JOURNAL OF CREATIVE INDUSTRY AND SUSTAINABLE CULTURE
https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jcisc

How to cite this article:
Tan, E. & Camacho Fernández, S. (2023). The Chinese Orchestra Cultural Ecosystem in Malaysia: Hybridisation, Resilience and Prevalence. *Journal of Creative Industry and Sustainable Culture*, 2, 52-65. https://doi.org/10.32890/ jcisc2023.2.4

THE CHINESE ORCHESTRA CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM IN MALAYSIA: HYBRIDISATION, RESILIENCE AND PREVALENCE

[1]Elynn, Tan and [2]Sergio, Camacho Fernández

[1,2]School of Media, Languages and Cultures, University of Nottingham Malaysia

Corresponding author: kabfy5tey@nottingham.edu.my

Received: 6/9/2023 Revised: 22/9/2023 Accepted: 30/9/2023 Published: 31/10/2023

ABSTRACT

While the Chinese orchestra is a relatively modern formation, its Chinese folk music predecessors and their relationship with their host environment has a long, traceable history. Traditionally, Chinese music has nurtured a close identification with natural phenomena, from the use of natural resources in the construction of instruments, classified as the *bayin,* to the portrayal of imageries of the soundscapes of nature with extended performance techniques. Along with globalisation trends, Chinese folk music traditions have since undergone a series of hybridisation and transformation processes that transposed its focus from the natural/individual into the social/communal, mimicking the Western symphony orchestral model, a process that fostered the constant modification, repurposing, and commodification of its instruments and practices. Applying Titon's concept of ecomusicology as the theoretical framework, the present study explores the resilience and adaptive management of the Chinese orchestra since the inception of its model 100 years ago, particularly in the context of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia. How does Chinese music in a diasporic location retain and adapt its historical aesthetics, after undergoing politically induced transformations, pressures of modernisation and desires of assimilation into the local community? This study proposes a participant observation to reassess the current state of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, while providing an update on the limited existing literature on the topic through the perspective of cultural ecosystems. With tensions of modernising according to social trends and additional challenges posed by social configurations, repositioning the study of Malaysian Chinese Orchestras as ecosystem would help to devise new strategies to sustain the model in the future, while keeping its identity as a 'tradition' that is experiencing constant evolution.

Keywords: Chinese orchestra, Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, cultural ecosystem, cultural sustainability, resilience

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese orchestra formation, a normalised symphony orchestra layout comprising traditional Chinese instruments, was developed as a top-down attempt to dress traditional cultural expressions with a coat of modernity, in the context of the New Culture Movement in early 20th century China.

Throughout its history, Chinese music had to negotiate the tensions of tradition and modernity, evolving from an individual or small ensemble music-making experience to a communal one, ascended to the category of court music, to ultimately be reassimilated to the popular realm in the form of Chinese orchestras. Throughout these translocation processes, traditional Chinese instruments had to undergo a series of modifications to address the evolving environment, being developed, selected, redesigned, standardised, commodified, and systemised. However, the eventual adoption of the Western symphony orchestra model into traditional Chinese music had a more significant impact than the mere physical distribution of the instruments in a fan shaped formation with a conductor. It was a musical yet social, philosophical, identitarian and even politically induced hybridisation, in which traditional Chinese music models, aesthetics and values were challenged in the name of globalisation.

Traditional Chinese music was compelled into a sudden process of encounter with Western models and had to renegotiate conventions related to tuning, scales, ranges, textures, notation, organological families, instrumental sound projection, spatial layout, professionalism, and repertoire, questioning the founding principles of traditional Chinese music soundscapes. Arguably, these soundscapes are one of the defining elements of any cultural ecosystem, in which communal performative experiences develop new codes that substantiate new contexts; they are not just constructed by shared repertoires or the use of traditional instruments but by the interaction of musical experiences with the life and values of the community. As this study argues, Chinese orchestras consistently became one of the most significant forces of their hosting cultural environments, particularly in the context of the Chinese diaspora, by defining their respective soundscapes and articulating elements of identity, community, education, and nostalgia.

During this process of globalisation and modernisation, Chinese music also interacted with several other cultural contexts, predominantly pan-Asian, blurring the physical boundaries of traditional Chinese music[1]. These encounters fostered a constant negotiation of the Chinese self through its idealised traditions and contact with the otherness, to finally embrace a new spectrum of genres and characteristics (Lam, 2008; Lau, 2008), redefining the traditional models. In essence, it can be argued that the Chinese orchestra format serves as a vessel for cultural homogenisation hence reinforcing the dynamics of a renewed Chinese cultural identity and a symbol of the new national music of China. Consequently, and paradoxically, the Chinese orchestra is supposed to represent a nationalistic and identitarian music through a model that is, by definition, constantly Westernising, modernising and globalising.

This study contextualises the Chinese orchestra model from its inception to its arrival in Malaysia and the consequent hybridisation process it had to undergo to conform with its multicultural host society. In order to do so, this research will discuss the mechanisms on how diasporic cultural expressions can retain and adapt their traditional aesthetics, while negotiating

[1] The present-day Chinese music can be seen as a product of those cultural exchanges with other regions that has arisen from ethnic migrations, and it has in turn shaped other musics during the construction of the pan-Chinese identity (Feng, 2013).

political transformations, pressures of modernisation and desires of assimilation into the local community. Using Titon's (2020) concept of ecomusicology, the study will analyse the dynamics of the development of the cultural activity in Malaysia from the perspective of a cultural ecosystem. Titon posed the discussion not just in the interrelation of environment and society, but in 'how the ideas of nature are embedded in culture, how science constructs nature, and how economic rationality constructs the environment' (Titon, 2013). The Chinese orchestra in Malaysia is defined through its practices and the dialogues it has established with the local environment it currently sustains itself in, as well as its position in the wider global cultural practice. After contextualising the situation of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, Titon's theoretical framework of four principles for the analysis of music cultures as ecosystems will help to assess the adaptive management methods for resilience, and eventual viability of the Chinese orchestra model in a displaced environment.

Chinese orchestras in Malaysia constitute a growing research field, with significant potential for further study, considering the limited corpus of works available (see Tan, 2000; Yong, 2016; Tan, 2019; *The Historical Melody of Chinese Music in Malaysia*, 2022). Nonetheless, there is a sizable number of works that focus on the context of Singapore that may help to provide a good insight of the Chinese orchestra movement in the Southeast Asia region (see Goh, 1998; Wong, 2009; Wang et al., 2020; Ling, 2023). Since its initiation in Malaysia, there has been a series of advancements that needs to be further discussed, with newer social significances and cultural values imbued to this practice in the process of finding its own narratives. For addressing them, this research proposes a longitudinal ethnography study of the Malaysian Chinese orchestra, based on the authors' participant observation and complementary involvement. Some of the key findings referred in this research are the result of a series of focus groups and personal interviews with practitioners of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, conducted under the framework of the broader project *When a Hundred Flowers Blossom: (Re)assembling the Chinese Orchestra in Malaysia as a Cultural Ecosystem*, led by the author Tan Elynn[2].

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A STANDARISED CHINESE ORCHESTRA

The 'modern' Chinese orchestra model as opposed to that of the community and court 'traditional' ensembles has a relatively short history. It was an intellectual (hence political) product, conceived in the 1920s in pre-revolutionary China along with reformations of the New Culture Movement (Wang et al., 2020). It promoted a depart from Confucianism, heightening interests for Western values such as the concept of nation, democracy, and equality re-evaluating Chinese culture and identity through a lens of perceived modernity. In the 1930s, such intellectual framework led to the appearance of the first 'modern' Chinese orchestras, inspired by their Western counterparts, using traditional Chinese instruments. The formation was appropriated from the *Jiangnan sizhu* (江南丝竹) ensemble model that was popular in areas south of the Yangtze River, reshaped using the standardised Western orchestra layout and organisation, and disseminated with a clear aim to promote a new and sanitized national identity. In the long run, this unification arguably led to the prioritisation of the modernised Chinese orchestra model over smaller regional folk music ensembles in the expression of national culture, and has come to be emblematic of Chinese identity. However, Chinese aesthetics were not subordinated during this adoption overall, composers strive to incorporate the essence of Chinese melody and style with Western forms and harmonies.

[2] Responses are anonymised due to the sensitivity of certain discussion topics that directly identify research participants.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the model expanded, incorporating communist monumental aesthetics to the format, and thus forming grand 'symphonic' Chinese orchestras with the express intention of transcending regional boundaries. This revamped Chinese orchestra format needed a new repertoire of revolutionary pieces that was developed with the explicit political purpose of conveying the new ideologies of the communist state (Jiang, 1991). Paradoxically, the same system that consolidated Chinese orchestras led them to a period of dormancy during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when most pre-revolutionary forms of music were suppressed. During this period, the traditional Peking opera was reformed into the *yangbanxi* (样板戏) or 'model opera' as an avenue for political propaganda[3]. After the Cultural Revolution period, the Chinese orchestra model gained momentum, with a growing popularisation across the PRC, Taiwan, the then-British Hong Kong, and thanks to its central role in the construction of a pan-Chinese identity in several clusters of Chinese diasporas, particularly Singapore and Malaysia, and even beyond Asia, with orchestras and ensembles in Australia, Canada, the USA, and others. The success of the model fostered a rapid enhancement in musical instrument design, compositional skills, and performance standards.

The political undertones of the evolution of the Chinese orchestra model are uncoincidental with the variations of nomenclature across its main active regions Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore and Malaysia, whose names combined could read as *zhonghua minguo* (中华民国) or 'Chinese Republic' (Wong, 2009), illustrating the inherent difference in the perception and receptivity of the Chinese nomenclature for 'Chinese music', solely from its semiotics.

In Hong Kong, the favoured terms are *zhongyue* (中乐) or *zhongguo yinyue* (中国音乐) meaning 'China's music'. In Malaysia and Singapore, *huayue* (华乐) carries the identification of Chinese identity as *huazu yinyue* (华族音乐) music of the Chinese people as a form of reaffirmation of cultural identity by Chinese immigrants. Mainland China embodies the spirit to identify this form of Chinese music as music of the people, *minzu yinyue* (民族音乐), or *minyue* (民乐), while in Taiwan, *guoyue* (国乐) carries similar significance as national music, by the then Republican government to assert its political legitimacy through Chinese culture (Lau, 2008).

It is apparent that the idea of 'Chinese music', while recognized with a unified denomination in English, carries a deeper significance of cultural identity when used in the Chinese language. Although some practitioners would debate that the combined 'Chinese Republic' identification of the nomenclature is arguably conspirative, impacts of the discrepancy in nomenclature perpetuate a power structure and hierarchy between the 'Chinese Republic' regions. An observed example would be the discrimination of a *huayue* student who published in the social media of a Taiwanese community[4], being identified simply by mentioning the name of *huayue* rather than *guoyue*. Subject to localized social, political, and economic factors, the Chinese orchestra in these areas pursued different trajectories despite stemming from the same

[3] This process of Cultural Revolution incidentally prompted innovations in Chinese music, as it fostered the combination of Western and Chinese musical elements into an interlocking harmony (Luo, 2018).
[4] The social media page has been closed due to certain controversies related to the MeToo movement in Taiwan.

geographical and cultural origin of Mainland China, and such trajectories were intrinsically bonded to the wider cultural politics that exist between regions. However, the ecosystems are interdependent despite self-sustaining in different paces of growth. Exchanges between regions are essential to strengthen the cultural value of the practice, and to foster the unique identity of practices in each region.

CULTURAL HYBRIDISATION OF CHINESE ORCHESTRAS IN MALAYSIA

The Malaysian Chinese orchestra followed a distinctive path from those of other main regions, wherein it faced differential challenges in relation to the cultural politics, asymmetrical multiculturalism, and cultural hybridisation inherent to the Malaysian society. Arguably, these particularities, inherent to the Malaysian context, together with its positionality as a minority cultural group, has led to its differential implantation, and limitation of support and resources. Nonetheless, the connection to the main regions through tertiary study, cultural exchanges, shared repertoires, and musical expertise has also led to a number of synergies and parallelisms that need to be assessed.

The development of Chinese music ensembles in Malaysia can be traced back to the late 1800s, as an outcome of politically induced mass emigration of lower-class Chinese workers from the Southeast China coast. At that time, the main role of those musical practices was the reaffirmation of the Chinese identity, to support the needs for community bonding (Tan, 2000), simultaneously reinforcing ties with the imaginary homeland. Chinese music was recurrently performed by solo instruments or, in the case of opera performances, by small ensembles. Then, *difang* music (地方音乐, also known as regional music), especially opera music, played an essential role as community entertainment and social interaction among Chinese immigrants from Southern China regions mainly Teochew, Hokkien and Canton. Ensembles were linked with clan associations, a connection still existing to present-day, as the Malacca Teo Chew Association Chinese Orchestra (TCCO) illustrates.

Chinese music has been a mainstay of the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia since the origin of the first migratory movements; however, the Chinese orchestra model is much more recent. Chinese orchestra music became widespread available by the 1960s in the recently independent Malaysia through its dissemination via the radio and cassette tapes[5]. By that time, there was an influx of scores and instruments from China, often transported by merchants from mainland ports. Additionally, if instruments necessary to perform such pieces were not readily accessible, they were replicated using locally available materials or replaced with other instruments[6]. The Chinese orchestra format flourished with an increased realisation of the importance of localisation and hybridisation in its music repertoires, to be in a constant dialogue with the popular music of the time and the musical expressions of other cultures and ethnicities[7]. This includes the numerous musical arrangements of other Malaysian ethnicity music to merge into the Malaysian cultural fabric, such as *Burung Kakak Tua* and *Kadazan do Bambazon*. However, due to the racial segmentation of Malaysian cultural and social landscape, the

[5] Pieces heard on radio were transcribed and adapted by earlier local ensembles.

[6] Such ingenuity in constructing musical instrument and gaining access to resources exemplify the resilience and desire for growth that is not necessarily only linked to the social and identity function of the Chinese orchestra, but also an innate desire to nourish the self through musical experiences.

[7] During the times of social unrest in Malaysia, in late 1960s, Chinese music with communist undertones was banned, many performances were halted midway, and some musicians were arrested due to their association with communist movements.

Chinese orchestra was not fully assimilated as a genuinely Malaysian cultural product, and practitioners today still look to Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to establish the canons of authority, style, and repertoire. Performing Arts are the emblem of ethnic identity; the Malaysian Chinese community is still marginalised from the avenues of power and is constantly aware of its separate identity (Tan, 2000). Arguably, the Chinese orchestra continues to undergo processes of incorporation into the Malaysian cultural landscape, beyond solely the Malaysian Chinese community.

It can be argued that the lack of assimilation into the constructed Malaysian cultural fabric shaped by the dominance of Malay models over those of other ethnicities, on top of an overall lack of emphasis for the Arts led to limited governmental support for most artistic cultural expressions, which makes the Chinese orchestra particularly relevant as a community-based institution in Malaysia. Currently, Chinese orchestras thrive in community establishments, comprising of educational organisations (primary and secondary schools, universities, alumni associations), clan associations or guild halls, local cultural centres, freelance groups, and other small collectives. Beyond that, there are also centres teaching solo instruments that are not predominant in the Chinese orchestra, namely the *guzheng* and *guqin*.

At its peak, there were nearly 300 active Chinese orchestras and ensembles throughout the country[8], most of them linked to educational institutions. It is apparent that the sustainability of the Chinese orchestra heavily relies on the continuity of school-based orchestra system to nurture young talents (Tan, 2019). As a co-curricular activity, is also well regarded by the younger generation, as it is seen to carry numerous benefits of learning music while having a healthy leisure activity and preserving Chinese traditions (ibid., 2019). Moreover, the general social functionality of the Malaysian Chinese orchestra is maintained over time (Figure 1). It serves as a form of community interaction, promoting a diverse array of social activities, including concerts, festivals, competitions, musical instrument exams, and cultural exchanges, among others.

[8] In *The Historical Melody of Chinese Music in Malaysia* (2022), a recent publication the author Tan Elynn participated in, there are 160 orchestras listed in the 'orchestra' section. However, this record only includes registered groups and those that were contactable by the publishing team. Other independent, unregistered ensembles are not included in this list. After the Covid-19 pandemic, many orchestras are no longer active.

Figure 1

A commercial performance of a Chinese music ensemble during Chinese New Year open house organised by a housing developer, in 2018.

On the other hand, the same community environment is nurturing an increasing number of professional performers and teachers, including Chinese orchestra students furthering their tertiary studies mainly to conservatoires in places such as Beijing, Shanghai and Taiwan. Tertiary institutions in Mainland China offer scholarships for overseas Chinese candidates each year, attracting students to advance a holistic education whether majoring in instrument playing, conducting, composing or musicology. There is an observable improvement since the inception of the Chinese orchestra model in Malaysia, according to the pioneers in the field, that recurrently observe that 'people of the Chinese orchestra nowadays are much luckier than the olden days', having better resources and support that were built over generations. Accordingly, the ease in access to further education is perceived as the defining element that has bred a new generation of professional instructors who then become resources to pass down accurate skills and wider musical knowledge to younger students, thus elevating the overall musical standard in Malaysia, consolidating a positive outlook on the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia.

CHALLENGES OF THE CHINESE ORCHESTRA IN MALAYSIA

Unfortunately, despite its allegedly solid foundations, this cultural ecosystem also faces structural issues that challenge its long-term viability, especially due to the referred lack of governmental funding and support (Yong, 2016), limiting the potential music standards, and restricting the development of local talent, who can only further improve their skills in Mainland China or Taiwan. Conversations with practitioners indicate several main struggles faced by the community namely funding, interpersonal relations, and the intrinsic value of the practice.

Funding and institutional support are perceived as the biggest concerns for the Chinese orchestra community in Malaysia (Tan, 2019). The tough economic environment in the Malaysia Performing Arts context contribute to its unique coping mechanisms and creativity in ways of looking for sponsors and resources to sustain daily operations. Practitioners

suggested that the responsibility is not entirely to be placed on the Malaysian government, neither should there be dependency on government funding; it should depend on the overall society and the overarching capitalistic economic structure that has currently resulted in little emphasis on the Arts. Although there are grants and government programmes for artistic pursuits, these efforts are insufficient if there is a lack in long term social support. A comparison is recurrently drawn to state-run Chinese orchestras in other regions; although the government allocates an annual budget to operate the orchestras long term, it would have to generate sufficient income through its own programmes, or it still loses its value that justifies the support received. Moreover, another issue referred to by the interviewed practitioners is the limited artistic satisfaction in performing to an empty audience. Ultimately, direct funding from the community whether in the form of ticket purchases, sponsorship, or donation—is a direct reflection of the cultural worth of the art form to that society, and the most reliable illustration of the sustainability of the ecosystem.

In alignment with the desire to unite and enhance the community, practitioners have recurrently expressed their aspirations for the establishment of a professional Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, similar to Singapore Chinese Orchestra of the neighbouring country. Since the 1980s, practitioners had in mind a semi-professional or professional Chinese orchestra with aims of raising musical standards and elevating the status of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia (Tan, 1990). However, it is also acknowledged that community propagation is insufficient for the advancement of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia, given the insufficient organisational support and resources for professionalising (Goh, 1998).
In the post-pandemic context, there has been a noticeable shift of focus of practitioners from the establishment of this professional Chinese orchestra, towards consolidating the fundamental education of the new generation of performers, after noting a significant decrease in the performance standards of students upon their return to the practice. The attention is now placed on raising performance quality and disseminating the cultural activity to a wider audience, despite still having the aspiration of the formation of a fully professional Chinese Orchestra in Malaysia present. The lack of long-term external support and resources is seen as a limiting factor to the establishment and perdurance of such ensemble.

According to the interviews, the Chinese orchestra model in Malaysia is currently in an awkward position, as the recurrent performance of repertoires imported from China, Taiwan or Hong Kong do not fully resonate with the particularities of the hybridised Malaysian environment, posing the question of what it does mean to be a Malaysian Chinese orchestra in the current context[9]. Following suit in multiculturalism, efforts have been made by local composers to compose pieces that incorporate music from other cultural contexts, like the *Gamelan* or *Sape*, but those are still yet to imbue significance beyond a mashup of several Malaysian cultural identities. The perception of Chinese orchestra music in Malaysia has departed from the one given in its regional counterparts. However, Malaysia is yet to decipher the way of developing a music model that belongs to the Malaysian identity yet retain the Chinese essence, and resonates with the larger sociocultural context.

Ultimately, the seminal question remains what intrinsic value does the Chinese orchestra model has to offer to society in order to make its survival a necessity? Or, in other words, what is there in Chinese music in Malaysia beyond the notion of 'preserving Chinese traditions'? Currently, the demography of Chinese community in Malaysia supporting this cultural

[9] Through joint efforts, Singapore answered the analogous question, as it made its mark internationally with 'Nanyang music'.

ecosystem does not extend beyond close social circles of family, friends, and existing Chinese music enthusiasts. Students and practitioners themselves think that the Chinese orchestra has little to no significance to other ethnicities in Malaysia, struggling to attract audiences of other ethnicities to attend Chinese orchestra concerts despite its expanded repertoires. Arguably, if the Malaysian Chinese orchestra wanted to flourish in its multicultural setting, it will have to undergo deeper scrutiny of identity and cultural representations, while embracing the search of deeper meanings that are localised and contemporary to the Malaysian society.

Ironically, the challenging situation described provides the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia with a degree of international acknowledgement. Its counterparts from the other Chinese orchestra regions acknowledge the difficulties faced by their Malaysian ones, commending the 'passion and spirit to preserve the Chinese orchestra despite its tough survival conditions' (Tan, 2019). The contemporary political landscape of Malaysia resulted in the positioning of arts and culture alongside tourism, all under the same ministry, demonstrating a lack of emphasis on the development of arts as a value-generating contributor to society. With the little acknowledgement received from public institutions for the cultural and educational activities run by Chinese orchestra organizations far less the opportunity for the potential forming of a professional Chinese orchestra it is difficult to be accepted by its own people (and beyond the Chinese community) as something that is culturally significant to society, much less to receive international recognition as a local cultural product that leads a global movement. Sufficient to say, practitioners assure that the Chinese orchestra, and traditional arts in Malaysia in general, have a long way to go before they could be detached from the self-perpetuated loop of lack of support that hinders their growth potential.

EXPLORING THE CHINESE ORCHESTRA AS A CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

When compared to the consolidation of the Chinese orchestra in other regions, the model in Malaysia appears to be stagnant, given its limited impact beyond its cultural context, insufficient institutional support, reduced number of original and creative outputs and non-existent professionalisation. However, as suggested before, the Chinese orchestra occupies a crucial role for the Malaysian Chinese community that cannot be sufficiently valued through applying measurable models of cultural assessment. Hence, this study proposes to analyse the role of the Chinese orchestra in Malaysia through the lens of cultural ecosystems, in order to establish strategies to consolidate its position within the Malaysian soundscape.

Titon (2020) suggests that the interaction of communities across the world encompasses physical and cultural factors of the musical environment. This concept, related to the ecosystem, can be applied to music in a less structural, functionalist manner. Notably, there is a fundamental distinction between the natural and cultural (or musical) ecosystem: ecosystems of culture have the capability to experience more interconnection and can be described as a network or rhizome (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) without placing one on top of the other. People may participate in multiple ecosystems of music across the world, whereas organisms in a natural ecosystem do not exist in multiple populations. Nonetheless, any form of ecosystem always comprises a community of living organisms of different populations (biotic components) and its environment (abiotic components), connected through cycles of nutrients and energy flows.

In the discipline of ecomusicology, Titon (2020) applies four principles for the analysis of music cultures as ecosystems: the cultivation of diversity, recognizing of limitations to growth, interconnectedness and interdependence, and stewardship. These four principles, along with

the concept of resilience, provides a strategy adaptive management towards sustainability of music cultures. Resilience refers to the ecosystem's capability to manage and recover from disturbances, and to redirect towards the goal of sustainability. This is achieved through the adaptive management implementation, for a most desirable state of existence that is unnecessarily in equilibrium, but suitable to ensure the survival of the ecosystem.

Within this model, change is recognised to be natural and inevitable. It resonates with the notion that 'traditional' identities are constantly evolving, something that is lived and experienced over time, and not something that is frozen in history. The resilient system should be able to sufficiently retain core functions in the face of disturbances (Gunderson et al., 2009). Hence, for traditions to continue with integrity, cultural workers must ensure that change is managed with ample resources and space for growth.

However, a caveat in ecomusicology (or any field) is that nature should not be regarded with 'good intentions or a belief of agency. Nature happens (naturally) and what is good or bad is determined by human constructions the perception of 'growth' or 'destruction' of cultures and traditions are entirely up for interpretations. Moreover, the rise and fall of a cultural ecosystem depends also on environmental factors; based on the notion of 'survival of the fittest', it is only natural that a strong culture may experience its downfall under unexpected circumstances.

Along the lines of evolving traditions, the Chinese orchestra was designed as a novel form of Chinese music organization that selects forms of tradition and injects Westernisation into the model without losing the Chinese identity (Han, 1979). As mentioned, Chinese music has undergone a series of hybridisation and transformation processes since the New Culture Movement in China, that made it depart into the social, simultaneously attempting to retain the richness in its aesthetics of natural melodic nuances, style and colour. In this context, folk music is integrated into modernised Chinese music, because it is deeply rooted in the lives of the people who present natural soundscapes and imageries of life through their own music; the interconnection and equilibrium have to be retained for the ecosystem to thrive. This interdependence between the people and musical development demonstrates that the musical presentations and organization structure of the Chinese orchestra reflects the lifestyle and philosophies of the Chinese ethnicity to grow as a cultural ecosystem that is always closely related to history and nature. It is how the Chinese orchestra maintains its status of 'tradition' despite experiencing constant modernisation.

Looking at the music itself, Chinese music nurtures a close identification to natural phenomena; it portrays imageries of natural soundscapes through virtuosic techniques of its musical instruments. The connection of Chinese music to nature is inherent down to the classification of Chinese musical instruments, that are constructed using natural resources. These eight materials derived from nature are metal, stone, clay, hide, silk, wood, gourd, and bamboo (金石土革丝木匏竹). Traditionally, this classification system is known as the *bayin* (八音, or 'eight sounds'), established during the Xi (Western) Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BC), and is mentioned in the *Zhouli* (周礼, *Rites of Zhou*). In the Zhou Dynasty, music is regarded to be a cosmological manifestation of natural sounds, within the dual order of yin and yang and the five elements of nature for universal harmony (Meyer, 2021). Some examples of ancient Chinese music instruments include the *xun* (埙), made of clay, *sheng* (笙), made of gourd, and *bianzhong* (编钟), made of metal.

One such good example of a modern Chinese orchestra composition that demonstrates the connection of the Chinese orchestra soundscapes to imageries of history and the application of the *bayin* is *The Terracotta Warriors Fantasia* (秦兵马俑幻想曲), composed by Peng Xiuwen in 1984. The piece is a classic, inspired by the terracotta army excavated in the Shaanxi province, that served to accompany Emperor Qin in his afterlife. The composition depicts the bitterness and homesickness experienced by soldiers who were forced on campaigns under the order of Emperor Qin (Wang, Chow and Wong, 2020, p. 389). In the first section, an imagery of the terracotta warriors' march is portrayed in its glory, followed by a melancholic second section for the warriors missing their homeland, and finally a resuming of the march towards war. The piece has an interesting instrumentation to bring the audience back to the past, utilizing the *xun*, that was a popular music instrument in ancient times, besides drums and cymbals that were crucial instruments for army coordination in the past.

After undergoing a series of transformations, the modern Chinese orchestra classifies its music instruments into four categories based on their playing method. Under the formation of the modern Chinese orchestra, that closely mirrors the Western symphony orchestra, musical instruments integrated into this system are categorized into wind, plucked strings, bowed strings and percussion (*chui*, *tan*, *la*, *da*, 吹弹拉打). Some traditional instruments are incorporated into the orchestra while others are side-lined. For instance, the *sheng* and *suona* are important instrument families of the Chinese orchestra that are still under constant modification and improvisation to accommodate contemporary compositional techniques related to symphonisation (Figure 2).

Figure 2

A Chinese orchestra concert attended by the primary author in 2019. The orchestra has a complete family of expanded instruments, including the sheng family (top center rows) and suona family (top right rows).

Meanwhile, instruments such as the guqin and guzheng are less commonly used in an orchestra; they are rather performed solo. On the other hand, the bianzhong, while carrying a rich ancient history, is abandoned, only appearing in specific compositions for nostalgic and historical education purposes.

Within adaptive management strategies of music cultures, expansion and diversity allows for a greater chance of survival; in the case of the Chinese orchestra, its diaspora creates sufficient space not only for survival, but also for conservation and growth in Malaysia, the community is the main, if not sole, support. Diasporic communities become locations of preservation of culture that could have been eroded in its homeland. An example is the preservation of the ancient five-string pipa in Japan that became lost in China over time, and only recently regained popularity (and reclamation) in China. Malaysia also served as the site of preservation of several traditional Chinese orchestra pieces and regional music in an unaltered form that were lost in the modernisation process of China in present times, while simultaneously developing more hybridized practices of its own.

Nonetheless, returning to Titon's second ecological principle of limitations to growth, it has to be understood that there are natural limits where increase becomes unsustainable with finite resources. This principle is exhibited by the fact that the growth of the Chinese orchestra does not increase exponentially. It is moreover important to acknowledge that any culture, however developed, is subjected to restraints, and therefore requires sustainability thinking continuous growth is unattainable. There are always limiting factors such as limitations on musical instruments and performance skills, learning resources, external support, funding, and other types of disruptions to the ecosystem. Hence, in Malaysia, the key element to assess the viability of current Chinese orchestra models is not its level of dissemination, but its relevance to the larger ecosystem, as aforementioned.

The third ecological principle of interconnectivity understands that ecosystems do not exist in isolation and there are interconnections with populations, communities and habitats. For instance, even when the Chinese orchestra's relevance is particular to the Chinese community in Malaysia, its impact spreads beyond its boundaries through its cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaborations. For that, there is a dynamic equilibrium of forces to make up the music culture.

Finally, musical stewardship includes the care for all components of the music culture, including its people, partners, and resources. A sustainability concern regarding stewardship that is particular to Malaysia is the continuity of the practice related to two specific groups of individuals school students and professional music teachers/performers. Although most of the community of the Chinese orchestra revolves around secondary schools, the lack of community orchestras and a work-oriented society meant that most students ended their journey after they have completed their secondary or tertiary education. Another underlying risk involves the loss of practitioners, who, after completing their further studies in this field, relocate to other regions in search of a better livelihood and opportunities for career expansion. The reality is that the broader cultural ecosystem in Malaysia is less rewarding and intellectually stimulating, thus resulting in the perpetuation of a glass ceiling on music standards and a slower development in its music education.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese orchestra, as with other performing art forms across the world, requires a reformulation for a more tangible future, after experiencing a huge blow to the arts community through the COVID-19 pandemic. It is believed that cultures in moments of crisis will not go extinct but simply evolve into a different form. Instead of viewing music as a heritage that should be preserved, Titon (2020) suggests presenting musical cultures as something that is contemporary, living, and renewable in our daily lives, in order to shift towards a discourse of

sustainability. Cultural stewards should make use of newer and available ways, besides partnering up with others, to promote a collective ownership of culture and to enjoy musical environments we live in.

The health of any traditional Performing Arts model intertwines with its cultural ecosystems very closely, to the point that one cannot be without the other. Sustainable practices are the way forward to thrive beyond preservation; only sustainable ecosystems can host viable practices. As the Chinese orchestra experiences disruptions to its ecosystem, it is imperative to seek alternative solutions for more institutional support and traditional patronage of performances, that may be encouraged by experimenting with online platforms and alternative performance spaces, and the incorporation of local styles and to hybridise Chinese orchestra music to create a new series of soundscapes that may favour the prevalence of the cultural form.

A further study of ecosystem models of the Chinese orchestra aids the formulation of new adaptive management methods of resilience to sustain the Chinese orchestra while maintaining its 'traditional' identity that is experiencing constant evolution. Other than that, a reconnection of the Chinese orchestra to its soundscapes provides a better overview of it as an organic entity that interacts with other elements and is not entrapped in an imagined past. All to ensure the sustainability of the cultural ecosystem by nurturing each of its defining elements.

In future, this study hopes to inspire comparative studies that examine the interdependence of Chinese orchestra ecosystems in different regions, as ones that are organic and demonstrate a more complicated network of relations. Further studies should establish relations of musical cultures as assemblages rather than solely looking at them as isolated entities. From a musical aspect, more experimenting on the hybridisation of Chinese music with global music styles could be conducted to connect notions of assemblage and musical fluidity, besides intersections with cultural identity and collective sense-making. Most importantly, future studies should emphasise on arts and culture policies and cultural stewardship for the sustenance and evolution of performing arts, providing them with space to grow beyond their existing ecosystems.

In their constant struggle to survival, adaptation, hybridization and identification to its cultural environment, the distinct soundscape of Chinese orchestras in Malaysia have nonetheless manage to embrace the unique characteristics of their host ecosystem: the multicultural society of contemporary Malaysia. Let us hope that Malaysian communities persevere in the defence of such a distinctive element of their cultural heritage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for profit sectors.

REFERENCES

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Feng, W. (2013). *Zhongwai Yinyue Jiaoliu Shi* [History of Chinese and Foreign Music Exchanges]. Beijing: People's Music Publishing House.

Goh, E. M. (1998). *Xinjiapo Huayue Fazhan Shilue* [History of Chinese Orchestra Development in Singapore]. Singapore: Lingzi Mass Media.

Gunderson, L. H., Allen, C. R. & Holling, C. S. (2009). *Foundations of Ecological Resilience*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Han, K. -H. (1979). The Modern Chinese Orchestra. *Asian Music*, 11, 1-43.

Jiang, J. (1991). The Influence of traditional Chinese music on professional instrumental composition. *Asian Music*, 22(2), 83-96.

Lam, J. (2008). Chinese Music and its Globalized Past and Present. *Macalester International*, 21(1), 29-77.

Lau, F. (2008). *Music in China*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ling, H. S. (2023). *Shiyuxia de Xinjiapo Huayue Fazhan Lujing* [Overview of the Chinese Orchestra Development Pathway in Singapore]. Singapore: Singapore Chinese Music Federation.

Luo, M. (2018). Cultural policy and revolutionary music during China's Cultural Revolution: the case of the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. *International Journal of Cutural Policy*, 24(4), 431-450.

Meyer, E. M. (2021). *Chinese Music*. China Educational Tours. https://www.chinaeducationaltours.com/guide/culture-chinese-music.htm

Tan, E. (2019). *Decolonizing Global Cultures: Searching for Cultural Identity Through the Chinese Orchestra in Malaysia*. (Masters dissertation). University of Nottingham Malaysia, Malaysia.

Tan, S. B. (2000). The *Huayue Tuan* (Chinese Orchestra) in Malaysia: Adapting to Survive. *Asian Music*, 31(2), 107-128.

The Historical Melody of Chinese Music in Malaysia. (2022). Selangor: Yi Xiang Ler Chinese Musical Center.

Titon, J. T. (2013). The nature of ecomusicology. *Música e Cultura: revista da ABET*, 8(1), 8-18.

Titon, J. T. (2020). *Toward A Sound Ecology: New and Selected Essays*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wang, C., Chow, J. & Wong, S. (2020). *The TENG Guide to the Chinese Orchestra*. Singapore: World Scientific.

Wong, S. S. (2009). *Hua Yue: The Chinese Orchestra in Contemporary Singapore.* (PhD Thesis). University of Sheffield, England.

Yong, Q. (2016). *Pili yibao xiaoyuan huayue tuan fazhan zhi kaocha—yi shengmu maliya guominxing zhongxue huayue tuan wei zhu* [An observation on school orchestra development in Ipoh, Perak—focusing on SMJK Ave Maria Convent Chinese Orchestra] (Unpublished bachelor's thesis). Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia.