del bel canto italiano* was published by Nicole



Vaccai in 1838. Bel canto was then believed, as a musical term appeared in print for the first time in this particular reason (Duey, 1951).

Apparently, it is reported that Ferdinand Sieber's collection of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century songs entitled *Il bel canto* published in 1887 was a move to offer an "antidote to offensive shrieking of dramatic singing in the German style" (Elliott, 2006). Rossini, as a nationalistic composer for Italian singing style, expressed his concerns over the decline of bel canto in a conversation in 1858 (Jander, 1997), associating bel canto as a term closely related to Italian highly florid singing in contrast with the raising declamatory singing style in Germanic fashion, especially so related to Wagnerian compositions. In recent decades, bel canto has also been termed as 'cultivated voice' (Hitchcock, 1988) and 'elite vocalism' (Miller, 1986) for singers whom have been trained to perform repertoire with extreme voice technicality written in the broad classical period.

As a whole, Stark's description of bel canto as a stylistic and aesthetic experience is most appropriate when he aptly states:

"In the broadest sense, bel canto represents the 'classically' trained voice of opera and concert singers, extending from Caccini at the dawn of the Baroque era to the best singers of today. Such singing requires a highly refined use of the laryngeal, respiratory, and articulatory muscles in order to produce special qualities of timbre, evenness of scale and register, breath control, flexibility, tremulousness, and expression. This kind of singing requires a different vocal technique than 'natural' or untrained singing, and it also differs from both choral singing and the many forms of popular singing nowadays referred to as vernacular styles" (Stark, 2003; xx-xxi).

Pedagogical studies in bel canto training in the Euro-American continents are voluminous. From early treatises by Tosi (1723)<sup>1</sup>; Manuel Garcia II (1841)<sup>2</sup>; Lamperti (1931)<sup>3</sup>; to modern voice pedagogical sources such as Coffin's *Overtones of Bel Canto* (1980); Miller's *On the Art of Singing* (1996); Bunch's *Dynamics of the Singing Voice* (1982), the bel canto singing tradition has greatly contributed to its advancement in many regions in the world, especially in the urban social spaces of current modernity. The long tradition of opera, oratorio and concert productions supported by many conservatoires and music faculties in the Euro-American regions have also produced generations of bel

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<sup>1</sup> Tosi's *Opinioni de'cantori antichi e moderni o sieno osservazioni sopra il canto figurato* (1723) was translated by J.E. Galliard as *Observations on the Florid Songs*, published in 1743.

<sup>2</sup> Garcia's *Traite complet de l'art du chant* (1841) consists of two parts, the first part largely concerned about vocal techniques and the second stylistic practices of singing.

<sup>3</sup> *Vocal Wisdom: Maxims of Giovanni Battista Lamperti* (1931) was a transcription of singing advices provided by Lamperti put together by his student William Earl Brown. Brown was studying with Lamperti in Dresden from 1891-1893.

canto celebrities<sup>4</sup> of whom have been travelling extensively world-wide performing to a great mass of audience.

### 1.7.2 Bel Canto in the Cultural East

Bel canto singing and the western classical music tradition spread to the East mainly through the movement of colonialism during mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the existence of colonial powers, many regions in the East, especially Beijing and Shanghai had experienced the presence of foreign musicians. Musicians from Russia, Germany, France, United Kingdom, United States and Japan were teaching privately or working at conservatories, providing opportunities for the Chinese to explore musical west (Li, 2007). Among some prominent foreign musicians were B. Zakharoff, V. Shushlin, I. Shevtzoff, B. Lazareff, S. Aksakoff, A. Foa, Z. Pribitkova and A. Tcherepnin. They were all considered the best music teachers with high qualification during their time (Liu, 2010). Russian bass V. Shushlin (1894-1978) was among the most influential voice teachers in China. He was reported to have performed in operas such as *Boris Godunov* and shared stage with the world famous bass Fyodor Chaliapin before landing in China in the 1920s (Melvin and Cai, 2004).

Shushlin, in his first three years, settled in Harbin teaching and giving solo performances. He then travelled to Japan and to the Philippines before returning to China and eventually settled in Shanghai Conservatory (Melvin and Cai, 2004). Western operas incorporating Orientalism reflecting Asian themes, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have also further elevated bel canto singing in the Eastern region. Operas/operettas such as *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*, *Mikado*, and *The Land of Smiles* have all plotted in Oriental construction of Asian nuances. Puccini's popular opera *Madama Butterfly* is of specific significance propelling Japanese soprano Tamaki Miura (1884-1946) to international fame in the pre-war period. Miura was regarded the "Japanese Butterfly" and her performance of Cio-Cio San seen by American audience is "natural" and "innate" due to her ethnicity (Yoshihara, 2007; 24).

In recent decades, musicians of whom retaining close Asian roots in the western classical music industry such as Yo-yo Ma, Lang Lang, Seiji Ozawa, Kent Nagano, Midori, Li Yundi, Tan Dun, Sarah Chang, Venessa Mae and others project a sizable musical visibility of Asian musicians presenting compositions of the musical West on international frontiers. Yoshihara (2007) has investigated the complexity and diverse musical voices of Asian musicians in the western classical world since World War II and showed how a confluence of economical and political stability propelled groups of middle-class

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<sup>4</sup> Internationally renowned opera singers are among celebrities easily noticeable in the bel canto arena. A monograph entitled *Sopranos, Mezzos, Tenors, Basses, and Other Friends* by Chapin (1995) is a valuable source in studying some of the greatest singers of bel canto in recent decades.

households accepting western classical music as a new elevated form of artistic expression.

In the realm of bel canto, celebrated Asian voices such as Sumi Jo, Hong Hei-Kyung, Ying Huang, Dilber Yunus, Warren Mok, Dai Yuqiang, Tian Hao Jiang, Mitsuko Shirai have been presenting western bel canto singing in international frontiers in their Asian bodies. Similar to most of the practice of musical playing on western instruments or musical composition in western harmonic language, bel canto singing, having its roots firmly grounded in the western aesthetic traditions, has become a common cultural entity appropriated by many Asian counterparts. Beyond the Euro-American premises, Asian equivalents primarily of those singers with nationalistic ties from the mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea have witnessed plausible results in cultivating Musical West in classical idioms including bel canto tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Zhou XiaoYan<sup>6</sup> who is called the China's First Lady of Opera has a tremendous influence on the bel canto movement in China and has produced many award-winning bel canto singers internationally (Turnbull, 2010). In Taiwan, Ren Yong<sup>7</sup>, among others, is a highly respectable soprano teacher who has helped many students, including the now-active Malaysian soprano Hong Mei Feng to hone her bel canto singing skills (personal communication, 2011). All these precedents of external bel canto movement formed in the other parts of Asian region have somehow shaped the condition of bel canto singing among Malaysian Chinese.

### 1.7.3 Chinese Studies

Sinology remains one of the many fields in academia providing scholars and researchers possibilities to look into topics related to a broad study of Chinese cultures. Early writing such as *The Origin of the Chinese People* (Ross, 2001) serves as the basis that sparks my investigation of cultural doings performed by Chinese people. Board sinological studies provided by Cheu (2000), Kuhn (2008) and a volume of papers, themed *Intercultural Relations, Cultural Transformation and Identity - The Ethnic Chinese* presented at the International Society for the Study of the Chinese Overseas (ISSCO) conference held in

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<sup>5</sup> My argument is based on the musical examples of bel canto celebrities that I provided beforehand of which most of those are originally trained from their respective home countries of which classical music tradition has been adopted for decades.

<sup>6</sup> Zhou XiaoYan is considered one of the most important bel canto pedagogues in modern bel canto scene and is regarded as the 'first lady' in opera in China. She has produced many students winning international prizes at bel canto singing competition. For more information, please refer to Turnbull's article in The New York Times at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/arts/05iht-madame.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/arts/05iht-madame.html?_r=1)

<sup>7</sup> Ren Rong is a well-respected voice teacher from Taiwan and is considered one of the earliest Taiwanese sopranos to make debut the role of *Madama Butterfly* in Rome. Ren has published a few singing texts on bel canto and has been serving as judicator in many international singing competitions. Ren is one of the organizers for Mondial Chinese Vocalists Concours in Taiwan.

Manila on November 26-28, 1998 (Ang See, 2000) are literature closely related to the dynamics of Chinese-ness of which I generally referred and related to.

Studies more specifically related to Malaysian Chinese either from the educational, socio-cultural, racial, anthropological and musical angles by Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies (2011), Ye (2004), Voon (2008), Carstens (2005), Tan and Santhiram (2010), Debernardi (2009) and Wong (2009) are important sources underlining the overall vitality of this study related to urban Malaysian Chinese communities in bel canto singing. Among all the above-mentioned readings of Malaysian Chinese, it is Wong's *Music of the Chinese in Sabah: The Keyboard Culture* (2009) resembling the closest musicological slant of discourse in this present study. In *Music of the Chinese in Sabah: The Keyboard Culture*, Wong provided valuable insights from his own experience as a piano and electronic organ teacher and performer in Sabah. Drawing a rich set of data from conversations (interviews), questionnaires and personal observations, Wong reported a detailed ethnomusicological study of cultural activities performed on piano and electronic organ in schools, home tuitions and churches. Wong concluded that piano is a cultural icon that forms a part of Sabahan society and yet Western and modern. Comparatively, the electronic organ has been largely adopted with its repertoire and habitual performance techniques intact. Students in Sabah basically learn piano and organ as part of their education, emphasizing predominately on musical examination pieces lacking of Chinese traditional music making. In fact, most students listen to Chinese and Western popular music for the musical enjoyment (143).

#### **1.7.4 Socio-cultural Theories Applied in the Study**

A broad examination of modern sociological and cultural studies form the foundation of investigation in this study providing a comprehensive consideration of socio-cultural groundwork needed (During, 1993; Lewis, 2002; Ritzer, 2008; Nederveen Pieterse, 2015). Nederveen Pieterse's cultural theory (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015: 45-65) depicts three distinctive paradigms is of special interest in this study. The first paradigm focusing on cultural differentialism basically supports the theory that different cultures that have lasting differences largely will have the core remained and unaffected by globalization or by any other bi-, inter-, multi-, or trans-cultural processes. This is particularly pronounced when the political direction of a nation defies the integration of a new culture or has specific interests of a different cultural system (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015: 50). The second paradigm however believes that cultural convergence will take place with globalization leading to increasing same-ness throughout the process of cultural interaction resembling the concept of "McDonaldization". This paradigm is a variant of the world-wide homogenization of societies through the impact of multinational corporations. It represents universalism or diffusionism in the similar vein of westernization attributed to modernization and Americanization. The last paradigm emphasizes on the cultural hybridization of which cultures from various parts of the world integrated resulting new "glocalized" cultural phenomenon. The

cultural hybridization is deemed an antidote to the cultural differentialism of racial and nationalist doctrines. It allows the acceptance of experiences that are banished, marginalized, tabooed in cultural differentialism, and has since then gone under aliases such as syncretism, creolization, métissage, mestizaje, and crossover. Hybridization may conceal the asymmetry and unevenness of elements to be mixed. The patterns, types, timing and styles of mixing of elements from different cultural settings are of paramount importance in shaping the final form of a hybridization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015: 55).

Lewis' chapter "Postmodern Spaces: Local and Global Identities" (Lewis, 2002: 334-378) provides insights into the above mentioned cultural variants due to the postmodern cultural model of which spaces from around the world diminish and national boundaries blurred due to inter-territorial trades and cultural exchange mainly caused by human migration and human mobility around various geo-political spaces.

Drawing closer to similar themes deemed comparable and adaptable to this study, modern musicological ideas derived from Finkelstein (1989); Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000); Biddle and Knights (2007); Stokes (1997); Yoshihara (2007) and Melvin and Cai (2004) form the critical interrogation of writing in this study. From discussion by Finkelstein (1989) discoursing composers and nationalities in the unbreakable stronghold of western classical music tradition, outlining the importance of composers and art works as a national representation of certain cultural locations either intentionally or unintentionally, my position as a Malaysia-born musician questions similar issues of nationality in art works produced by our Malaysian Chinese composers.

The explicit message is that music and nationality are deemed unbreakable in Finkelstein's discourse and musical works are laden with symbolic undertones reflecting nationality and to certain extent, ethnicity. Views by Born and Hesmondhalgh (2000); Biddle and Knights (2007); Stokes (1997) open up further discussion of musical appropriation among cultures and issues of musical west and musical east. Ethnicity, identity, musical difference, musical borrowing, musical alterity, musical construction of place, musical globality and locality are current musicological themes resonating with wide academic discussion in the field. Meanwhile, Yoshihara (2007); Melvin and Cai (2004), touch on musical ethnicity of Asian musicians including specifically how Chinese adopts and appropriates western classical music embracing this "outside" musical system as their own. These two sources offer extra musicological interests that inspire the present project that I embark on.

Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus" and "fields" (Bourdieu, 1992; Swartz, 1997) are adopted to re-conceptualize and theorize the socio-cultural importance and knowledge-power relation of bel canto singing among Malaysian Chinese communities in urban Malaysian cultural pluralism. According to Bourdieu,

"The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1992: 53).

Thus, habitus is a product of embodied history, internalized as a second nature of forgotten history, and is an active presence of the past. It produces individual and collective practices where the "correctness" of practices and their constancy over time tend to be guaranteed more reliably than all explicit norms and formal rules. The habitus tends to generate all the reasonable and common-sense behaviors which are possible within the limits of objective regularities (Bourdieu, 1992: 54-56).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus has a strong link to a key spatial metaphor widely known as *field* (*champ*). Fields denote arenas of productions, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize different kinds of capitals (Swartz, 1997; 117). Capitals in Swartz's view are broadly available as cultural and economic capitals. Cultural capitals encompass knowledge, culture, and educational credentials, whereas economic capitals include wealth, income and properties (Swartz, 1997; 136-137). The formation of artistic field requires a high volume of cultural capitals contributed by continuous effort and various cultural doings involving actors, cultural artifacts and events in the habitus so that its sustainability will not be negated by other capitals that favor the development of social space and political power per se.

## 1.8 Methodology

This is a qualitative study that applies content analysis leading to social critiques. As bel canto tradition in Malaysian Chinese is conceived as a form of habitus, which operates as cultural capitals in the fields generating knowledge and power, contents analyzed here are deemed necessary knowledge and power sustaining the bel canto tradition among Malaysian Chinese.

Overall, my position as a researcher-cum-practitioner in the qualitative musicological study is intentional resembling common practices of various sociological and anthropological studies. Over the decades, many scholars from a wide range of sociological, anthropological and musicological discourses have adopted researcher-cum-practitioner approach in arguing the importance of critical public review of art, literature, culture and music that

consist of a major part in current public domain (Yoshihara, 2007; Wong, 2009). In essence, this position of researcher-cum-practitioner approach may have been mainly derived from the reception theory advocated widely by Stuart Hall (1993: 90-103). As a researcher-cum-practitioner in reception theory, I decode cultural meanings from data encoded by the composers, producers and organizers of cultural artifacts, cultural-social events and cultural signifiers presented in the research range that I am working in. While reception theory allows my position as a researcher-cum-practitioner in a "preferred/dominant-hegemonic" position due to my subjectivity as a Malaysian Chinese who practises bel canto expression in general public spaces; my argument is that as an academician, I treat myself as an objective "negotiated or oppositional" researcher decoding enclosed cultural meanings in bel canto tradition among Malaysian Chinese in an insightful and meaningful manner of impartiality.

The materials used in this study consist of volumes of manuscripts of concerts/festivals/competition program books, musical scores, recordings, anniversary reports and vignettes from the yesteryears as well as recent collections in the year of 2015. Either self-owned or derived from the private collections of others, these materials together with musical excerpts and sources found in social media are the data used in this study.

Historical newspapers reporting either in Chinese, English or Malay are collected from national archives and libraries. The movement and structures of eminent events and organizations as well as early movers and shakers of bel canto are witnessed through self participation of events and performances. The profiles and opinions from selected bel canto teachers, practitioners and composers are informed through interviews and conversations.

Through the analysis of the above-mentioned contents, new descriptions that review facets of the bel canto traditions in Malaysian Chinese communities involving investigation of the main players, repertoire, music structures, texts, venues and events are brought forward. These descriptions result in structural analysis contributing new cultural insights linking fragmented information into a holistic understanding across various domains of time, musical features and social contexts. Further discussions are presented to merge and triangulate the findings of different facets of contents in constructing the main themes of argument for the thesis.

## **1.9 Usage of Terms**

The thesis is a study of cultural Sinology within the urban ethnic Malaysian Chinese communities in modern Malaysia. Some specific terms, such as the names of the composers, actors, doers, events and cultural artifacts of bel canto in this context will be originally in Chinese characters. To present this thesis in English, I use *pin yin*, whenever I deem necessary, to address these

terms. Personal names of composers, bel cantists and informants are un-italicized. These names are not the official names adopted or used by Malaysian authorities but are names widely used in the bel canto Malaysian Chinese habitus. Second, titles of songs (in *pin yin*), titles of productions/publications (such as *Hang Li Poh*) and foreign words (such as *Arie Antiche*) are as well *italicized*. A special precaution is considered when Hang Li Poh is concerned either as a historical princess (un-italicized) or as a production (*italicized*). A list of reference in terms to depict disparities of names in different encoding systems is to be included in appendix.

### 1.10 Organization of Thesis

This thesis consists of 7 chapters. Chapter 1 outlines fundamental questions of research practices to introduce readers the overall scope of this thesis including problem statement, research questions, significance of the study, objectives of the study, scope and limitation of the study and methodology. It basically serves as a prelude to the ensuing chapters and provides readers relevant literature reviews that used to scaffold the overall theoretical framework of this study. Chapter 2 traces broad musical and cultural accounts of bel canto from early days to present times. It reports important events of bel canto that shape the bel canto habitus in Malaysian Chinese communities since 1930s and highlights prominent movers and shakers that contribute plausibly in the field.

Chapter 3 looks into representative songs of bel canto composed by selected Malaysian Chinese composers in order to understand musical contents projected by the pieces. Poetic texts are analyzed and fully translated in order to substantively comprehend cultural subtleties in the textual expression intended by these songs. Chapter 4 probes into the musical components of selected pieces. Periodization of two periods of musical idiom are determined - the early period and the recent period. These two periods highlight the stylistic difference in the compositional tools or techniques adopted by the early period composers and the new generation of composers. Specific characteristics of melody and harmony in selected songs are looked into in both musical periods.

Chapter 5 looks into sub-topics pertaining to cultural venues, events, and social behaviors that form the essence of urban Malaysian Chinese bel canto habitus in Peninsular Malaysia throughout the decades. These venues, events and behaviors collectively congeal a cultural signification of bel canto in the Malaysian Chinese communities of which is essential for the bel canto's sustainability and dissemination among the communities. These sub-topics are more descriptive in nature drawing important insights in understanding bel canto singing as a whole entity. Chapter 6 offers discussion in theorizing bel canto tradition in the Peninsular Malaysian Chinese communities. It adopts various cultural theories in shedding light over bel canto tradition among the Malaysian Chinese communities in the Peninsula. The final chapter, chapter 7,



summarizes the overall discourse of the study, offers relevant findings and suggests possible studies of similar nature in days to come.



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