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

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By

CHOW OW WEI

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Chairman: Chan Cheong Jan, D.Lit., PhD

Faculty: Human Ecology

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

Oleh
CHOW OW WEI
Disember 2008

Pengerusi: Chan Cheong Jan, D.Lit., PhD
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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.


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 pertubuhan tipikal yang memberi peluang berlebihan kepada ahli-ahli dalam bidang karya muzik, sementara ahli-ahli belajar untuk menggubah lagu, memberi persembahan muzik, menyertai pertandingan gubahan lagu dan menerbit persembahan konsert dan rakaman muzik.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 24 December 2008 to conduct the final examination of Chow Ow Wei on his thesis entitled "Identity and Sustainability of ‘Chuangzuo’ Music Movements as Observed Through Case Studies on ‘Gongzuofang’ Music Groups in Penang, 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 Master of Science.

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Date: 09 APR 2009
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or other institutions.

CHOW OWWEI

Date:
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Background of the Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Statement of Problem</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Objectives of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Significance of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Limitation of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Glossary of Terms in Contexts</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.1 Chuangzuo</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.2 Gongzuofang</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.3 Music, Song, and Genre</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.4 Music-maker, Music-worker, People Engaged with Chuangzuo and Chuangzuo People</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6.5 Chinese</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Writing Convention</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.1 Names of Organisations, Informants and Respondents</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.2 Musical Terminology</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.3 Orthography</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.4 Translation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7.5 Reference and Citation Style</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 Organisation of Thesis</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Popular Culture</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Music in Malaysia</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Musical Landscape in Penang</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 The Past Situation</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2 The Current Situation</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Chinese Studies</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Chinese Popular Music</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6.1 Chinese Popular Music Consumed in Malaysia</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 Chuangzuo and Its Development 52
2.8 Chuangzuo 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 Gongzuofang 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 Chuangzuo Compositions  160  
  6.2.2  Amateurish Characteristics in Chuangzuo  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  Recommendations for Further Research  201  

BIBLIOGRAPHY  205  

APPENDICES  250  
A  Field Photographs  251  
B  List of Chinese Characters  257  
C  List of Gongzuofang 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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organisational Chart of CZMusic</th>
<th>304</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Selected Song Texts in Chinese</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Results of Song-writing Competitions</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Analysis of Musical Materials in <em>Chuangzuo</em></td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Guide for Interview Questions</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Interview Data</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Biodata of the Student**  
390
### List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Types of format in music performance in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Categories of musical styles in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic.</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Types of key in songs collected from the Wanderers and CZMusic.</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Generally perceptible characteristics of seniors and juniors in the Wanderers during a weekly review.</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

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

5.15 Text in "Daomu Shou" [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) “Ye Shengkai” [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 “Xiang You Zou.” [text by RY Yang and JC Tan; music by Lin Pei Yin] 145

5.18 Text from “Qingchun Zhi Ge” [text and music by Ang Eng Bok] 149

5.19 Recurring motives (xxx) and (xxxi) in “Qingchun Zhi Ge” [text and music by Ang Eng Bok] 149

5.20 Text from “Yaochuan Ge” [text and music by Tan Kok Liang] 153

5.21 A rhythmic texture in “Yaochuan Ge” [text and music by Tan Kok Liang] 154

5.22 Text from “Qian” [text and music by Ang Eng Bok] 156

5.23 A recurring motive in “Qian” [text and music by Ang Eng Bok] 156

6.1 A strategy used at the Wanderers that strengthens the bond of chuangzuo 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