

3.1. Academic involvement in the Lion City underground: Documentation, pedagogy, and scholarly connectivities in Singapore's multi-subcultural music scene

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Abstract

Singapore may be reputed as a soft-authoritarian contemporary city-state. Yet within its tightly regulated political and social landscape lies a stubborn multi-subcultural underground music scene that has wrestled a more-or-less autonomous identity spanning close to four decades. Once characterized as either a symptom of western influence or juvenile deviance (or both), a collection of “rebellious” genres, including punk, hardcore, metal and ska, has recently gained a more engaged form of scholarly attention in the republic. In this article, we first map out some significant features of the history of underground music culture in Singapore, and then reflect on and represent our roles as academics in supporting a critical third space for underground music in Singapore. Rather than focus on our performance of normalized/traditional role identities rooted in the scholarly production of research reports and/or providing the legitimacy for students’ scholarly endeavors, we instead discuss our active involvement in supporting Singapore’s underground music scene through documentary filmmaking, the exhibition of heritage and developments in the scene, and the integration of university-based active learning pedagogies at local gigs. Through these activities, we highlight some connections between academia and the multi-subcultural music scene as a community resource.

Keywords: music, pedagogy, Singapore, Southeast Asia, subculture.

1. Introduction

On February 14th, 2015, an alternative music festival was organized to bring together different generations of underground bands in Singapore. Called “Sound Steady Saturday,” the festival involved more than fifteen bands participating in three venues: Pink Noize on North Bridge Road, the Aliwal Arts Centre on Aliwal Street, and Wonderbar @ The Sultan on Jalan Sultan. *Sound Steady* also provided the opportunity to record and document an oral history of alternative music in Singapore, from the 1960s through the 2010s, entitled “Resurfacing 50 Years of Underground Music in Singapore”. *Resurfacing* took place at the three music venues, as well as at two other nearby locations: the Independent Archive and Resource Centre and the Museum of Independent Music, both on Aliwal Street. Funded substantially by the state under the Singapore Memory Project, *Sound Steady* and *Resurfacing* were two pieces of a larger set of projects aimed at increasing the salience of underground music and arts cultures as a component of Singapore’s cultural heritage.

In this paper we discuss how we as academics have tried to contribute to the nurturance of the underground music scene by fostering connectivities between ourselves as university professors and the multi-subcultural music scene in Singapore. Focusing on these two overlapping projects — “Sound Steady Saturday” and “Resurfacing 50 years of Underground Music in Singapore”— we discuss in (auto)ethnographic fashion a case study of how academics can utilize their cultural and social capital in the service of alternative music and youth cultures.

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2. National context: Singapore

As a centuries-old regional trading crossroads and a British colonial port-city since the 19th-century, Singapore (from Old Malay, “Singapura,” meaning “Lion City”) has hosted a multitude of intermingling cultures for generations. The Lion City’s multicultural roots extend to musical cultural genres as well, with a rich (although largely uncharted) history of local, colonial and global music genres developing alongside and mixing with one another. However, with Singapore’s establishment as a sovereign nation and the coming into office of the People’s Action Party (PAP), the government began taking a distinctly interventionist approach toward cultural practices of many kinds, but particularly towards “yellow culture,” a direct translation of the Chinese term *huangse wenhua*, used by the Chinese political left from the 1920s to refer to decadent and anti-social behavior. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Western and local musicians and genres were closely scrutinized in terms of their risk to citizens.

As part of the anti-yellow drive (...) jukebox and pin-table saloons were outlawed because they were gathering places for gangsters and youths. (...) The prohibitions extended to music: Radio Singapura pulled rock ‘n’ roll music off the air to feature more serious programs with a Malayan emphasis. The government also frowned on the hippy movement and men with long hair, as these were associated with the drug culture, as well as permissive and deviant behavior. In addition, several discothèques were closed and had their liquor permits revoked. (...) The restriction on long hair was gradually relaxed in the 1980s, while the ban on jukeboxes was lifted only in 1990 [National Library Board, n.d.].

Until the 1990s, “yellow culture” was informally used to describe and subsequently contain emerging Western inspired popular music youth cultures in the republic. “Yellow culture” was associated with traits such as individualism, indulgence and insolence, and Western music was seen as condoning or even promoting such traits. The state contrasted such problematic cultural ideals with a preferred collectivist ethos involving diligence, hierarchy and harmony. Subsequently framed as “Asian Values,” this value-orientation has promulgated through mainstream, state-sponsored music and other culture industries (Kong, 1995).

Accompanying institutional constraints against youth cultural forms was the systematic marginalization of youth and musicians themselves. An anti-long hair drive named Operation Snip Snip, for example, was launched in 1974. Men with long hair already in-country were served last at government offices, while long-haired men outside were denied entry into the country at all borders. This affected young Singaporean men who consumed Western music and styles and kept Western artists out of the country as well—Led Zeppelin is one famous example of a band barred from entering the country to perform because of their hairstyles. Barring Western musicians out was not enough, however, and vigilance against yellow culture resulted in a large volume of music literature from the West also being banned. Clampdowns on spaces utilized by alternative youth and musicians occurred, with both public spaces cleared and many dancehalls’ operating licenses withdrawn. With the re-emergence of countercultural music subcultures such as punk and then hardcore by the early 1980s, alternative music continued to be scapegoated as a source of social problems. In 1993, a moral panic followed a newspaper report on slam dancing at hardcore gigs, and conservative officials quickly banned the activity outright.

Although the rhetoric of yellow culture is no longer deployed today, the instruments of control remain under the official pretext of maintain “family values” and “social and religious harmony” in a “conservative Asian society.” For example, the ban on moshing was quietly lifted in the early 21st century, yet even today any venue wanting to host live music for public consumption must apply for a permit, submit the lyrics of the musicians’ songs for vetting by a government agency, and pay several thousand dollars as a type of deposit on the permit. Organizers who allow musicians or attendees to behave in ways that threaten or disrupt the Asian values of the state (for example, through lyrical content or physical actions) can have their deposits confiscated (Liew & Fu, 2006).

Generally speaking then, alternative music genres in Singapore have for decades been made synonymous with problematic or deviant behavior, delinquency, risk, and/or criminality. Meanwhile, the state has benefitted by creating a system within which the majority of youths toe the line, and has prided itself on its reputation of maintaining the safety and allegiance of those who do so. Despite all this, multi-subcultural music scenes—falling within an umbrella of various old and new genres that share similar platforms, ranging from Britpop-inspired indie rock to that of punk, heavy metal and ska—have been able to negotiate for ideo-political terrain since the beginning of the nation (Kong, 1995).

The essential component for the presence and evolution of these multi-subcultural music scenes perhaps lies in the availability and access to performative spaces within the city-state. From government-run community centers, to schools and universities, malls, and even carparks, organizers have held gigs in many different types of venues. As the decades have passed, the alternative music scene has grown with and into the landscape as well as the history of Singapore. Alongside pioneers who introduced specific music genres to the scene, enduring bands who continue to serve as focal points around which other musicians and fans work and play, and significant places and events visited by both aging and younger scenesters, there is a perennial need for academic involvement in this lifeworld, whether to document its past and present, or to help negotiate its interactions with dominant/mainstream society. In the remainder of this paper, we briefly describe how our own involvement in two related projects serves these functions.

2.1. Sound Steady Saturday and resurfacing 50 years of underground music in Singapore

“Sound Steady” refers to the perennial and steady existence of alternative, D.I.Y., and resistant music cultures in Singapore. Year after year, decade after decade, alternative sounds persevere and adapt to larger cultural conditions. Sound Steady Saturday was driven by a motivation to appropriate the otherwise commercialized Valentine’s Day on 14 February 2015 to stage a music festival-cum-archival and documentary project along an entire Aliwal Street. Overall, the event involved over twenty musical performers and bands (see Figures 1-2). Over the course of the evening, bands representing Singapore’s 50-year history, from 1970s R&B and Rock to contemporary death metal, shared the stages at three venues. While one venue was filled with teens and young adults head banging to extreme metal, toddlers sat on their fathers’ shoulders watching ska music at another. There was talking dancing, sing-alongs, hugs and cheers in abundance. It brought together many generations of alternative music scenesters and fostered new connections between young and old just as it facilitated the maintenance of old bonds.

“Resurfacing” refers to collective efforts from within the alternative, subcultural, and underground music scenes to make their identities known. The purpose of the documentary project itself was to record the evolution of these scenes over several decades. Performers and bands from the 1960s to the present gathered and shared their experiences and contributions to building up the music scene, and to clarify their own integral parts in Singapore’s music and cultural heritage. As such, while Sound Steady was about experiencing culture and music in the moment, Resurfacing was about personal recollections of past motivations and struggles, as well as hopes and concerns regarding the prospects of alternative music in Singapore’s future.



Figure 1: Flyer for Sound Stead Saturday.

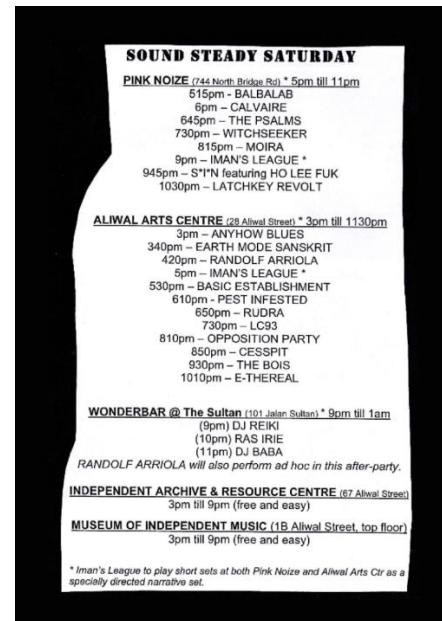


Figure 2: Flyer for Sound Stead Saturday.

3. Kai Khiun: When subculture becomes cultural heritage

With the exhibition of memorabilia and literature from the 1970s as part of the commemoration of four decades of Punk Music by the British Library from May to October of 2016 (British Library 2016), there is a growing realization and recognition of the historical and archival value of what was otherwise thought of “passing fads”. Scholars and artists are increasingly seeing punk and other alternative music subcultures as part of urban heritage and that of collective cultural memories (Bennett, 2009; Darvill, 2014; Reitsamer, 2014; Stanković, 2014; Spracklen, Lucas & Deeks, 2014). Oral history interviews, memoirs and recollections in public talks as well as exhibitions and archival collections count as much as the “latest” album releases and performances as cultural resources for the evolution of the punk and alternative music scene (Baker & Collins, 2015; Baker, Dolye & Homan, 2016; Brandellero & Janssen, 2014; de Jongh, 2013; Lothian, 2012). These trends resonate personally as I have witnessed how the alternative music scene in Singapore has fostered critical community despite the transient nature of music venues (till this day, organizers struggle to carve out performative spaces). Despite the fluid nature of the alternative music scene, a cultural-spatial network has developed over the decades centering around dated shopping malls like Peninsula Plaza and arts houses such as the Substation and more recently Alival Arts Centre.

Being involved in the advocacy of conservation in Singapore from cemeteries to railroads (Liew, 2014; Liew, Pang & Chan, 2014), I recognize the heritage value of these sonic spaces that has yet to be sufficiently documented and appreciated, even by the participants of the alternative music scene themselves. So while I have been more of an audience member than a musician in the scene for decades and do not command an intimate presence among bands and the larger community, my academic, media and conservation networks have given me opportunities to nevertheless establish connectivities between the scene and the broader politics of heritage and collective memory in Singapore. This potential for connectivity became the impetus for the documentary project.

A valuable opportunity came in 2014 with the open grant calls for films by the government initiated Singapore Memory Project (SMP) Film Festival to take place in 2015. Working with the producers of M'GO Films, we successfully pitched our proposal to make a documentary on the heritage of alternative music in Singapore through a live performance and interviews with subjects simultaneously. The budget given by the state was modest (around S\$40,000), and hence the filming and post-production process had to be compressed significantly. I was both the researcher and script writer for the documentary, and my other collaborator, Shaiful Rizan, a prominent gig organizer, made the arrangements to coordinate the performances for the concert while M'GO Films coordinated the filming process. We divided the documentary project team into four units to cover the entire Sound Steady Saturday event. Two fixed cameras were stationed at Aliwal Arts Centre and Pink Noize directly recording all the performances of the day. A more mobile unit headed by the chief director, the late Abdul Nizam, moved among the venues covering the activities of the event. I was involved in the oral history recording unit that was stationed in the lecture theatre at the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC). Known previously as Istana Kampong Glam, which was the palace of the old Malay royalty before being converted to the current MHC, the premise offered a more conducive soundproof environment for the recordings to take place for the band members prior to their performances. I spent about two days conducting oral interviews, not only with participating bands, but also with other academics, DJs, music critics, and retailers who supported the local music scene during the decades concerned. We made contacts to many bands through our personal networks in the scene and were fortunate that most responded positively to be interviewed.

The team interviewed musicians from historically and contemporary prominent bands over two days. Among them included members from the pioneering punk/hardcore groups Stompin Ground and Opposition Party, the first ethnic Indian based Vedic (Extreme) Metal band Rudra, as well as women-centered punk bands and other bands with female artists such as Radigals and Ethereal. We interviewed others who played important roles in the scene, including radio station broadcasters such as Chris Ho and fanzine writers such as Lim Cheng Tju. Record shop retailers such as "Paul" of Roxy Records and "Ridhwan" of Straits Records were also involved. I also turned the camera on myself as one of the local academics who have studied the Singapore alternative music scene for the past two decades. Throughout the interview process, we had graduate and undergraduate students (including from Patrick's course, see below) assisting us with the coordination with interviewees, the recording as well as the transcription of interviews. For many students, this was their first time doing interviews, and more importantly, encountering another part of Singapore society. For one Malay-Muslim graduate student who grew up listening to local hardcore music, the experience was indeed an emotional affirmation of his communitarian roots.

Supplementing the live recordings of the performances and interviews was invaluable archival footage that I managed to source from community arts archivists like Ridhwan Ghany of Straits Records as well as from the voluminous photographic and newspaper collections of artist-archivist Koh Nguang How. Both Ghany and Koh have been diligently been collecting flyers, records, posters and fanzines since the 1980s, when explicitly oppositional music subcultures started to develop. Together with purchased copyrights images from the national newspapers, we produced a 45-minute documentary, "Resurfacing 50 years of Underground Music," for the Singapore Memory Project Film Festival where the films were screened in the main libraries across Singapore between August and September 2015.

While this documentary could potentially have given clearer recognition to the political and cultural agency of alternative musicians in Singapore, the strings attached to government funding resulted in the contents being "moderated for public consumption." In short, we were required to edit the film to function as a celebration of multiculturalism and youthful creativity without engaging in discussions of politics or social justice. This sanitized the more important themes that I wanted to deal with explicitly, like that of the politics of state control and policing on alternative music in the republic. Fortunately, the project did not end with the 2015 screenings. The producers

and I are still keen to re-produce a more critical version for film festival circuit. Yet, given the prior official and public disdain of underground music in Singapore, I feel that through the commissioning of the documentary and its screening in public libraries, this was a significant step forward in the positioning of this genre of musical expression as part of Singapore's national heritage and the collective memories of its citizenry.

4. Patrick: Building understanding and reflexivity through student engagement

While Kai Khiun took to lead building connections from the inside out, I took on the role of establishing connectivity from the outside in. Having taught at universities in North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia, I have learned that Singaporean university students overwhelmingly lack meaningful contact with subcultures, not least because of the social and political trouble that can come to those who engage in explicit criticism of dominant policies and practices (e.g., Amnesty International, 2016). Thus I have created an opportunity for students to interact with the topic of alternative and opposition cultures through an undergraduate sociology course entitled, Youth Cultures and Subcultures. In the course, students interact with the relevant literatures, assemble data having to do with a youth cultural or subcultural topic of their choice, and tie those data to theories or concepts (see Williams, 2008; Williams & Ho, 2016; Williams & Zaini, 2016). Because *Sound Steady* and *Resurfacing* would take place during the semester I was teaching this course, I made participation in the event a course requirement. Specifically, I assigned students to work a minimum of three hours at the event in some capacity needed by the promoters, venue managers, or documentary film crews. Many students subsequently wrote reflective essays in which they analyzed their experiences in terms of sociology [the block quotes below come from these essays].

In the weeks leading up to the events, I invited two members of the local punk scene to class to discuss underground music and culture in Singapore, to outline some possible roles students might perform, and answer any questions. The need to break the ice between university students and local scenesters was obvious in students' essays. As one pair of students wrote in reaction to the punks' visit:

There was much apprehension and anxiety due to a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding what this particular subculture entailed. We had preconceived notions that this subculture would be non-accepting of us, because we have been religiously adhering to the system our whole lives. We also expected the environment to be very 'us versus them', believing that they would not be welcoming to people who did not seem to belong. Especially since they came to our class and told us that all of us looked like undercover cops (...).

Despite such fears, students responded positively to the punks' visit and admitted that the punks were much more "normal" than they had anticipated. This warmed students up to the prospect of working alongside punks and other members of the multi-subcultural music scene at the event. On the day of the event, students were again surprised, this time by the passion and camaraderie expressed by subcultural attendees. Some students were surprised at seeing individuals who "were well above 50," but for whom "rock and roll is very much still alive within them. It was inspiring to see that they were so passionate about the subculture despite having aged." Another student wrote, "What was striking was the way in which everyone knew one another, be it young or old. At the door and even in the crowd, they would shake hands and greet each other by name."

My desire as a sociologist was not simply to have students experience the event as cultural tourists, but rather to find the opportunity to engage in making use of the "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959; Williams, 2016). For one student, sociology's relevance became suddenly clear as she helped the film production crew at the Malay Heritage Centre.

I was given the logline job. I thought it was a mundane, give-any-tom-a-job task, but little did I know how wrong I was. I was in time for the (...) interview [with] an all-girl band that was formed in 1997, and that plays hardcore punk music. The interviewer asked questions about how the band evolved, how it was like being an all-girl band in a predominantly male subculture, and if the band feels accepted in mainstream society. There was a question about whether they sing about girl power. Right then and there, I knew those were wonderful sociological questions (...).

Another pair of students also recorded insights on gender, as well as on notions of ethnicity and class:

Over the course of the afternoon, it appeared to us that the DIY music subculture embodied a tacitly masculine dimension. The festival also had a distinct ethno-racialized character. An overwhelming majority of the participants were observed to be of Malay heritage. We opine that the ethno-racial makeup of the participants can be linked to the historical socioeconomic position of the Malays in Singapore.

Getting Singapore university students engaged in the everyday life of the underground music scene gave them the opportunity interact with the cultural Other. Because Singaporean university students are largely those who have been "religiously adhering to the system" for much of their lives, I believe it is important to show them ways of living that do not adhere closely to dominant cultural values such as meritocracy and economic pragmatism. And while not producing instant and profound effects, the opportunity nevertheless expanded their interpretive horizons:

Upon leaving, my friend and I had a long and in-depth conversation about what subcultures meant to us. We think that so much can be said about what we think about subcultures, about why they are antagonized, and whether the antagonising is real and whether they themselves want to remain antagonized (because going mainstream is not an ambition) — when at the end of the day, we should really ask and listen to what subcultures really want from this society. What we do know that subcultures have given us a really refreshing perspective that is radically different from the lives we lead in a Singaporean university, and for that, we thank the course for exposing us to them.

When studying subcultures through normal classroom assignments, my students most-often engage in descriptive, third-person writing, even when discussing topics they are sincerely interested in. Such reflective writing therefore represented moments ripe with the potential for personal growth as social change (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985). I will continue to flesh this out with some literature on pedagogy, active learning/engagement, and reflective writing.

5. Conclusions

Kai Khiun—The entire documentary project opened me to the possibility of developing a model for applied research in the otherwise predominantly theoretical field of cultural and media studies. Moving from perceiving them as merely ethnographic subjects to be studied, what I see now is a more dynamic form of scholarly engagement. In essence, *Sound Steady* and *Resurfacing* have reconnected my experiential subjectivity, the alternative music that I had listened to for several decades, my academic expertise, and my activist involvement in conservation and heritage in Singapore. Through the project, I have been able to make meaningful bridges between academia and active citizenry.

Patrick—Feeling like a subcultural outsider when I came to Singapore, the Sound Steady project gave me a way to connect with local subcultural actors and to offer my cultural and social capital for the betterment of the scene. Equally important has been the opportunity to bring high-achieving Singaporean university students into this connection as well. Rather than engaging in the armchair study of cultural difference, students were able to connect with the local punk scene in a way that moved them beyond *characterizations* of what it means to resist or reject mainstream culture. By

interacting with members of the alternative music scene, mainstream students walked away with new knowledge about the breadth of human experiences and beliefs to be found in their own island nation. Such contact needs to increase in both frequency and duration. The experience, I hope, will remain with them as they continue on their sociological journey through life.

On the hand, the *Sound Steady* and *Resurfacing* projects function alongside similar projects in other countries to map out the heritage of oppositional music cultures (Guerra and Bennett, in press; Moreira, Guerra, Oliveira, & Quintela, 2015). On the other hand, these projects were much more than academic. Brotherton (2007, p. 377) has written that,

The role of the researcher must not be merely that of acquiring knowledge or the accumulation of information. To the contrary, it must also contribute to the empowerment, the reflexivity, and the (...) abilities of the subaltern youth, launching the construction of bridges able to support social relationships (...), from a mediating perspective in which the researchers may also learn to walk with youth that produce on a daily basis a culture of resistance. This relationship may also move to the rest of society, so that the results of the investigations may be put to the service of moral values that could help the excluded and oppressed communities.

It was with a similar commitment to underground cultures and music scenes that we have undertaken a responsibility toward building up connectivities that may benefit society at large. The Sound Steady and Resurfacing projects gave us new opportunities to apply scholarly and pedagogical practices to contribute to the strengthening of the music scene, to create new documents that map out its history and heritage, and to expand the cultural horizons of university students. Going beyond the usual roles of participant-observers or experts, we have we linked our academic and pedagogical backgrounds more tightly with the community as co-producers in the making memories in contemporary Singapore.

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