

PopLore Episode 2: Chinese pop in Singapore and abroad

Desmond Chew:

Welcome to episode two of *PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop*, a seven-episode series. I'm Desmond Chew, a producer at Esplanade, Singapore's national performing arts centre. And I'll be narrating the story of Singapore's Chinese pop. Some of our interviewees in this episode spoke in Mandarin and Cantonese, and I'll be translating these soundbites for you into English.

In the last episode, you heard about how singers like Zhuang Xuefang (庄雪芳) and Poon Sow Keng, or Pan Xiuqiong (潘秀琼), achieved success in markets beyond Singapore in the 1950s. And many of our music-makers have continued to venture into the different epicentres of Chinese pop ever since.

Is there a signature style that has enabled Singapore's performers and songwriters to make their mark in this larger landscape? Chen Yuneng (陈玉能), the co-founder of music website Freshmusic, shares his thoughts.

Chen Yuneng:

One of the interesting thing I think about Singaporeans, right, I think we are very good at adapting. So, be it the epicentre is Hong Kong or Taiwan, we are able to understand what is the needs of the industry, of the audience at a particular time.

And this is how we have always been. But at the same time, there will always be some subtle, very subtle difference that we can provide. To the normal listeners is same same, but different, but you also can't really point out what's the different thing in a very exact manner. So this same same but different thing, I think it matters a lot, because, firstly, you must achieve the same same thing because if you cannot do the same same sound, you can't reach the mass audience. But the different part is what helped us to stay on.

Desmond Chew:

So what is it that makes us different? Well, let's go back to that 1961 concert by Cliff Richard & The Shadows that you first heard about in episode one. That performance inspired a whole generation of musicians in Singapore. A few years later, the Beatles exploded onto the international scene, and the craze for pop music from the UK kicked into an even higher gear.

In 1965, songwriter Shangguan Liuyun (上官流云) rode the wave of Beatlemania by penning Cantonese lyrics to the melodies of two Beatles songs, *Can't Buy Me Love* and *I Saw Her Standing There*.

His versions were titled *Hang Fai Di La* (行快点啦) which means "Walk Faster Lah", and *Yat Sum Seong Yuk Yan* (一心想玉人), which means "Thinking About My Beloved". These became Cantopop favourites, and were covered by many singers, as was his Mandarin song *Midnight Kiss* (Wu Ye Xiang Wen 午夜香吻).

That makes Shangguan Liuyun one of the earliest Singapore songwriters to contribute to the shared pop songbook of the Chinese diaspora. And he would not be the last.

You will hear from some of these later songwriters in just a few minutes. But for now, let's stay a little longer in the swinging sixties, which was when budding musician John Teo taught himself how to play the guitar.

John joined a band that would eventually be called The Stylers. According to writer Joseph Pereira, this group is the most recorded band in Singapore's history. They not only made their own albums, but also played on hundreds of records, backing local and regional Chinese artistes. But before all that, this band played rock 'n roll.

The earliest version of The Stylers was made up of Malay and Chinese boys from Kampung Wak Tanjong. In the 1960s, they took part in a Cliff Richard & The Shadows Contest held by Shaw Organization. The finals took place at Shaw's Sky Theatre in Great World Amusement Park.

John Teo:

It was fantastic. Some people bring their amplifiers, you know. For example, there is one band whose father is an electrician or whatever lah, he make the amplifiers so big and so nice, we look until ah, wah, *lau nua* (drool), hahaha...

Desmond Chew:

His band won second place at this competition, and was soon playing lots of gigs, including "early bird shows" at the Capitol and Odeon cinemas.

John Teo:

Normally last time in theatres where they had movie, they will either put some show or maybe put a guitar band or put in other thing before the show started, especially during a premiere. And sometime they even do a Talentime also. This will also help to bring in the crowd.

Desmond Chew:

They put their twist on popular dance music like the cha cha, which had a local variation called offbeat cha cha that was very popular with the Chinese crowd.

John Teo:

(singing) This is the craze during that time.

Desmond Chew:

Soon, The Stylers became a very popular backing band for the *getai* (歌台). By the 1960s, these live shows could be found all over Singapore, especially during the Hungry Ghost Festival. To maximise their earnings, *getai* singers try to hit as many getai stages as they can in a single night. And The Stylers could help them do that by shaving valuable minutes off each set.

John Teo:

When we play in this getai we have a kind of a format, we don't waste singers' time. Let's say we say Mingzhu Jiemei (明珠姐妹) come, then they come with three song, we will medley all the song, we will join join join join join join, finish. Then they have more time to perform at other stages. That is why a lot of people want to come to our stage. We will never allow slow song. For example, there is someone, I don't want to name who, then they come one song with *Wang Zhaojun* (王昭君).... You know that song last how long, nearly five or six minute. Poor fella, another singer is waiting behind, *fai ti leh fai ti leh* (faster leh, faster leh). So they wait, they can't go and earn money from other place.

Desmond Chew:

While there were exceptions, getai singers were generally not recording artistes, and vice-versa. But in the 1970s, these lines blurred as recording artistes started appearing in getai-like skits in a new type of performance venue. Music industry veteran Lim Sek explains.

Lim Sek:

I think slowly, at one point in Singapore's Chinese pop history, they started to have a lot of live houses, what we call *ge ju yuan* (歌剧院). They basically took a Taiwanese format—those famous actresses and singers and all that will perform a show, a 45-minute show or something, and included in this show, always will be a finale, which is like a comedy, like a short musical gag.

Desmond Chew:

One famous live house was the Wisma Theatre (Hai Yan Ge Ju Yuan 海燕歌剧院), located where the Wisma Atria shopping centre now stands. These venues featured many of the top Hong Kong and Taiwanese singers of the day. There were also many nightclubs and record labels in Singapore, which made the 1970s a boom time for the Chinese music scene. Entertainment journalist Alice Kwan, better known as Guan Xuemei (管雪梅), names some of the major labels from that time.

Alice Kwan (in Mandarin):

Tong Yi (统一), Feng Ge (风格), Feng Mei Hang (丰美行), Li Feng (丽风)... There were many many record companies, so there were many singers in Singapore too.

Desmond Chew:

The profusion of record companies meant they were hungry for talent, so there were many local singers as well. John shares his memories of the era's most popular homegrown performers.

John Teo:

Zhang Xiaoying (张小英) during that time was superb. Her voice is so unique and so sweet.

Desmond Chew:

Huang Qingyuan (黄清元) was also at the top of his game.

John Teo:

He has a special crooning voice.

Desmond Chew:

That voice made his records sell like hotcakes. But first, these albums had to be transported from Malaysia, where they were manufactured, to Singapore, where lorry drivers were eagerly waiting to deliver this precious cargo to record shops.

John Teo:

During that Huang Qingyuan era, the piece of EP, four songs, EP is even more valuable than money. The lorry drivers will wait at JB causeway, waited... wait for the release of the album, especially the song called *Arana*... this song, *aiyo*, that one is the killer.

Desmond Chew:

John also worked with another local singer, whose nickname was *Queen of Tears*, thanks to all her sad love songs. But actually, she's a pretty upbeat person.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

This is Lisa Wong from Singapore.

Desmond Chew:

When she was growing up, Lisa actually preferred English pop. The Cliff Richard fever of the 1960s had hit her too. It wasn't the guitars that got her, but his lovely singing voice.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

Cliff Richard had a beautiful voice, the moment he opened his mouth it sounded beautiful.

Desmond Chew:

She also loved the agogo flair of Sakura Teng and Rita Chao, two popular local singers who were known as Ying Hua (樱花) and Ling Yun (凌云). They sang in Mandarin and English, and were often backed by the local band The Quests in their albums.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

I started listening to Ying Hua and Ling Yun when I was in secondary school. I was very active, I liked to dance, so I really liked them. I didn't listen to all the other Chinese songs at all. How to describe? Their style was very hot, a lot of action, very wild, very westernised. Especially Ling Yun, she was a really good dancer.

Desmond Chew:

The teenage Lisa liked to dance, and she loved the way Sakura and Rita moved on stage. Their outgoing image was more westernised than the other Chinese pop stars of the time, and that really appealed to her.

Soon, her brother formed a band with his friends, and through their connections, Lisa started to perform English pop at parties and other events. The first time she was paid \$15 for a gig, she was over the moon.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

Because \$15 is a lot of money. During that time, if you were a clerk, your monthly salary was \$70 to \$75. If you were a worker, you got paid about \$1 to \$1.60 a day. So I was very happy.

Desmond Chew:

After all, she says, a clerk earned only around \$70 a month in those days, and a worker about \$1 a day. Besides, she loved singing. In 1969, when she was 19 years old, Lisa auditioned for a record label, and was offered a two-year contract on the spot. But her excitement turned to dismay when she told her mother the big news. Lisa offered to re-enact her mother's response in Cantonese for us, so that we could get the full dramatic impact of her anxiety.

Lisa Wing (in Mandarin):

She was very frightened; her face even turned green. I'm going to say this in Cantonese, otherwise I cannot give the feel of it. (in Cantonese) She said, you stupid son, what have you gotten your sister into?! Don't you know that singing is not a decent line of work? Haven't you seen all the movies where singers have to do things with their bosses?

Desmond Chew:

Having watched many movies where young women were forced into indecent proposals when they became entertainers, her mother was very worried about what Lisa had gotten herself into. So, for a while, she made sure a family member went with Lisa to every engagement related to her contract.

Eventually, her family realised that the industry was not a hotbed of sin. Lisa soon moved to a bigger recording label, where her boss's name was Lucky. And Lucky asked her to move away from Mandarin and English songs, and try singing in Cantonese instead. Here's how she reacted.

Lisa (in Mandarin):

I said no! I was so shocked. During that time, Cantonese songs, Hokkien songs, Teochew songs... nobody listened to dialect songs.

Desmond Chew:

According to Lisa, songs in Chinese dialects were not as popular with most listeners, and she was very reluctant to switch to Cantonese pop.

But Lucky was, indeed, lucky. One of Lisa's first Cantonese songs was a sad love song titled *Xiang Si Lei* (相思泪), or *Tears of Love*. It was originally released by a Malaysian singer, and had not made much impact. But when Lisa's cover was distributed to record stalls from Chinatown to Toa Payoh, it was an immediate hit.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

Every time they played this song, people would crowd around, ask about the song, and buy the record immediately.

Desmond Wong:

Whenever the record stalls played this song, crowds would form and they would snap up the album instantly. The success of *Tears of Love* even gave Lisa the chance to venture into the Hong Kong market. She still remembers the rousing welcome fans gave her when she touched down at the airport.

Lisa Wong (in Mandarin):

The minute I stepped out, I saw so many people screaming my name, Lisa, Lisa!

Desmond Chew:

It was a great adventure. But Lisa thinks that many of her Hong Kong fans probably didn't know that she was from Singapore. And after some years in the business, she decided that she couldn't be a singer forever, and enrolled herself in some beauty and nutrition courses to plan for a future outside of entertainment. In 1982, she recorded her final album.

Around this time, a big shift was taking place in Singapore's Chinese pop scene. The one thing the vibrant music industry of the 1970s lacked was original songs. Even the most popular singers of the time generally sang cover versions of songs from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and sometimes Japan. But the game was about to change.

Lim Sek:

At that point in time, there are also, young artistes who are discovered by local record labels. People like, Maggie Teng (Deng Miaohua 邓妙华). They had the looks, and they had the voice and they got recorded, and then they started to appear on TV as well.

Desmond Chew:

In the 1980s, Maggie broke into the Taiwanese market, singing songs written for her by a Taiwanese team. In Singapore, she is also remembered for singing the theme song of the drama series 《小飞鱼》 (Xiao Fei Yu) *The Little Flying Fish*.

In fact, such theme songs were some of the most well-known tunes in the country. Several were composed by twin brothers Li Wei Song (李伟菴) and Li Si Song (李偲菴). They got their start in showbusiness as teenagers, when they took part in a theme song competition in 1983. Soon, they were going to the TV station after school to hear producers recount the plotlines of TV series, so they could craft catchy themes.

Li Si Song (in Mandarin):

Hi everyone, I am Singapore Mandarin pop producer Li Si Song.

You must grasp the story, the highs and lows, the time period, and the place where it is set. For example, the series *Samsui Women* (Hong Tou Jin 红头巾) was about characters who came from Sanshui in Guangdong to Singapore to work as labourers, so we listened to many tunes from that region so we could create something with that flavour... (singing)... Isn't that flavourful?

Desmond Chew:

To write a good theme song, he says, they needed to understand the story, the characters, and the setting of the show. For instance, the 1986 series *Samsui Women* was about characters from China's Sanshui (三水), who came to Singapore to work as labourers in the 20th century. To create this theme, Si Song and Wei Song listened to traditional tunes from that region of China, so they could better understand the cultural feel of the characters' hometown.

Other youths were making waves as well. Chinese students in Singapore started to compose their own songs, form singing groups, and stage concerts in their schools. This phenomenon was later named *xinyao* (新谣), which means "Singapore songs". It was partly influenced by the Taiwanese campus folk music of the 1970s. But Yuneng draws some distinctions between the two movements.

Chen Yuneng:

For Taiwan, I think that there are some more culturally and maybe political reasons for the starting of all these things. Singapore, I will say that, it really started from something really simple—"we just want to do our own music" kind of thing. I would say that's how they started.

Desmond Chew:

This may have been a simple dream, but it was not easy to achieve at a time when original songs were literally unheard of. Eric Moo (Wu Qixian 巫启贤) is a key figure of *xinyao*. He had moved from Malaysia to Singapore as a child, and wrote his first song when he was in Jurong Junior College. In an interview, he said that none of his classmates believed the song was created by him, because "in those days, only people from overseas wrote songs".

Eric went on to form the singing group, Underground Express (Di Xia Tie 地下铁). Alice remembers attending an early concert of theirs at Jurong Junior College and covering many *xinyao* singers and events after that as the movement grew. She was struck by the innocence and enthusiasm of these young people.

Alice Kwan (in Mandarin):

I thought they were very innocent and adorable. Some songs were not very mature, but they had the courage to sing for everybody.

Desmond Chew:

Others in the media were supportive as well. At that time, Lim Sek was a producer for Chinese TV variety shows, where he featured some of these *xinyao* artists.

Lim Sek:

I started to work with a lot of the *xinyao* artists, but I wanted to add something more to it. You know, *xinyao* was pretty much a school performance kind of thing. They wrote their own songs and so on. I thought the time was right to create idols, just like in Hong Kong, in Japan, right, they had a lot of young teenage idols, flooding the market. So I thought, yah, maybe if I concentrate on just a few of the *xinyao* artistes with idol potential, then maybe we can have our own Singapore pop idol, Chinese pop idols. So that's why I featured people like Eric Moo (Wu Qixian 巫启贤), Thomas Teo (Jiang Hu 姜郢).

The disadvantage that Singapore artistes have over foreign artiste is that not many of them have recordings at that time. Their only medium would be when they appear on TV, right? But then, because of the regularity of appearance, they become household names, some of them. So they get signed up by local record labels. With the record, right, then they can get on to radio. That's how the wheel turns.

Billy Koh:

In 1982, Mediacorp has *Ge Yun Xin Sheng* (歌韵新声), one of the radio programmes that introduced all these new, up and coming songwriter, singer. So I think that program also kind of give a push to the *xinyao* movement.

Desmond Chew:

That's producer Billy Koh (Xu Huanliang 许环良), who got his start in *xinyao* when he was a student at Singapore Polytechnic. In the 1980s, he was a member of a singing group called *Shuicao Sanchongchang* (水草三重唱), or The Straws.

Billy Koh:

I think at the time, we didn't realise that we are making a movement. Not much attention was given to culture at that time. Culture was more treated like social activities rather than economic activities. When we were a part in the *xinyao* movement, we were just doing it for fun. So I think *xinyao* reach a peak during the mid 80s. And then, just like any movement, when there's a peak, there will be a downturn. So *xinyao* become like, turning cold after 1986. And then a lot of us will start to rethinking on what we want to do next.

Desmond Chew:

By 1987, English had become the main language of instruction in most of Singapore's schools. Mother tongues such as Chinese were taught as a second language. Some have pointed to this change in policy as one factor for the decline of the *xinyao* movement.

In any case, it was time for these *xinyao* artistes to grow up, and make some decisions about their future. Some left music behind. But others chose to keep going, even though a career in music was not the conventional path to success at a time when the Singapore economy was laser-focused on finance and manufacturing.

In 1986, The Straws released a song penned by *xinyao* icon Liang Wenfu (梁文福). It was titled “Wo Men De Ge Zai Na Li?” (我们的歌在哪里?). That means *Where Are Our Songs?*

The melody sounds pensive, but the lyrics are actually gently defiant. In the verse you just heard, Liang writes, in part, “I don’t believe that life has just one meaning. I don’t believe that we have to sing the same song.”

The chorus repeats the title: Where are our songs? Different *xinyao* pioneers sought different answers to this question. In 1986, Eric turned his attention to Taiwan, and eventually became a well-known singer-songwriter in the greater Chinese market.

The same year, Billy co-founded music production company Ocean Butterflies along with other members of the *xinyao* cohort. They produced records for singers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia, and also did a roaring business in advertising jingles. While working on an album of Singapore national songs, Billy met Kit Chan (Chen Jieyi 陈洁仪).

Billy Koh:

When I first recorded her singing *Count On Me, Singapore* in the studio, I was quite amazed by this little girl. She was wearing a school uniform from Raffles Girls’ School. She was very outspoken. It’s not common in Singapore, because most Singapore college students at that time was like, very shy. So she kind of surprised me. And then she sang very well. At that time. I thought her voice sounds a little bit between Sheena Easton and maybe Carpenters.

Desmond Chew:

She told him about her ambition of becoming a professional singer. But Kit wanted to sing English songs, and Billy told her that it would be tough competing with the Western artistes in that space. Some time later, they connected again, and Billy found out that she had indeed been turned down by several record labels. But Kit had not given up on her dream, and she was prepared to give Chinese market a go. In 1992, she signed on with Ocean Butterflies, and the company started to explore ways for her to break into Taiwan.

Billy Koh:

At that time, I was actually already producing some albums and records for Taiwan artistes. So during one of the session, I actually brought her along to Taiwan. I just give her a map. I say, okay, this is the map of Taipei city. So during daytime, I will have to work. So you will take this map and go to wherever you want. Do your adventure. And then we meet up for dinner and you could tell me, what is your discovery in the day. During that trip, I also brought her to some of my musician friends to speak to them, to listen to their opinions on her. With her limited vocabulary, she’s able to survive in Taiwan for that few days. I kind of concluded she is very unique. She is not a typical Singaporean. She is a new generation of Singaporean whereby they’re willing to take chance, they’re willing to explore.

Desmond Chew:

Despite Kit's adventurous spirit, things did not go well at first in Taiwan.

Billy Koh:

The reason mainly is because they are very sceptical about whether or not a Singaporean artist can make it in Taiwan. So in 1993, we decided not to wait for Taiwan anymore. We decided to launch Kit Chan's first Mandarin album in Singapore with one of the Japanese label called Pony Canyon at the time. I think at this point I want to express my gratitude to the MD of Pony Canyon at the time, Jimmy Wee. Before he become the MD of Pony Canyon and he was also MD of Warner Record, which actually helped a lot of artistes, including Dick Lee, Mark Chan to come into the scenes. So I talked to Jimmy and then we decided to launch Kit Chan's first album, in Singapore in 1993.

Desmond Chew:

Billy had the kind of eclectic musical exposure that was typical of a Singaporean music-maker. As a young student, he had sung in a choir and played in a Chinese orchestra. And before *xinyao* came along, his teenage years were full of Western influences like the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Bee Gees. As he crafted Kit's debut album, he leaned into the Singaporean tendency for remixing diverse sounds into something unique.

Billy Koh:

I think as a Singaporean because we are exposed to both Eastern and Western culture. That's why when we create music, we always try to find something interesting instead of just copying what the West did, or what the East can do. So we always try to blend both sides. Kit Chan actually, she liked a lot of independent alternative music. Her liking somewhat also kind of influenced into my listening habit. So I think at that time we was trying to find some intersection between alternative and what we call mainstream.

Desmond Chew:

Kit's first album was called *Bu Yao Shang Le He Qi* (不要傷了和气), which means *Do Not Destroy The Harmony*. It won her some awards in Singapore, and that sparked new interest from Taiwanese labels. In 1994, she finally launched an album in Taiwan. And for this album, Billy composed a song specifically to appeal to the Taiwanese market. This was a sad love song called (Xin Tong 心痛) *Heartache*.

Billy Koh:

Xin Tong no doubt is a ballad. But the structure, the melody, the way that the production is going, I think it's a little bit westernised and because Kit Chan, she has a little bit of musical theatre background, so I was trying to incorporate a little bit of that musical background things into the pop song, that is not heard in most of the Taiwan hit songs at the time.

Desmond Chew:

Kit's Taiwanese record company was not confident about the commercial viability of this song. But eventually, they decided to release it. And it became a huge hit.

This was a landmark moment in Singapore's Chinese pop history. It wasn't the first time that a Singaporean singer, or a Singaporean songwriter-producer, had succeeded in an overseas market. But it was the first time they had done it as a team. And more such teams soon followed, including singer Mavis Hee (Xu Meijing 许美静), and composer Chen Jiaming (陈佳明), who had also been part of the xinyao movement.

Billy Koh:

At that time, it kind of give me a lot of encouragement, because I feel that although Singapore is small, we can dream big and we can do something beyond our land. When I first go to Taiwan, some of the famous producer, I won't name who lah, say, Oh, you're from Singapore. I've been there before. It's such a boring place. No wonder you guys cannot write great music. So after Kit Chan became successful, after Xu Meijing became successful, in the late late 90s, I met another producer, not the same producer but another producer, but also quite a famous producer. Oh, you're from Singapore. I've been there. It's such a international country. No wonder you all can write good song.

So I think the most important thing, which I always used to encourage a lot of people is that, don't be trapped by the perspective of what people viewing over you. Sometimes we can't change whatever the external environment, but what you can change is your perspective. If you can build some kind of energy within yourself, then with this energy, you can radiate to the people who believe in you. And when more people believe in you, you can change the world.

Desmond Chew:

His can-do spirit was much needed in the late 1990s, when the Taiwanese music industry was badly affected by rampant piracy. As major labels acquired many smaller companies that were struggling, the market became saturated with pop stars known more for their good looks than their music.

Billy Koh:

At that time, we were kind of, in some way, puzzled. We do not know where the industry is going. But when we feeling down, we always look back, how we ended up to become a music producer, become musician, we realize that the reason why we're still working on music is because we love music. Actually, musical work is the core business of music industry. You have to write good songs; you have to build great artists. It's not about selling record, it's about making music.

Desmond Chew:

With that in mind, Ocean Butterflies launched a training course to discover new talent. Thousands auditioned, including two future Singaporean pop stars—A-do (阿杜) and JJ Lin (Lin Junjie 林俊杰).

Ocean Butterflies offered A-do a contract because his husky voice and everyman appeal was exactly what was missing in Taiwan's pop music at that time. As for JJ, Billy was impressed by his diligence as a songwriter.

Billy Koh:

He was a very, very hardworking person. But at that time, his songwriting skill was not good. And also his song was very outdated. Because I think that time, he actually is a big fan of Cantopop, so he listened to a lot of Cantonese song. And then, a lot of song that he wrote was like, sounded much older than his age. He actually used to come to my room with the new song that he wrote, and then, after I spend time patiently listening to his song, I will tell him that this song is no good; you have to fix this, you have to fix that. And then, he will take my opinions, and go back, and rework on the song, and maybe few days later, he will come on with a new fix, plus new song. This kind of situation has been go around for like, almost 18 months. And none of his song has passed my grade. So I realized that this little lad was quite unique in a way because many teenagers with this kind of rejection, they will probably gone home. But JJ didn't, he keep coming back.

Desmond Chew:

One day, a JJ composition finally met Billy's high expectations. And that eventually became *Ji De* (记得), or *Remember*, a song recorded by Taiwanese diva Zhang Huimei (张惠妹) and a definite contemporary classic in Mandarin pop.

It's just one of the many iconic Chinese pop songs created by Singaporean songwriters. And that includes not just songwriters from the *xinyao* movement, but also those from the English-language pop scene, like Dick Lee. You'll hear more from Dick in future episodes, but here, he talks about his foray into Hong Kong.

Dick Lee:

I got introduced to the Hong Kong market because of a collaboration that I wanted for my first Japanese album *Asia Major*. I was looking for a Chinese singer to sing *Lover's Tears*, which is a famous Chinese pop song. I asked Warner Japan to ask Warner Hong Kong to recommend a singer. Warner Hong Kong recommended Sandy Lam (Lam Yik Lin 林忆莲). And that's how I started working with Sandy. And the song became a hit. And I started writing songs for her. And I started producing her albums and everything. And she was a star on the rise. So in 1991, she had her first big concert at the Coliseum in Hong Kong, the biggest venue. I was invited to be her guest artist. And every night, a parade of Hong Kong artists would come and watch her concert, and they will come backstage. My dressing room was very cleverly positioned before hers. So they would pass by my room and then come and say hello to me. And that's how I met all the Heavenly Kings and Queens. And that's how I ended up writing for all of them.

Desmond Chew:

Si Song also wrote for Sandy, and for other Chinese pop stars. Along with his brother, he had segued into performing and then producing pop songs in the 1990s. Their experience with crafting TV theme songs served them well as they moved behind the scenes.

Li Si Song (in Mandarin):

What I learned during those years was how to custom-make a song for a TV series. That's very important. Years later when I opened a music school, one of the students

was Stefanie Sun. I found that although she had a small build, her voice had a very unique quality. Around then, there was a Western singer called Alanis Morissette, and Stefanie's voice was a little like hers. That was the kind of voice that had never been heard in Chinese pop before, and because of this unique voice, I found a way to customise a unique song.

Desmond Chew:

He says that writing for TV shows was a master class in learning how to tailor a song for a very specific story. Creating songs to highlight the charms of different pop stars was a similar exercise. And when he encountered a young Singaporean singer named Stefanie Sun (Sun Yanzi 孙燕姿), he put those skills to work.

Stefanie's voice reminded him of Alanis Morissette, and nobody else in the Chinese pop scene at that time had that sound. To showcase Stefanie's unique vocal qualities, he didn't want to write a sad love song, because there were just too many sad love songs on the market. So he took inspiration from a friend's personal experience of feeling misunderstood by her family and forgetting to cherish their love.

Li Si Song (in Mandarin):

My intro was extra simple... the feeling I wanted to create was that of a little girl wanting to tell us a story.

Desmond Chew:

This simple introduction set the mood for a story, told by a young girl who realised that she had neglected her loved ones. Si Song decided to use a Hokkien folk tune as a hook. His grandmother used to sing it to him when he was little, and he knew that this song would be familiar to everyone in the Taiwan market.

Si Song (in Mandarin):

To tell this story, I designed this part—I remembered when I was a child, my grandmother would always sing this song to me when she was trying to get me to sleep. I thought, this was a Minnan song, and Stefanie was going to release her Chinese album and Taiwan was a very important market. And Minnan was spoken there. And this song, everybody from age 6 to 60 knows it. So I used it as a hook... (singing) That's the original version. But she only sings a small part of it. Why? Because she has forgotten the love of her grandmother.

Desmond Chew:

This song is, of course (*Ti Or Or* 天黑黑) *Cloudy Day*. And it was a monster hit that launched yet another Singaporean pop star.

Billy Koh:

In the 90s, I think Singapore music, more like a team, not only artists, but has producers, has musicians, has music arrangers that work for the industry. If we take Kit Chan, Xu Meijing as 1.0, then Sun Yanzi, A-do, JJ is definitely 2.0. So in the period from year 2000 to year 2010, I think there was the 10 years of the golden era of Singapore pop music in the Chinese pop market.

Desmond Chew:

Since then, it's been a quieter time for Singapore's Chinese pop. So what can today's music-makers learn from the golden ages of the past?

Si Song believes that young performers today should know that Singaporean singers like Poon Sow Keng, Sakura Teng and Stefanie Sun all have something in common. And that's how very distinct each of their voices and singing styles are.

Li Si Song (in Mandarin):

Do you know why they were so successful? Because they had unique voices. Pan Xiuqiong had a very warm, magnetic, alto voice. It's a very distinct voice, plus her singing style... her voice is easily imprinted in people's memories. And the duo Sakura and Rita, especially Sakura, only she sang in that way. And Stefanie also, we helped her designed a special singing style... (singing) switching between falsetto and her full voice...

Desmond Chew:

Yuneng agrees, highlighting singer-songwriter Tanya Chua (Cai Jianya 蔡健雅), in particular as a Singaporean music-maker who has been able to adapt to the greater Chinese market while staying true to her very own sound.

Chen Yuneng:

So people who are successful, right, one of the most important thing is you need to retain your uniqueness. So you can adapt, but you must know where your uniqueness is, and you have to keep it. So even if you listen to the Tanya songs now, although she has shifted to Taiwan, but her songs now, it doesn't sound a pure Taiwan type of sound. It's a Tanya sound, okay? So she move on from just having that Western influence; she move on to that Tanya signature sound.

Desmond Chew:

Tanya is among the talented few who have been able to write and perform their own songs. For the homegrown singers who depend on others for their material, having a Singaporean creative team behind them can make a big difference.

Chen Yuneng:

Just now, we were talking about the same same but different thing, right. So, you know, when Singapore singers become one of the in thing, big thing, when it started from Kit Chan, right, there were more Singapore singers that were being signed by Taiwan record companies. Some of them, you know, how they do it, right, yes, I sign a Singaporean singer, but the whole production team is a very Taiwanese team. So you know, the same same, but different thing, the different doesn't come out too much. It can be easily replaced by another Taiwanese singer from another label. When you have a local team, and the singer go up together as a pair, your sound, your music, it will be a full package. There's much better cohesion and when you're out in the market, you do stand out in a good way.

Desmond Chew:

So what's next for Singapore's Chinese pop? Yuneng believes that the next wave of stars to make a mark overseas could well be those who are currently working in the English-language scene in Singapore.

Chen Yuneng:

If you look at for the past five to eight years, I would say the local Chinese independent artists, or even the labels lah, the sound that they're creating, the songwriting, you can hear that their influence, it's from the 90s and 2000s Mandopop. So, the influence is from the Jay Chou and David Tao era. So, their works are more or less within the zone of Chinese music. So the unique sound is no longer there. So if you put it back into the bigger Chinese market, right, it's harder to stand out. But now if I look at the English scene, right, if I put Charlie Lim's music into the scene, it's still different. It's very different from the other Chinese artists.

Desmond Chew:

If they choose to venture into these markets, these artists will have to brush up on their Mandarin skills, just like many of their predecessors did. Billy, who is now based in mainland China, knows first-hand how tough it is to make an impression in this vast and competitive arena, which has also become a new epicentre of Chinese pop in recent years. And fluency in the language is just the beginning.

Billy Koh:

I think the problem with Singaporeans is not that they are not good in Chinese—they are not good in any language. Because I think the way we brought up, we are so used to write reports, we are so used to write complaint, but we are bad in expressing ourselves. Most Singaporeans always have traveling plan, year-end holiday plan to go other country. But we are not interested to explore the culture of that country that we go to. We only interested to go there, find good food, shopping, take photo, come back. Give an example. Although we live in a very multi-nation society, a lot of us have Malay friend, have Indian friend, but ask any Chinese ethnic Singaporean, how deep are they, in terms of understanding the Indian culture? I don't think so, they only know Indian food. Indian is one of the four oldest civilization but most Singapore Chinese, they're not interested. They don't really spend time. Being in the land of Singapore, you have the opportunity to expose to different culture, Chinese, Indian, Malay, Europeans, so it's up to you whether or not you want to absorb all the positive energy of a different culture.

Desmond Chew:

Adapting to the demands of new lands while staying rooted in the diversity of home—it's much easier said than done. And while Singapore's Chinese pop has been successful, it cannot be denied that the terms of this success have mostly been defined elsewhere. After all, Singapore has never been the epicentre of Chinese pop.

But what happens when the epicentre is right here? That was true for a long time for Singapore's Malay pop. In the next episode, we find out how being at the heart of things shaped this music.

PopLore: Stories of Singapore Pop is produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre, in celebration of its 20th anniversary. Look out for more episodes on Spotify and Apple podcasts.

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