



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF 'CHUANGZUO'
MUSIC MOVEMENTS AS OBSERVED THROUGH CASE
STUDIES ON 'GONGZUOFANG' MUSI GROUPS IN
PENANG, MALAYSIA**

CHOW OW WEI

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By

CHOW OW WEI

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

December 2008



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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Chuangzuo has emerged as a music trend through a music movement, and as a popular culture for youth in Malaysia, but the music of *chuangzuo* have not been described to the general public that is probably not aware of the identity in *chuangzuo*, the social aspects of *chuangzuo* as in a *gongzuofang*, and also how the music has sustained so far.

The primary objective of this study is to determine the identity and the sustainability of *chuangzuo* activities in Malaysia. The specific objectives are to produce a description on the settings of *gongzuofang* in Penang, an analysis of musical materials of *chuangzuo*, and a clarification of the identity and sustainability of *chuangzuo* based on the former two specific objectives.



Observation through fieldwork is rendered for this ethnographic research. The primary setting is *gongzuofang* in Penang, namely the Wanderers and CZMusic which have been actively involved in *chuangzuo* activities. Observation, interviews and video recordings of important rehearsals and actual performance were rendered. The secondary setting of the fieldwork is based on related song-writing competitions, concerts and music camp, which were held in Penang and Kuala Lumpur.

The general phenomenon of *chuangzuo* depicts a scene where youth perform their own music compositions with guitars or light instruments. *Chuangzuo* is a music activity for the youth in Malaysia, as the music, mainly performed in Chinese, often depicts the youth's life-cycle events. The music is commonly composed in the sentimental style or of a ballad that usually adopts a major key and the common simple quadruple time. Instrumentation is usually simple, and Chinese texts with rhymes are used. Though mixed language and vocables are included sometimes, the texts are commonly written in the discursive style.

A *gongzuofang* is the basic unit of *chuangzuo* that accommodates youth's music activities. It exists as an important space for music practice, music-learning, idea-sharing, planning, music presentation, socialisation, and also life-cycle events. The studied *gongzuofang* represents a typical organisation that provides its members with abundant opportunities in music

compositions, as members learn to compose, perform, compete in music contests and produce music concerts or music recording.

Chuangzuo is an opportunity for youth to engage with music. They usually adopt elements of cultural fusion in their compositions, and they show amateurish characteristics in their music. This has formed the musical identity of *chuangzuo*. The social identity of *chuangzuo* is built through identity construction, individuality, communion formation and aspiration. Nevertheless, the need to survive changes for the long term has triggered the implementation of sustainability in the handling of *chuangzuo*. The sustainable ways, as observed, are organisation, commercialisation, hegemony and exclusion of certain music genres.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Izajah Master Sains

**IDENTITI DAN KELESTARIAN GERAKAN MUZIK
'CHUANGZUO' YANG DIPERHATIKAN MELALUI
KAJIAN KES KE ATAS KUMPULAN MUZIK
'GONGZUOFANG' DI PULAU PINANG, MALAYSIA**

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Chuangzuo telah muncul sebagai suatu trend muzik melalui gerakan muzik, dan juga sebagai budaya popular untuk pemuda-pemudi di Malaysia. Namun, muzik *chuangzuo* tidak diperkenalkan kepada awam. Boleh dikatakan bahawa identiti *chuangzuo*, aspek-aspek social *chuangzuo* dalam *gongzuofang*, dan kelestarian muzik belum diketahui.

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti identiti dan kelestarian aktiviti-aktiviti *chuangzuo* di Malaysia. Objektif spesifik termasuk menghasilkan diskripsi tentang keadaan *gongzuofang* di Pulau Pinang, analisis terhadap bahan muzik *chuangzuo*, dan penerangan tentang identiti dan kelestarian *chuangzuo* berdasarkan dua objektif spesifik yang tersebut.

Pemerhatian melalui kerja lapangan dilaksanakan untuk kajian etnografik ini. Penempatan utama ialah *gongzuofang* di Pulau Pinang, iaitu the Wanderers and CZMusic yang masih aktif dalam aktiviti-aktiviti *chuangzuo*. Dalam kerja lapangan, pemerhatian, temuduga dan perakaman video dilaksanakan semasa raptai-raptai penting dan persembahan-persembahan utama. Penempatan sekunder kerja lapangan adalah berdasarkan pertandingan gubahan lagu, konsert dan kem muzik yang diadakan di Pulau Pinang dan Kuala Lumpur.

Fenomena *chuangzuo* biasanya digambarkan dengan adegan di mana pemuda-pemudi mempersembahkan karya muzik mereka dengan gitar atau alat muzik ringan. *Chuangzuo* merupakan aktiviti muzik untuk pemuda di Malaysia. Muzik yang dimainkan terutamanya dalam bahasa Cina dan biasanya menggambarkan peristiwa kehidupan pemuda. Karya muzik biasanya merupakan lagu sentimental atau balada yang mempunyai nada major dan masa empat rentak. Instrumentasi biasanya ringkas, dan teks bahasa Cina dengan kata berima digunakan. Walaupun kadang kala bahasa campuran dan vokabel dimasukkan, teks biasanya ditulis dengan gaya yang merewang.

Gongzuofang merupakan unit asas bagi *chuangzuo* sebagai aktiviti pemuda-pemudi. Ia muncul sebagai ruang penting untuk latihan muzik, pembelajaran muzik, perkongsian ide, perancangan, persembahan muzik,

sosialisasi dan juga peristiwa kehidupan. *Gongzuofang* dalam kajian ini melambangkan pertumbuhan tipikal yang memberi peluang berlebihan kepada ahli-ahli dalam bidang karya muzik, sementara ahli-ahli belajar untuk mengubah lagu, memberi persembahan muzik, menyertai pertandingan gubahan lagu dan menerbitkan persembahan konsert dan rakaman muzik.

Chuangzuo adalah suatu peluang untuk pemuda-pemudi bertempur dalam muzik. Secara umum, mereka menggunakan unsur-unsur muzik bercorak pelbagai budaya dalam karya mereka, dan sifat amatir boleh diperlihatkan daripada hasil karya mereka. Ini menyumbang dalam pembentukan identiti muzikal *chuangzuo*. Identiti social *chuangzuo* terbentuk melalui pembinaan identiti, keindividuan, pembentukan perhimpunan dan aspirasi. Namun, keperluan untuk terus hidup dalam perubahan telah mengimplikasikan proses kelestarian dalam pengendalian *chuangzuo*. Melalui pemerhatian, cara-cara kelestarian adalah melalui organisasi, komersialisasi, hegemoni dan pengecualian daripada jenis-jenis muzik tertentu.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
APPROVAL	xi
DECLARATION	xiii
LIST OF TABLES	xviii
LIST OF FIGURES	xix
CHAPTER	
1	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Statement of Problem	3
1.3 Objectives of the Study	4
1.4 Significance of the Study	5
1.5 Limitation of the Study	5
1.6 Glossary of Terms in Contexts	6
1.6.1 <i>Chuangzuo</i>	6
1.6.2 <i>Gongzuofang</i>	8
1.6.3 Music, Song, and Genre	8
1.6.4 Music-maker, Music-worker, People Engaged with <i>Chuangzuo</i> and <i>Chuangzuo</i> People	9
1.6.5 Chinese	10
1.7 Writing Convention	11
1.7.1 Names of Organisations, Informants and Respondents	11
1.7.2 Musical Terminology	12
1.7.3 Orthography	12
1.7.4 Translation	13
1.7.5 Reference and Citation Style	13
1.8 Organisation of Thesis	14
2	16
LITERATURE REVIEW	16
2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 Popular Culture	17
2.3 Music in Malaysia	21
2.4 Musical Landscape in Penang	25
2.4.1 The Past Situation	26
2.4.2 The Current Situation	29
2.5 Chinese Studies	32
2.6 Chinese Popular Music	37
2.6.1 Chinese Popular Music Consumed in Malaysia	37



2.6.2	Popular Culture and Popular Music in the Pan-Chinese	39
2.6.3	An Overview of Chinese Popular Music in Malaysia	41
2.7	Propagation of <i>Chuangzuo</i> and Its Development	52
2.8	<i>Chuangzuo</i> as Malaysian Chinese Popular Culture	58
2.9	Summary	59
3	METHODOLOGY	61
3.1	Introduction	61
3.2	Research Design	61
3.3	Setting of Field Location	61
3.4	Research Approach and Conceptual Framework of the Study	63
3.4.1	General Environment	64
3.4.2	Organisation	65
3.4.3	Human Interaction	66
3.4.4	Musical Materials	67
3.5	Data Collection Procedure	68
3.6	Data Analysis Procedure	70
3.7	Summary	72
4	SETTINGS OF CHUANGZUO	73
4.1	Introduction	73
4.2	Chuangzuo Settings in Penang	73
4.3	Gongzuofang: the Cradle of Amateur Musicians	75
4.3.1	Music Events in a <i>Gongzuofang</i>	79
4.3.1.1	CZMusic	83
4.3.1.2	The Wanderers	88
4.4	Interactivity of Chuangzuo Organisations	95
4.4.1	Northern Group of Composer	95
4.4.2	Qing Guangchang	98
4.4.3	Other Related People and Organisations	99
4.5	Summary	102
5	MUSICAL MATERIALS IN CHUANGZUO	103
5.1	Introduction	103
5.2	Description of Musical Materials	104
5.2.1	Performance of Music	105
5.2.2	Musical Style	108
5.2.3	Instrumentation	114
5.2.4	Visual Elements	117
5.3	Analysis of Musical Materials	119
5.3.1	Formal Structure	119
5.3.2	Tonal System	125
5.3.3	Metric Structure	132

5.3.4	Text Structure	135
5.3.5	Detailed Analysis on Selected Songs	143
5.4	Summary	157
6	IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF CHUANGZUO	159
6.1	Introduction	159
6.2	Musical Identity of Chuangzuo	159
6.2.1	Elements of Cultural Fusion in <i>Chuangzuo</i> Compositions	160
6.2.2	Amateurish Characteristics in <i>Chuangzuo</i>	162
6.3	Social Identity of Chuangzuo	163
6.3.1	Identity Construction	164
6.3.2	Individuality	169
6.3.3	Communion	172
6.3.4	Aspiration	177
6.4	Sustainability	180
6.4.1	Organisation	180
6.4.2	Commercialisation	183
6.4.3	Hegemony	185
6.4.4	Exclusion of Certain Music Genres	188
6.5	Summary	193
7	SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	194
7.1	Introduction	194
7.2	Summary of Thesis	194
7.3	Conclusion	200
7.4	Rocommendations for Further Research	201
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	205
	APPENDICES	250
A	Field Photographs	251
B	List of Chinese Characters	257
C	List of <i>Gongzuofang</i> in Northern Malaysia	262
D	List of Original Song Titles, Romanised Titles and Translated Titles of Compositions by the Wanderers	264
E	List of Original Song Titles, Romanised Titles and Translated Titles of Compositions by the CZMusic	269
F	List of Original Song Titles, Romanised Titles and Translated Titles of Compositions Collected from Other Sources	272
G	List of Major Events and Achievements of the Wanderers	290
H	List of Major Events and Achievements of CZMusic	298
I	Organisational Charts of the Wanderers	302

J	Organisational Chart of CZMusic	304
K	Selected Song Texts in Chinese	306
L	Results of Song-writing Competitions	311
M	Analysis of Musical Materials in <i>Chuangzuo</i>	314
N	Guide for Interview Questions	366
O	Interview Data	368
BIODATA OF THE STUDENT		390



LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
5.1	Types of format in music performance in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic	105
5.2	Categories of musical styles in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic.	108
5.3	Types of key in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic.	125
6.1	Generally perceptible characteristics of seniors and juniors in the Wanderers during a weekly review.	186



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
3.1	Conceptual framework of the study	64
5.1	Examples of gliding pitches or <i>acciaccatura</i>	107
5.2	Resemblance of African beats through the song in " <i>Shijie Xing Xing Ba</i> " [text by Sun Yao Zong; music by Luo Zi Shen]	112
5.3	Male backup vocal in " <i>Shijie Xing Xing Ba</i> " [text by Sun Yao Zong; music by Luo Zi Shen]	112
5.4	A phrase in the verse of " <i>Kafei</i> " [text and music by You Shi Min]	113
5.5	Shuffle rhythm in " <i>Heise De Shitou</i> " [text and music by Cai Wei Guang]	113
5.6	General formal structure of the music in <i>chuangzuo</i>	119
5.7	(1) 'flat' and (2) 'wave' patterns in melodic structure	130
5.8	'Flat' pattern in (i) " <i>Huayuan</i> " [music by NOS band], (ii) " <i>Mang</i> " [music by Xu Mei Yan] and (iii) "Someone Like You" [music by Cindy Wong]	130
5.9	'Wave' pattern in (iv) " <i>Cai Die</i> " [music by Tan Kok Liang], (v) " <i>Qingchun Zhi Ge</i> " [music by Ang Eng Bok], (vi) " <i>Luhui</i> " [music by Lin Pei Ying] and (vii) " <i>Modu Shangbei</i> " [music by Koay Chee Lin]	131
5.10	Combination of 'flat' and 'wave' patterns with ornamentation in (viii) " <i>Xianren Mian Jin</i> " [music by Song Arrangement Group 2003], (ix) " <i>Bao Wen</i> " [music by Huang Ying Ying], (x) " <i>Andan</i> " [music by Tan Yean Chang] and (xi) " <i>Ganjue</i> " [music by Chen Gen An]. The use of an <i>arpeggio</i> of E minor is indicated in (ix).	131
5.11	Ornamentation in (xii) " <i>Luhui</i> " [music by Lin Pei Ying], (xiii) " <i>Tebie</i> " [music by Cindy Wong], (xiv) " <i>Zizai</i> " [music by Howard Foo], (xv) " <i>Kuqi De Dadi</i> " [music by Li Ai Ling], (xvi) " <i>Ai Meiyou Bai Fen Bai</i> " [music by Tan Aik Guan], (xvii) " <i>Di San Ci Shijiedazhan</i> " [music by Cai Wei Guang] (xviii) " <i>Zhijian</i> " [music by Cindy Wong] and (xix) " <i>Tiankong Yu Haiyang De Huashi</i> " [music by Koay Chee Lin].	132
5.12	Excerpts from (xx) " <i>Tebie</i> " [music by Cindy Wong] and (xxi) " <i>Kafei</i> " [music by You Shi Min]	133
5.13	The tango beats in " <i>Zhijian</i> ". Music by Cindy Wong	134
5.14	Syncopation in excerpts from (xxii) " <i>Hui Hang</i> " [music by Jiang Shu Jin], (xxiii) " <i>Erguang</i> " [music by Cai Wei Guang], (xxiv) " <i>Jihe Yuyuan</i> " [music by JC Tan], (xxv) " <i>Ai De Gaobai</i> " [music by Zou Guo Quan], (xxvi) " <i>Qingchun</i> "	



	<i>Zhi Ge</i> [music by Ang Eng Bok] and (xxvii) " <i>Jiandan</i> " [music by Raymond Law]	134
5.15	Text in " <i>Daomu Shou</i> " [Text by Liang Jin Xing; Music by JC Tan]	137
5.16	Non-mellimastic feature in text as many syllable are allocated to one musical tone. Excerpts from (xxviii) " <i>Ye Shengkai</i> " [text and music by Tan Kok Liang]; and (xxix) "Someone Like You" [text by Liang Jin Xing; music by Cindy Wong]	140
5.17	Text from " <i>Xiang You Zou.</i> " [text by RY Yang and JC Tan; music by Lin Pei Yin]	145
5.18	Text from " <i>Qingchun Zhi Ge</i> " [text and music by Ang Eng Bok]	149
5.19	Recurring motives (xxx) and (xxxi) in " <i>Qingchun Zhi Ge</i> " [text and music by Ang Eng Bok]	149
5.20	Text from " <i>Yaochuan Ge</i> " [text and music by Tan Kok Liang]	153
5.21	A rhythmic texture in " <i>Yaochuan Ge</i> " [text and music by Tan Kok Liang]	154
5.22	Text from " <i>Qian</i> " [text and music by Ang Eng Bok]	156
5.23	A recurring motive in " <i>Qian</i> " [text and music by Ang Eng Bok]	156
6.1	A strategy used at the Wanderers that strengthens the bond of <i>chuangzuo</i> people	175
6.2	A diagram showing the continual cause-effect relationship between aspects of resource, commercialisation, popularity and profit	184

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Since the 1980s, a phenomenal music genre seems to initiate an influence in local Chinese popular music. This influence has affected Chinese youth engaging with music, and has undoubtedly changed the way music is perceived, conceived, consumed and applied in Malaysia. This music trend, perceptibly, has a typical fashion: young people compose music, and in reality perform their music compositions at public stages with guitars as the accompaniment to the vocalists. Seemingly as if a common scene at a campus of an institution, the music has a particular characteristic in terms of musical styles, performance and cultural context, and therefore it is distinguished from other musical genres. This typical musical genre is often referred as *chuangzuo yinyue*, or *chuangzuo* music [*chuangzuo* herein after]. In the 1990s, *chuangzuo* emerged as an important youth culture in Malaysia, especially when *chuangzuo* activities gained popularity through constant supports from commercial organisations, local newspapers and also the state apparatus.

The consumption of Chinese popular music in Malaysia is particularly interesting, as Malaysian Chinese usually adopted the taste from the pan-Chinese. Since the pre-war era, Chinese popular music was usually brought into

the Malaysia through production companies from Shanghai, Taiwan and Hong Kong, although Chinese popular music was also popularised by a number of local Chinese artistes in the 1960s and 1970s. Continuous, enormous import of Chinese popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan claimed its extensive dominance and influence since the late 1970s.

However, the awareness of 'locality' was awakened with the introduction of the idea of *chuangzuo* in the late 1980s. This has raised a great awareness in the making of local music compositions, which can be written, performed and produced by local 'down-to-earth' people who are not professional composers and song-writers. *Chuangzuo* also animated many sentiments and enthusiasm in the manifesto of 'locality'. The popularity of *chuangzuo* reached its peak in the first half of the 1990s with a few *chuangzuo* song-writing competitions. Moreover, commercial record companies attempted the production of *chuangzuo* music albums, while some popularised the artistes who recorded and performed *chuangzuo*. In the late 1990s, many *chuangzuo*-affiliated Malaysian artistes were brought into the pan-Chinese popular music scene through local channels and gained popularity.

A basic unit where *chuangzuo* is practised is usually called a *gongzuofang*. *Gongzuofang* plays a major role in running all activities related to *chuangzuo*. Regular activities that are organised internally maintain constant activeness



within the *gongzuofang*, whereas major activities such as a music concert [*fabiao hui*] register reputation and popularity among youth in Malaysia. A *gongzuofang* sometimes join forces with organisations from commercial or related sectors to organise big-scaled activities such as song-writing competition, music camp and recording production for music albums.

With the application of the recently advanced method in information technology, there is also a trend where people engaged with *chuangzuo* record their own music albums at home. The music recording is highly independent from marketing strategies and sales manipulation in the mainstream. This DIY [do-it-yourself] album is often produced for the purpose of self-satisfaction, but many would post this recording as a 'demo' tape to leading record companies, hoping to gain the attention from the popular music industry.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Chuangzuo is a type of music performed by youth in Malaysia. Though it somehow gains the attention of the public through mass media, it is still almost unknown to academic researches. In his dissertation, Lee W. K. (2002) has seriously examined the cultural context of *chuangzuo* 15 years after the establishment of the '*Chuangzuo Movement*', but there has still not a systematic description about the music until now, and not to mention the lack of any kind

of exploration into the identity of the musical sound of *chuangzuo* or how the music has sustained through the course of time.

Besides, as a youth music activity, *chuangzuo* has not been seriously studied as both a music genre and a social organisation [*gongzuofang*]. There are still no researches that can answer to the questions such as what makes *chuangzuo* a music genre, what youth seek with their engagement with *chuangzuo* activities, where their passion lie on and how *chuangzuo* lasts.

Specifically, this dissertation intends to answer the following questions: (1) What is the identity of *chuangzuo*? (2) How this identity is being sustained through the period of time? Further questions can be asked from the two main questions above. Concerning the first question, how different is *chuangzuo* from other Chinese popular music? What social identity is constructed through the operation of *gongzuofang*? Concerning the second question, how the unity of musical ideas, if any, is preserved through time in *gongzuofang*? How does *gongzuofang* ensure the sustainability of *chuangzuo* against social and environmental changes?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to determine the identity and the sustainability of *chuangzuo* activities in Malaysia. The specific objectives are to