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Music and Cultural Politics: Ideology and Resistance in Singapore

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This paper focuses on popular music written and produced by Singaporeans to illustrate the nature of social relationships based on ideological hegemony and resistance. Analysis is based on two groups of music: 'national' songs supported by the government in the 'Sing Singapore' programme; and songs brought together in *Not the Singapore song book*. Interviews with local lyricists and analysis of video productions provide supplementary information. Music is used by the ruling élite to perpetuate certain ideologies aimed at political socialization and to inculcate a civil religion that directs favour and fervour towards the nation. Music is also a form of cultural resistance against state policies and some social-cultural norms. Music embodies social commentaries on aspects of Singapore society, such as controversial government policies and the ostentatious lifestyle of many Singaporeans.

key words   popular music   cultural politics   ideology   resistance   Singapore

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Introduction

In their introduction to *Inventing places: studies in cultural geography*, Anderson and Gale (1992) drew attention to the recent focus in cultural geography on the relationship between 'culture and power' and 'culture and resistance'. Such a focus has arisen out of a recognition of the plurality of culture groups in any one society and the consequent control, conflict and contestation between groups, sometimes arising from cultural differences, sometimes (mis)appropriating cultural differences. Indeed, the explicit attention paid to cultural politics in the various essays in Anderson and Gale's volume form part of the growing geographical literature scrutinizing these issues in theoretical and empirical, historical and contemporary ways.[1] Much of this reinvigoration within the sub-discipline draws inspiration from, *inter alia*, cultural studies where music too has received some research attention (Hebdige 1979). Particularly associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, cultural studies in postwar Britain have stressed notions of ideology, hegemony and resistance, and illustrated how culture groups are related to each other in terms of dominance and subordination along a scale of 'cultural power' (Clarke *et al.* 1976, 11). Culture groups will appropriate the resources of other groups, transforming and often exaggerating them as a form of protest and resistance (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). These ideas will inform my discussion of popular music in Singapore.

Alongside the repositioning of cultural geographical attention to include notions of power and resistance, has been the focus on the question of national identity and the explicit recognition that such identities are often, if not always, deliberate constructions rather than 'natural' givens. The political discourses that seek to define hegemonic visions of 'nation' and 'national identity' have been explored in a growing literature by geographers, amongst others. For example, in Jackson and Penrose's (1993) collection of essays, we find, *inter alia*, discussions of how policies on immigration and refugees reinforce nationalist and racist ideology and of how nationalist rhetoric plays a role in the construction of nations whilst, in *Fields of vision*,

Daniels (1993) illustrates how landscapes in various media have articulated national identities in England and the United States from the later eighteenth century. The message here is of the explicit and deliberate construction and deconstruction of national identity, achieved via a variety of strategies, from political rhetoric through specific government policy to cultural production. This paper is situated within such a discourse on the constructed nature of 'national identity' and will illustrate how a cultural form (music) is harnessed in the construction of a hegemonic vision of a specific nation, Singapore.

A third development within cultural geography in recent years has been a movement away from privileging élite culture in research to a more explicit recognition of the significance of popular culture, defined as the 'everyday practices, experiences and beliefs of what have been called "the common people" ' (Burgess and Gold 1985, 3). The hegemony of élite culture – based traditionally on 'a view of the relative "worth" of élite versus popular culture' (ibid., 15) – has been challenged through the realization that the very ordinariness of popular cultures masks their importance as 'well-springs of popular consciousness' (Harvey 1984, 7).

My exploration of music and cultural politics in this paper takes off from these recent repositionings within cultural geography. By focusing on two groups of popular music in Singapore, I will illustrate their embodiment both of ideologically hegemonic intentions of constructing a version of the 'nation' and of manifestations of resistance. Specifically, I will examine 'national' songs commissioned and encouraged by the state in the 'Sing Singapore' programme, promoted by the Psychological Defence Division of the Ministry of Communications and Information in 1988. The various texts of the programme, including the Sing Singapore book containing the lyrics and scores of 49 songs, the two accompanying tapes and the video clips aired on national television, are examined. While these songs do not represent 'popular music' as the term is commonly understood, they are 'popular' in the way in which they are a part of the everyday lives of many Singaporeans. For example, these songs are taught in schools and are aired on national television and radio. The fact that many young children are learning them and that they are becoming so much a part of their learned culture is reflected in Dick Lee's (a local composer and artiste) comment that these could well be the folksongs for future

generations (talk show at National University of Singapore, 23 July 1993).

Apart from examining such national songs, I will also analyse songs contained in a volume entitled Not the Singapore song book (1993), which contains new lyrics set to popular tunes, including some national songs. The tongue-in-cheek, 80-page book containing a collection of 53 songs by seventeen Singaporeans, a tape by entertainer Najib Ali titled 'Born in SIN' (that is, Born in Singapore; SIN is used to mimic 'Born in the USA'), featuring ten songs from the book, as well as Najib Ali's live stage show, act as a form of resistance to official cultural representation.

My argument is built on two bases. On the one hand, music is used by the ruling élite to perpetuate certain ideologies aimed at political socialization and the development of a sense of national identity or to inculcate a civil religion that directs favour and fervour towards the 'nation'. On the other hand, music is a form of cultural resistance, both against state policies and certain socio-cultural norms.

While I begin by situating my work within broader developments in a retheorized cultural geography, I also depart from other cultural geographical impulses pertaining to popular music in the United States. By emphasizing cultural politics, I diverge from the American tradition of 'musical geographies' that spotlight the identification of musical hearths and paths of diffusion and the perception of places in music (see, for example, Carney 1987). An intellectual tradition that is more pertinent to the development of my arguments is a concern with how and why '[s]ongs have been composed to teach, convert, seduce, pacify, and arouse' (Denisoff and Peterson 1972, 1). Abundant research exists on classical music and how it acts as propaganda in Czechoslovakia, Finland, England and Germany, for instance.[2] Here I draw inspiration from those studies which explore the use of popular songs for a variety of ends: to reinforce an ideology and legitimize a ruling élite (for example, Warren 1972); to act as a rallying call to others so as to establish and reinforce group identity;[3] and to voice dissatisfaction with society, including social norms and political conditions. Political dissatisfaction is captured, for example, in American 'protest songs',[4] while opposition to social norms has been expressed in rock 'n' roll (Frith 1983; Perris 1985).

One final body of literature that sets the context of this study is the small collection of writings on music in Singapore. Research here is both sparse and

diverse, dealing variously with music education (Nguik 1991), the uniqueness of particular local musical styles (Thomas 1986) and rock music as a sub-culture (Ho 1981). This paper will contribute to local research by highlighting the role of music in capturing and contributing to the sense of place and society in Singapore.

Contextualizing the case study: nation-building in post-colonial Singapore

Singapore acquired internal self-governing status from the British in 1959.[5] Full independence was attained in 1963 as part of Malaysia, comprising the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, but this merger was to be short-lived. In 1965, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaya's Prime Minister, decided that separation was necessary to avert serious political tension and communal upheavals,[6] and it was under such circumstances that Singapore became a fully independent state. The uncertainties and justified fears of the time are poignantly captured by Yong (1992). How was a small island with no natural resources, high un-employment, low levels of income and skills, overcrowded conditions and a potentially divisive multiracial population[7] to survive? The tasks ahead were enormous.

Since those early days, Singapore has come a long way in its economic development. The problem of chronic unemployment has long been solved[8] and labour shortages have developed in certain sectors. Most of the population is housed in subsidized, public-sector high-rise flats[9] replacing the slums of the 1960s. Singapore's GNP has grown from S$2193 million[10] in 1960 to S$63 905·1 million in 1990 (*Singapore 1991* 1991), while foreign exchange reserves have catapulted from S$1068·6 million in 1965 to S$48 033·9 million in 1990 (*ibid.*). Singaporeans today generally enjoy a high standard of living and have a per capita income second only to Japan in Asia. In 1991, there were three persons per telephone in Singapore and eleven per private car (*Singapore facts and pictures 1992* 1992); the latter figure was achieved only after stringent actions were taken to reduce the car population.

How has such an economic miracle been possible? A large part of it is certainly due to the shrewdness of the People's Action Party (PAP), not only in its economic strategies but also in its social engineering, including its conscious attempts to shape social values and political cultures. It is this pre-eminent role of the PAP in Singapore, its attempts at social engineering and the resultant political culture that provides the more immediate context for this paper. The PAP came into power soon after independence in 1966 and has remained in power ever since. Indeed, for a long time (1966–81), Singapore had the dubious distinction of having only one party (the PAP) in a democratically elected parliament. There were few signs of serious political opposition and, even today, there are merely four opposition members from two different parties in an 81-seat parliament. With this stranglehold on the govern-ment of the country, the PAP has actively sought to develop an 'administrative state' (Chan 1975) in which the citizenry is depoliticized (Chan 1989), where public participation in decision-making is minimal – if not non-existent – and mobilization of the people to support state policies is the norm (Chan 1976, 1989).

Depoliticization is valued as desirable and neces-sary for social stability and economic growth. Com-petitive political struggle is actively discouraged, if only because of the belief that

> time spent by groups and counter-groups to lobby, influence and change policy outcomes are a waste of time that detract from the swift implementation of the plan and programme. (Chan 1975, 55)

As a consequence, there is not so much public participation as public mobilization 'which may have no impact on the reshaping or resharing of power as far as the participants are concerned' (Chan 1976, 39). Such mobilization is made possible by the establishment of local-level institutions such as Citizens' Consultative Committees, Residents' Committees and community centres entrusted with the task of socializing participants to 'accept basic values aimed at creating a consensual political base in the country' (Seah 1973, 119). The outcome of such forces is the development of a political culture in which open conflict, confrontation and bargaining have been markedly absent.

Yet, by the 1980s, certain social and political circumstances were construed as potential threats to the existing hegemony and there emerged a cau-tious, if forced, acknowledgement that the electorate was now demanding more consultation and public participation. The first political 'setback' was when the ruling PAP candidate lost to a Workers' Party candidate in the October 1981 single ward by-election. In December 1984, the PAP lost two seats to the opposition for the first time in a general

election[11] and suffered an overall decrease of 12·6 per cent in votes cast. This was a decline from 75·5 per cent in the 1980 general election to 62·9 per cent in 1984, with a further drop to 61·8 per cent in 1988 (Quah and Quah 1989). Although this would qualify as a landslide victory in any other context, it was considered a major blow to the PAP given its long, unbroken monopoly of both parliamentary seats and percentage votes. In the meantime, in 1987, the government uncovered an alleged Marxist conspiracy said to have used the Roman Catholic church as a cover for its activities aimed at overthrowing the government.

Beyond the assault on political legitimacy, the government also identified the erosion of Asian values amongst Singaporeans and the threat of becoming a 'pseudo-Western society'[12] as assaults on the socio-cultural order. Such a society is generally thought to be 'motivated by individualism', promoting 'personal freedom, [indulging] in sensual pleasures and [lacking] a sense of responsibility to the family and society' (*Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition* 22 October 1988).

The assaults on the PAP's political legitimacy and the perceived erosion of important values led to the development of policies geared towards re-asserting its hegemony. It began to proclaim its version of the nation and to rally Singaporeans behind it. Various measures were adopted. For example, the Education Ministry identified ten schools to which it would give special assistance to help keep alive the best Chinese traditions and core values, believed to include filial piety and family and society above self[13] (*Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition* 25 March 1989). A national ideology was developed which spelt out clearly the country's ethos and core values so that a national identity would evolve, thought to ensure the long-term viability of the country. These core values include community over self; upholding the family as the basic building block of society; resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention; and stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony. In addition, the idea of total defence, first given publicity in late 1982, was developed and amplified through diverse channels in the mid-1980s. Borrowing from the Swedish experience, total defence comprises military, civil, economic, social and psychological defence, and is designed to prepare the country for any eventuality. Despite its pre-eminent importance (Seah 1989), military defence alone will not suffice in times of trouble. Civil defence forces are necessary to maintain the internal administration of the country under adverse circumstances, whilst adequate economic defence ensures that government, business and industry will be able to organize themselves such that the economy will not break down during or under threat of war. Whilst military, civil and economic defence take care of the material realm of existence, more pertinent to this discussion are social and psychological defence. The former refers to the promotion of cohesion amongst Singapore's diverse groups so that external subversion through the exploitation of primordial sentiments would be minimized, while ideals are fully shared by all Singaporeans. Psychological defence is defined as 'the means of winning the hearts and minds of the people and preparing them to confront any national crisis' (Seah 1989, 956). As I will illustrate in the next section, national songs are an important weapon in social and psychological defence, aimed at encouraging Singaporeans to celebrate a particular desired version of the nation and to develop a strong national identity: to 'bond ourselves with our identity and destiny' (Buang 1989, 1).

While the attempts at social engineering continue, the government has also acknowledged, perhaps belatedly, the population's quest for a more active voice in decision-making by setting up the Feedback Unit in 1985. Headed by a PAP Member of Parliament, the unit is meant to

> gather feedback on Government policies and receives suggestions from the public on national issues. It ensures swift and effective response by Government departments on public suggestions and complaints. (*Singapore facts and pictures 1992* 1992, 92)

In effect, the Feedback Unit is an 'approved channel' of participation, indicative of how involvement is allowed only if directed through 'proper' and indeed 'managed' routes. It is in this context of conscious depoliticization, ideologically hegemonic intents, negligible organized opposition and overt resistance, and managed 'participation' that the two sets of Singapore popular music discussed below are to be understood.

The cultural hegemony of national songs

As Miller and Skipper (1972) have exemplified, lyrics are not the only ways in which meanings are communicated through songs. Indeed, music may convey its meanings and values through visuals, rhythms, titles of songs and albums, the timing of

releases and sometimes through the lifestyles of the performers. In this section, I will illustrate how such processes around the 'Sing Singapore' package combined in the attempt to achieve an ideologically hegemonic effect. Through various means of dissemination (including constant airing on national television and radio; the organization of community singing sessions in community centres; and, at the directive of the Ministry of Education, teaching the songs to schoolchildren during school assembly time[14]), the objective is to convince Singaporeans of the idea that Singapore has come a long way since its founding (in 1819) and independence (in 1965) and that they must continue to play their part in maintaining this dramatic development. The ultimate concern is to develop in Singaporeans a love for their country, a sense of patriotism and a willingness to support the ruling élite who have led the country through the short years since independence. As Dr Yeo Ning Hong, Ministry for Communications and Information, wrote in his message for the *Sing Singapore* (1988) songbook,

> Singing the songs will bring Singaporeans together, to share our feelings one with another. It will bring back shared memories of good times and hard times, of times which remind us of who we are, where we came from, what we did, and where we are going. It will bring together Singaporeans of different races and backgrounds, to share and to express the spirit of the community, the feeling of togetherness, the feeling of oneness. This, in essence, is what the 'Sing Singapore' programme is about.

Evidence of the state's hegemonic intentions abound in the lyrics of national songs which have been written in all four official languages in Singapore — English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Through national songs, Singaporeans are encouraged to express feelings of love and pride for and of belonging to their country. These emotions are captured in a variety of ways. For example, in *This is my land*, Singaporeans are encouraged to proclaim that

> This is our island
> O Singapore, We love you so, love you so. (*ibid.*, 116)

In turn, pride for the country is expressed in *Sing a song for Singapore*:

> I want the world to know about my island in the sun
> Where happy children play and shout, and smile for ev'ryone. (*ibid.*, 109)

Such pride stands alongside a sense of belonging, expressed, for example, in *We are Singapore*:

> This is my country
> this is my flag
> this is my future
> this is my life
> this is my family
> these are my friends
> We are Singapore Singaporeans
> Singapore our homeland
> it's here that we belong. (*ibid.*, 95)

and in *We the people of Singapore*:

> We the people of Singapore . . .
> Find in it ev'ry joy and hope
> As 'tis our very home. (*ibid.*, 105)

Feelings of love, belonging and pride must, however, be translated into more active manifestations and, in the national songs, Singaporeans are exhorted to attain excellence for Singapore. This idea of excellence encompasses various concepts such as unity, commitment to Singapore, productivity, hard work and teamwork. The message in brief is this: if Singaporeans can ensure that they have these qualities and mindsets, excellence can be achieved for the country and Singapore may stay ahead of other competitors, if not serve as their model. To make sure that the message is adequately conveyed to the populace, it is also promoted in a variety of ways apart from the official songs. For example, it pervades much of the existing state rhetoric, with ministerial speeches to public audiences emphasizing time and again the need to keep ahead by achieving excellence. Thus, the then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (1988, 10) intoned:

> Singapore is safe so long as we strive for excellence in all that we do. Once we become a mediocre society, we are in peril . . . we have no margin for error. A single mistake can mean the end of us.

The achievement of excellence in practical terms is also given much public airing as a way of encouragement and of instilling pride. Thus, newspaper headlines publicize the fact that 'Singapore [is the] top investment site for Western businessmen' (*The Straits Times* 8 April 1991); that the 'Republic remains best-rated Asian country outside Japan' in terms of risk (*The Business Times* 17 April 1991); and that Singapore companies are 'rated among Asia's best-managed' (*The Straits Times* 18 August 1992). The overall effect is that a vision and common goal for the future — to maintain the record, if not better it — is established.

These messages are encoded in the lyrics of many national songs. For example, to achieve excellence for Singapore, Singaporeans are told that they must stand up to be counted (*Stand up for Singapore* and *Count on me Singapore*, Sing Singapore 1988, 95), 'serve [Singapore] with all our might' and 'guard it with our very lives' (*We the people of Singapore*, ibid., 105). At the same time, the ideological message purveyed is that excellence is possible only when Singaporeans remain united, for it is by standing together that the 'lion's roar' can be heard (*We are Singapore*, ibid., 95); it is also by 'steering together' with 'drive and unity' that the vision of excellence can be achieved (*Undaunted*, ibid., 107). This unity, it is emphasized, is particularly important in multi-racial Singapore (*Untuk rakyat dan Negara*, ibid., 102). In addition, it is possible to achieve excellence only if Singaporeans develop the virtue of hard work and this ethic is reinforced in several songs which eulogize the worker who is diligent and persevering. For example, in the Chinese song *Kuai le gong ren* (literally translated 'Happy workers') (ibid., 106), the virtues of teamwork, cooperation and hard work are extolled and good workers are reliable and happy Singaporeans who work hard to deliver their promises. That these ideas pervade both national songs and state rhetoric and serve to reinforce one another is reflected in the parallel between the lyrics of *Undaunted* and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's speech:

> With our spirit undaunted
> More than ever we will try
> To be the best we ever can be
> For us and posterity
> Day by day, year by year
> Together we steer
> With drive and unity
> Our vision we'll achieve
> EXCELLENCE FOR SINGAPORE. (ibid., 107, original emphasis)

> The key to our long-term survival is the spirit and quality of our people and their leaders ... if we work with one heart, share one common vision, then in our lifetime we can be that Nation of Excellence. (Goh 1986, 11)

To encourage Singaporeans to play these various roles and to help attain excellence for Singapore, national songs appropriate past and present conditions. Specifically, past achievements are glorified; the role of the government is exalted; and both the built and natural environments are used to extol Singapore's beauty and achievements. In highlighting these achievements, Singaporeans are encouraged to continue to give of their best for their country, to defend it and to support the ruling order.

The appropriation of the past is designed to remind Singaporeans of how successfully the state has been steered from struggling Third World conditions to newly industrialized status and to arouse a sense of pride and loyalty. For example, in *We are Singapore* (Sing Singapore 1988, 95), Singaporeans are reminded that

> There was a time when people said
> that Singapore won't make it
> but we did
> There was a time when troubles
> seemed too much for us to take
> but we did.
> We built a nation strong and free.

Through this reminder, Singaporeans are encouraged to think that no problem would ever be too difficult to handle as long as they continue to uphold the spirit of the pioneers. This spirit, as intoned in the songs, belongs to 'loyal people with a rugged past' (*Reach out, reach out*, ibid., 103) who had served the country 'in love and trust' (*This is our country*, ibid., 106). It is embodied in the 'seeds of strength and mirth' sown by 'brave and loyal men' (*Sing a song of Singapore*, ibid., 109) who took the country 'through the years calm and stormy' and 'shaped our destiny' (*Undaunted*, ibid., 107).

Part of Singapore's successes, we are reminded, would have been impossible if not for the government for, as pointed out in the Tamil songs *Engkal Singapore* ('Our Singapore') and *Paduvom Varungal* ('Come let's sing'), Singapore has a 'strong and effective' government that 'cares about the welfare of her people' (ibid., 115, 97). The result of such good government is that 'life is joy and harmony' (*Voices from the heart*, ibid., 100). Indeed, to reflect the good life that Singaporeans are said to enjoy, elements of the built and natural environment conjure images of progress, peace, joy and harmony. For example, in *Sing a song of Singapore* (ibid., 109), happy children are said to be playing

> In city streets in parks so green in highrise housings [sic] too
> In every place so fresh and clean On sunny beaches too.

In those two lines, the urban environment of 'buildings ... climbing all the way to the sky'

(*Singapore town, ibid.*, 100) and the rustic peace of (practically non-existent) natural environments in Singapore are appropriated for ideological ends, namely to remind Singaporeans that if they did not continue to support the status quo and strive together with their leaders towards excellence, they stand to lose the beauty and prosperity of their 'fair shore' (*The fair shore of Singapore, ibid.*, 110). The images of skyscrapers are particularly important as symbols of modernization and development as well as of triumph over an environment that offered nothing towards economic progress by way of natural resources. At the same time, the emphasis on the 'fresh', 'clean', 'green' and 'sunny' can work at two levels. On the one hand, it represents a recognition of the value of the natural alongside the developed. The lyricist was determined to recover 'sunny beaches' as part of Singapore's natural heritage, despite the fact that land reclamation and seafront construction over the last two decades have left few beaches untouched. Here the tension between urban development and conservation of the natural environment that has recently been voiced in public arenas (see, for example, Savage and Kong 1993) is ignored, whether in innocence or for ideological ends. On the other hand, the portrayals may represent a proud acknowledgement of the consciously created manicured parks in 'clean and green' Singapore,[15] so glossing over the irony that the many parks and 'instant trees' of the 'Garden City' could be created and planted only by rolling back the natural heritage that had existed before (see Kong and Yeoh 1992).

While the lyrics of many national songs illustrate the state's ideological intentions, other factors also serve to support these intentions. The music tends to be anthemic, designed to arouse a sense of patriotism. At the same time, new national songs tend to be released just before National Day during which Singapore's independence is celebrated. This is intended to intensify the fervour of nationalistic emotions. Furthermore, the music videos aired on national television have carefully selected visuals, all of which serve to enhance pride, reflect harmony and encourage togetherness. For example, the images of smartly clad, combat-ready soldiers and sophisticated defence machinery are designed to evoke a sense of pride and strength, while happy images of the various ethnic groups in Singapore (such as the Chinese, Malays and Indians) are designed to remind Singaporeans of the harmony between different groups and the sense of unity that

must prevail. At the same time, the soaring skyscrapers and other modern buildings are often backdrops that remind Singaporeans of the significant development and modernization that Singapore has undergone in a short period of time, reinforcing the effect intended by the lyrics. In all these ways, the state attempts to persuade Singaporeans of the 'naturalness' of one reading of these texts, when it is a preferred rather than the only reading. As Anderson and Gale (1992, 7) point out,

> [p]owerful institutions (including nations) can . . . work to ensure that what are partial, culturally-bound interpretations of reality are accepted as 'natural' and 'correct' by the public at large.

To cast the use of music for hegemonic intentions in Singapore in a larger context, I would suggest that music contributes to an attempt to develop what may be called a 'civil religion' (Bellah 1970). In a general sense, a civil religion is 'any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present and/or future of a people . . . which are understood in some transcendental fashion' (Hammond 1976, quoted in Stump 1985, 87). In the American context, Stump (*ibid.*, 87) suggests that a civil religion exists in a nation when its people believe that their 'values and beliefs are . . . superior to those of other nations' and that their 'nation [has] a special mission to serve as a model for the rest of the world'. In Singapore, the state attempts to create such a civil religion by using various ideological tools. Apart from music, other symbols — such as the state flag, pledge, chants and cheers, as well as constant reinforcement in ministerial speeches and press reports spotlighting Singapore's superiority in a variety of fields — all serve to direct favour and fervour towards the state and, in the process, construct a version of the 'nation'. However, as Gramsci (1973) has pointed out, hegemony is never total and the dominant group's preferred reading of texts can often be met with contested meanings. In the next section, I will examine this contestation by using the example of *Not the Singapore song book*.

Not the Singapore song book: parody as resistance

While the government's national songs are clearly ideological and the timing and release of the various texts and intertexts are powered by hegemonic

intents, the lyrics contained in *Not the Singapore song book* (1993) reflect how popular music can be a form of subtle cultural resistance as well. Many of the lyrics are written with a humour often parodying national songs and Singapore life. Yet, the humour belies several more deep-seated concerns of the lyricists. Indeed, the lyrics are largely concerned with government policy on the one hand and the 'ugly Singaporean' on the other.

The appropriation of melodies of national songs and the setting of new lyrics to them is particularly powerful as a means of symbolic opposition; this despite the fact that the lyrics do not express explicit opposition to government policies. Their success lies in the way in which resources of other groups are transformed and exaggerated as a form of resistance and protest (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979), and the way in which new, subtly resistant lyrics are set to familiar tunes meant to arouse patriotism and respect for and gratitude to the ruling order. In the revised version, the lyrics draw ironic attention to controversial government policies. The best example of this is Ong Cheng Tat's *Count! Mummies of Singapore* set to the tune of *Count on me, Singapore*. While the original lyrics exhorted Singaporeans to stand up and be counted amongst those who would give their 'best and more' to the country (*Sing Singapore* 1988, 95), Ong's version translates the exhortation for Singapore women in particular, urging them to reproduce:

> We have the ova in our bodies,
> We can conceive,
> We can conceive.
> We have a role for Singapore,
> We must receive,
> We must receive. (*Not the Singapore song book* 1993, 35)

The lyrics are a reference to the government's concern that Singapore's fertility level is below replacement rate[16] — a reflection of trends towards later marriages, postponement of child-bearing and smaller family sizes. The urgency with which the government has sounded the alarm about fertility is revealed, in particular, in the frequent public pronouncements by no less than the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.[17] Ong satirizes this sense of urgency:

> There's a spirit in the air,
> Telling us to be a pair!
> We're going to get our hubbies, start a family . . .

> We must conceive!
> We MUST conceive!! (*ibid.*, 35, original emphasis)

Apart from setting lyrics to the melodies of national songs, other popular tunes (such as *Sixteen going on seventeen, Rose, Rose I love you* and *If you're happy and you know it*) are used. In such cases, the sense of irony may be missing but the impact of the symbolic resistance is not. A range of government positions on national issues are pilloried. Like Ong's contribution, the population issue is the target of many other lyricists, some of whom focus their assault specifically on the Social Development Unit (SDU). The SDU was initiated and sponsored by the government to act as a matchmaking body for the increasing number of non-married graduates. In addition, the SDU organizes many functions and courses which provide opportunities for graduates to get to know one another. The focus on graduates stems from the former Prime Minister's view that it is nature rather than nurture that produces intelligent, hard-working offspring in the mould of the 'excellent Singapore'. Hence, to ensure that the gene pool is not depleted, graduates (with presumably the 'desirable' genes) must continue to reproduce. As one example, Ee Kay Gie's *The SDU march*, to be sung 'vigorously and with conviction' (*ibid.*, 5) to the tune of *Colonel Bogey* exhorts Singaporean women to get married for the sake of the nation. Nowhere in the revised lyrics is there any hint that marriage is for any reason other than as a service to the nation:

> Hey girl!
> Why aren't you married yet!
> You girl!
> A man's not hard to get! . . .
>
> Now's the time for you to choose your mate!
> Don't delay! Do not procrastinate!
> Wed now and do your nation proud —
> Then do your part, spread the word clear and loud!
> (*ibid.*, 5)

True to official positions, other revised lyrics also reveal how marriage is not an end in itself but a means to an end — child-bearing. Mary Loh, one of the main contributors to *Not the Singapore song book*, highlights the government position that the rich who can afford it should have more children, while Colin Goh takes the income tax rebates for successive children designed to encourage larger families to ridiculous proportions. Sung to the tune of

Raindrops keep falling on my head, Goh's *Babies keep formin' in my bed* is an exaggeration about how income tax rebates are expected to persuade people to have more children:

> And for that
> Tax rebate,
> I won't be even stoppin'
> Reproducin' -
> 'Cause when it comes to income tax
> There's no way like sex.
> Babies keep formin' in my bed,
> But that doesn't mean
> I really wanna keep 'em fed,
> Kids are not for me -
> 'Cause all I wanna do is just keep on savin',
> Till my life's free, no more taxes for me . . . (*ibid.*, 43)

Other lyricists capture the sense of resignation and helplessness amongst those affected by government policies such as the car policy and streaming in schools. The government's attempts to deal with the severe traffic congestion have prompted the introduction of a quota for the number of new cars allowed on the roads. Potential car owners are expected to bid for a certificate of entitlement (CoE). The large number of aspiring car owners has raised CoE and hence car prices and many people have been forced out of the market, disappointed if not disgruntled. Desmond Sim captures this disappointment in his version of *What I did for love*, entitled *What I bid for love* (*ibid.*, 18). Similarly, the way in which the constant streaming in Singapore's education system puts examination pressure on students is captured in the lyrics of Sam Wan's *What we always do is stream* (*ibid.*, 47), sung to the tune of *All I have to do is dream*. Written into the song is the idea that such streaming exercises have added to the workload and hence have worked to the detriment of students.

On the basis of such examples, I submit that there is a cultural politics at work in *Not the Singapore song book*. The expression of dissatisfaction reflects a certain groundswell in the demand for more open consultative government. That the lyricists represent the better-educated — many of them are lawyers, publishers, playwrights and ex-teachers — reveals how this segment of the population is finding its voice of dissatisfaction, resistance and social commentary.

When set against the ideological messages of national songs, it is not difficult to couch cultural resistance in terms of opposition to the hegemony of the state. However, as Frith (1983) was at pains

to illustrate in his iconoclastic work *Sound effects: youth, leisure and the politics of rock*, music (in his case, rock 'n' roll) may also represent opposition to peer-group and adult middle-class norms. Adopting the logic of his argument, I will illustrate how the contributors to *Not the Singapore song book* oppose the norms of two groups, the yuppies and the *nouveau riche* (sometimes they are one and the same), which have arisen out of the rapid economic development in Singapore and the struggle for excellence. These norms are the everyday practices of the 'ugly Singaporean' (one who is greedy, spoilt and ungracious) indulging in an ostentatious life-style.[18] Indeed, they have sometimes been cited as constituting a distinctive Singapore culture, although not all agree with this view ('Sunday Plus', *The Sunday Times* 15 August 1993). Certainly, they receive no support from the seventeen lyricists of the *Not the Singapore song book*. By casting some of these norms in a questionable, if not negative light, the lyricists are making a pitch for the development of alternative norms.

The ostentatious lifestyles of many Singaporeans are described in taunting style; many of the lyrics highlight the fixation of Singaporeans with material trappings, such as the 'three cs': condominium, credit card and car (*Three Cees, Not the Singapore song book* 1993, 23), or with brand-name goods such as Gucci, Dior, Fellini, Balmain and Bruno Magli (*My favourite things, ibid.*, 20). Most of the time, the constant effort to keep up with the ostentatious lifestyle is for no better reason than because it is 'chic' or 'stylo'[19] (*Hand phone, I carry hand phone, ibid.*, 7). Unfortunately, it often means 'payin' [f]or what I can't afford' (*Cash, ibid.*, 37). The result is the need to take anti-stress pills (*Cash, ibid.*, 38) or the *Gold Card blues* (*ibid.*, 50), as goods are confiscated when the bills cannot be paid. Certainly, the ostentatious lifestyles and the continual attempts to 'live it up' and upgrade already comfortable if not luxurious lifestyles[20] are not uniquely Singaporean traits. They are part of a more widely developed consumer culture. The constant striving for excellence (so strongly encouraged in the national songs) is leading to the alienated and showy lifestyles frowned upon in songs like *Cash*. Other effects of this constant encouragement to do well are the various forms of greed and '*kiasuism*' which are said to characterize the Singaporean. For example, Goh Eck Kheng's *Oh my kiasu* (*ibid.*, 71), sung to the tune of *Oh my darling Clementine*, vividly portrays the ugliness of the *kiasu* Singaporean:

Mr Kiasu, Kiasu King,
Scared to lose out, always must win;
Number One in everything!
Grab first; don't talk,
Always jump queue,
Help yourself to sample things.
Look for discounts, free is better,
Never mind what they all think!
Must not give face,[21]
Winner takes all,
Hamtam[22] everyone you know.
Take but don't give, hide the best things;
Get there first or else don't go!
Always quit while
you are ahead.
Pushing helps to set the pace.
I want! Give me! First in all things!
That's the way to win the race!

Apart from the ostentatious lifestyles, other traits including, for example, the ugliness of a spoilt yuppie's child (*I'm a yuppie's kiddie, ibid.*, 21) and the inconsiderate, unsociable and irresponsible act of littering (especially of heavy, sharp or breakable material that can cause physical harm, or what is colloquially termed 'Killer litter') are opposed (*Killer litter, ibid.*, 29).

Taking the cue from Frith (1983), I would suggest that, through these songs, the lyricists are expressing their resistance to some social norms developed, as one lyricist pointed out (personal interview, 16 August 1993), as a consequence of values, such as excellence and hard work, promoted in the national songs. Although positive in themselves, such values become ugly when pushed to extreme limits. While couching his opposition to such extreme interpretations of exemplary values in humorous terms, he maintains that his message is of resistance to 'state and peer-group pressure to excel in everything', even at the expense of 'good mental health and basic courtesy and concern for others'. At the same time, he is at pains to reiterate that the values of striving for excellence and hard work are in themselves positive but, because they are 'being pounded home' all the time, there is an overkill and people either adopt the ideology or become cynical about the messages. Through satire, many of the writers hope to express resistance to the 'overkill' but, at the same time, they hope to make the original messages more palatable so that people can accept them 'in the right spirit' (telephone interview, 17 August 1993).

This use of satire is a recent phenomenon, dating from the 1980s and involves other cultural forms apart from music, such as literature and drama. For example, in recent years playwrights have become bolder in discussing important local social issues, such as race, gender, alternative sexualities, nationalism, censorship and political control, and the question of what makes a country like Singapore home. As pointed out by Heng (1992, 28)

> [m]any of these issues are painful, complex, and fraught with danger . . . [and] . . . playwrights must be careful not to instigate (or be accused of instigating) racial strife, for instance, when they analyse racial prejudices and problems on the local stage.

Hence, humour and, particularly, satire is adopted as the means by which to explore such issues. Yet, as Heng (*ibid.*, 28) also pointed out, the effect may be to 'acclimatise us to accepting, rather than questioning, existing social conditions'.

Conclusion

> Over the ages, kings and princes, revolutionaries and priests, peasants and slaves, have expressed their hopes and fears through music. While aiming to convince, they have used music to reassure the faithful as much as to persuade the unbelieving. (Denisoff and Peterson 1972, 13)

While some (Barzun 1958; Greenberg 1957) have argued that popular music is 'simply kitsch background noise' (Denisoff and Peterson 1972, 6), I have sought to argue that ideologically hegemonic intentions as well as voices of resistance can well be detected in popular music. In the case of the 'Sing Singapore' programme, the national songs form part of a total defence strategy in which Singaporeans are organized to defend their country against all forms of attack, military and non-military. This is to happen in two ways. First, Singaporeans are persuaded in the national songs, *inter alia*, to unite as one, differences (racial, religious, cultural, class, etc.) notwithstanding. Once this likelihood of sectoral division is diminished, the possibilities of internal fissures are concomitantly reduced. Secondly, Singaporeans can then be prepared to face external threats. Here again, national songs are the ideologically hegemonic tools by which to persuade Singaporeans and reinforce in them a love and patriotism for their country as well as in support for the ruling élite that has succeeded in taking the country from poverty to prosperity. Music is thus used to whip up the patriotic feelings of Singaporeans

so that, should they need to be called upon in any way to defend the country, their support will be forthcoming. In this way, social and psychological defence (via the national songs) create the fundamental psyche necessary before economic, civil and military defences can be effected. This, as Lee Kuan Yew pointed out, is what the state wants:

> to produce a community that feels together ... on certain things it responds together: this is my country; this is my flag; this is my President; this is my future. I am going to protect it. (quoted in *Total defence: the total picture* 1987, 10)

In the context of Singapore, therefore, the place of music in the construction of 'nation' is important. Through music, the state is constructing its version of the nation, one in which the citizenry is bound by 'core Asian values', chief of which must be the notion of society above self. It must be noted, of course, that the 'Sing Singapore' programme is neither the first instance of harnessing music in the construction of hegemonic discourse in Singapore, nor indeed is music the only instrument in such a construction. From the first days of independence, the state has attempted to employ music to develop a sense of national identity and patriotic verve. From the organization of national song-writing competitions (to encourage the production of distinctively Singapore songs) to hosting Asia-Pacific song competitions (in which the representative participation of Singaporeans will hopefully whip up a sense of nationalistic support from fellow Singaporeans), music has been part of the state's arsenal in the symbolic construction of nation.

The 'Sing Singapore' programme is hence not singular in the history of state exploitation of music. It is, however, singular in its degree of organization and commitment as well as in the extent of its reach and influence. Whereas allegiance to the state and ruling élite could be relatively well achieved in the past via delivery of economic goods, such allegiance has become more difficult to gain in recent years with a more sophisticated populace. The state has therefore had to step up its efforts in the hegemonic construction of 'nation'. Music, like some other cultural forms (such as dance (see Chua 1989) and religion (see Kong 1993a)) and non-cultural forms (such as political rhetoric), has therefore been developed to form part of a multiprong strategy.

Nevertheless, the political culture of Singapore does not encourage open conflict and confrontation.

Singaporeans have had to find other ways to express their opposition to preferred meanings (Kong 1993b) and it is in this context that the latent meanings in *Not the Singapore song book* may be appreciated. Resistance may be expressed through approved channels such as newspaper columns and the Feedback Unit but here it may be managed and its threat to the status quo nullified. However, while Singaporeans are not weaned on a staple of open conflict, a more educated populace is beginning to discover its political voice and is beginning to express opposition both to government policies and to some Singaporean cultural traits, albeit in symbolic and latent, even supportive, rather than overt or confrontational ways. *Not the Singapore song book* is the outcome of the discovery of such a voice and is one manifestation of an emergent cultural politics of music in Singapore.

Notes

1. See, for example, Baker and Biger (1992); Duncan (1990); Jackson (1989); and Kong (1993a and b).
2. See, for example, Hughes (1989); Meyer (1991); Perris (1985); and Stradling (1989).
3. See Hebdige (1979); Maultsby (1983); Tanner (1978); and Winders (1983).
4. See Auslander (1981); Denisoff (1972); Miller and Skipper (1972); and Rodnitzsky (1969).
5. This meant that the British controlled foreign affairs and defence of Singapore and still had a decisive say in internal security, while all other matters were decided by a local government.
6. Disquiet among Malaysian leaders stemmed from communal fears that the predominantly Chinese People's Action Party (PAP) from Singapore intended to supplant the Alliance leaders as the most important political party in Malaysia. This atmosphere of intercommunal bickering and tension was compounded by racial riots in 1964 which left 35 people killed and 563 wounded. Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed separation as a solution to such troubles.
7. Singapore's population comprises a Chinese majority (77·7 per cent) and substantial Malay and Indian minorities (14·1 and 7·1 per cent respectively). The last group, categorized in census reports as 'Others', constitutes 1·1 per cent (Lau 1992).
8. Unemployment stood at 1·7 per cent in 1990 (*Singapore 1991* 1991).
9. Indeed, in 1993, one of the new towns, Tampines, won a United Nations Habitat Award in the developed countries section for offering good housing design and amenities. In 1991, the Urban Redevelopment Authority was also awarded the

Habitat Scroll of Honour by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements for its achievements in improving Singapore's living environment.

10. At the time of writing, £1·00 is approximately equal to S$2·30.

11. The PAP had won all parliamentary seats in the April 1968, December 1972, December 1976 and December 1980 general elections.

12. *Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition* (20 August 1988, 4 September 1988, 3 November 1988).

13. Dr Tony Tan, former Education Minister, was quoted as saying that some values like honesty and hard work are universal values, while filial piety and society before self find greater expression in Asian than in western societies (*Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition* 26 November 1988).

14. While the songs do not enter the official school curriculum, they are played and taught to students during assembly periods.

15. See Savage and Kong (1993) for a discussion of the efforts to make Singapore a clean and green garden city.

16. Replacement-level fertility (the level of fertility necessary for a given generation of women to replace themselves with a new generation of women) was reached in 1975. This rate of about 2·1 has since dropped even further to reach 1·6 in 1985 (Yap 1989).

17. *Straits Times* (17 June 1984, 2 March 1987, 22 April 1987, 5 August 1987).

18. Whilst the origins of this concept are unclear, the reality of the phenomena is certainly unquestionable today and takes the form of *kiasuism*, a colloquial term meaning a grabbing mentality, borne of the fear of losing out and the urge to always stay ahead.

19. Singlish word for stylish.

20. This phenomena has recently been labelled the 'Singapore paradox' by the second Minister for Trade and Industry, Lim Boon Heng (*The Sunday Times* 15 August 1993, 24).

21. 'Give face' is a colloquial term meaning to do someone a favour and to give him/her some consideration.

22. 'Hamtam' is used in Singlish to mean pulverize.

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