

The Soundscape of the Creative City, Singapore: Heritage Building and the Creativity on Cultures

Kaori FUSHIKI¹

Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

Introduction

There are many performances on the streets in Singapore, such as the Chinese street opera and *Getai* in the lunar seventh month, lion dance in the Chinese New Year, *Thaipusam* (Tamil Hindu religious procession) and *Kuda Kepang* (Malay horse dancing that the dancers often go into trance). However, all these street performances are tightly regulated because of the potential loudness. The concept of “loudness” suggests that these street performances are considered as the cause of “noise pollution” in the city. Is it truly “noise”? In this paper, I will argue that these performances can be viewed as giving creativity and life to the city from the concept of “soundscape”. Furthermore, these performances can be regarded as adding liveliness and energy of the community visually and acoustically to the city temporally.

Due to the space limit of this paper, it will only focus on Chinese street performances.

1. “Soundscape” and Memory of the City

The word and concept of “soundscape” was proposed by Canadian Composer R. Murray Schafer, in the mid-1960s. According to his book, *The Tuning of the world* (1977), the definition of the soundscape is “the sonic/acoustic environment”(Schafer 1977, 271, 275).

Schafer’s initial concept of “soundscape” mentioned the sounds in an immersive environment, and make people open their ears to the sounds in every environments such as in a city, in a forest, in nature. And he tried to use the sounds as the modules for the acoustic design in a geographic scape and also use it as the elements of “music” to musical composition in his work. To understand the concept, there are three main elements: keynote sound, sound signals, and soundmark. According to his definition, “the keynote sounds are those which are heard by particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which of the sounds are perceived (Schafer 1977, 272)”. Sounds can be created by nature (geography and climate) such as wind, forest, rain, thunder, and animals. In a city, the sound of the traffic becomes the keynote sound. Sound signal is a foreground sound, such as bells or sirens. The concept of soundmark is associated with landmark which means unique or specific that can be identified to mark out a particular landmark. In addition, he mentioned the term of “soundscape”

to define the acoustic ecology in contrast with acoustic design. He said, “acoustic ecology is therefore the study of sounds in relationship to life and society” (Schafer 1977, 205). Then, the study of soundscape became a subject of acoustic ecology (sonic environment) or environment of sound.

However, because of the one certain topic, “noise pollution”, was came on as a social problem from the view of keynote sound of the city, traffic sound or noise, his important philosophy in this concept was hided. Moreover, the concept of soundscape became to be misunderstood. The important philosophy behind Schafer’s concept is the recognition of people that include time range. Actually in his concept, the recognition of people and time range / time-line of their recognition were reflected. In his book *The Rhinoceros in the classroom* (1975), he made excise to his students and asked his students to “remember” the sounds in last few minutes “before” his clapping hand.

Schafer’s theory also became to use to study not only geographical acoustic design but audio recordings, performance of sounds, compositions using sampling sounds of nature with/without musical note or performances. In the music scene, Barry Traux, a Canadian composer, is the pioneer of the composition with the sampling sound of nature. While he composed his music with sampling sounds and electric tools, such as synthesis including very early technology of real-time granular synthesis, he also wrote a guide book for the soundscape in 1978. In his book *The Handbook for Acoustic Ecology* (1978), he defined “soundscape” as:

An environment of SOUND (or sonic environment) with emphasis on the way it is perceived and understood by the individual, or by a society. It thus depends on the relationship between the individual and any such environment. (Traux 1978, 126)

His definition becomes a standard for the researchers and users of soundscape until today. His theory and practice was used in various ways, activities such as noise control system, sound mapping, sound design or soundscape design in the city. It is, however, important point to note in his concept of soundscape “understanding of the individuals and society”. Without this understanding, “soundscape” will not exist.

Continuous theory was appeared in 1990s. Expanding on the soundscape concept, Bernie Krause coined the word “biophony.” As a composer, and a soundscape recordist, he did his recordings in the wild nature for many years. Krause’s theory showed us the three kinds of sound that make up the structure of soundscape: geophony, biophony and human factor in the environment of sounds. Not only soundscape for “music” or “musical composition” that Schafer was supposed, but soundscape itself consisted by natural sound that include animal vocalizations, the sound of weather and natural elements.

Even though Krause emphasized on the sound of nature as a form of music, he also

suggested the importance of human factors. For example, when he described about the specific geophony or ground / earth sound, he also mentioned a group of old men he met. The old men told him that the sound was a kind of soundmark to recognize the geographical space, and once they lost it in the development, they would lose the geographical recognition for the space and collective memory of their society. And actually, and very unfortunately, because of due to land developments, the geographical space was lost and “geophony” sound that emerged due to the specific form of the land, climate and season was lost forever.

The recognition of human is important in the study of soundscape for the recognition on the scape or world. The study of soundscape will also take into consideration of the historical perspective, that is, people who used to live or were related to soundscape. For this reason, I will modify the definition of “soundscape” as “the environment of sound and performance” that will include geophony, biophony, memories (individual and public memory), time and history.

Usually if we said “soundscape”, many people will imagine continuous sounds such as “drone”. But in my paper, “soundscape” doesn’t mean “drone” sounds for this time. In this paper, I will focus on occasional sound in the city rather than “drone”. The subject of focus in the study of “soundscape” will be the performing arts, which is usually known for its rich variety of sounds.

2. Performance / Performing Arts as Problematiques

The performing arts that will be selected for discussion in this paper include Chinese street opera (*Jiexi* 街戲), *Getai* 歌台 and Procession (or more well-known as *Yewkeng*). The idea of “problematiques” doesn’t mean that these performances are social “problems”. What I mean is each performance is including the serious problems that are related to the social problems.

Chinese street opera is a famous street performance in Singapore. It was the early 1990s when I saw it on the streets for the first time. At that time, there were still a significant number of audiences watching the performances. However, fifteen years later, street opera seems to have become less commonly seen on the street and were gradually replaced by *Getai* (singing show) performances during the lunar seventh month believed to be the Hungry Ghosts Festival. According to Lee’s writings (Lee 2000, 2002, 2009), after the shaping of the cultural aesthetics in Singapore in 1990s, many of the “professional” troupes² that usually used to stage Chinese street opera in the temple events have less chance in recent years. And it became difficult to earn a living for them. In the background, there are some social problems. In ultra-meritocratic society, low income job workers are thought as a lack of or low-level educated people and low income job is not attractive to young generation. And the case of Chinese street opera, the dialects to play opera become not familiar with young generation through the policy of English-knowing bilingualism. In the past, the opera troupes had a function to give

knowledge with their dialects to young generation who could not join the national education system because of the lack of the school expenses. Nowadays, there is no function like that and members become old enough. Because of the reason, some troupes, such as one of Teochew opera 潮劇 troupe, become aging group that all members are over 65 years old, and some troupes cannot continue their performances. To say about the performances of small dialects group, although it is still continuing their performances in the rituals, there are very few people to see and join it today. In the background, there is the problem of difficulties of the succession between the generations because of the change of their custom and the conversion. In Henghua 興化 temple, there is “*Mulianxi* 目蓮戲” in every lunar seventh month, and they have a big “real human theatre *Mulian* 真人目蓮” every ten years. According to Tanaka, there were so many participants of the ritual theatre and it took almost three hours or more to help out their ancestor’s soul from the hell in the ritual. However, in my three years observation, only a few families joined it and finally there was no family in 2012.

Recently, because of the movie “881”, *Getai* was somewhat revived in Singapore. In the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, *Getai* is introduced as a Mandarin singing show performed during the lunar seventh month in Singapore and Malaysia. It is, however, a singing show performed in various dialects and language, and it is held out the year around. It is usually staged in the open field nearby public places like train stations and public housing area from 7.30 pm to 11pm. Due to its location, there may be many passersby. Because the dialects are used for the stage, however, it may not be comprehensible to non-Chinese and young generation, its audience is mainly limited to the older Chinese who can understand the dialect and appreciate this form of entertainment. Below is one case.

It was the lunar seventh month in 2010. I found the *Getai* information on a website and newspapers that it would be held in “土敏街 in Chinatown”, and I was planning to go there. However, when I asked a Chinese staff in one of the hotels in Chinatown, she didn’t know the name of the street, even though she likes to watch *Getai* and can speak Mandarin well. Finally, we found out the place from a stall owner who explained that the place referred to “Smith Street 史密斯街”. And when we backed to hotel, we found a Malay staff already knew the place. She said “Oh, the stage was already made on the way to come here.” Because she was not interested in *Getai* and probably she could not read Chinese character, it could be happen.

Moreover, because of the problem of the understanding of many dialects, many people cannot understand and enjoy it. Although main languages for the *Getai* are Mandarin and Hokkien, but also many dialects and languages such as Cantonese, Teochew, Malay, English or Singlish and even Thai are used and comedies depends on the dialect or language gap are in the *Getai* stages. There are a few *Getai* stages in the touristic site usually, however, when the hosts of the stage find the foreign tourists in the audience, soon after they become the English translator for them. As for the repertoires, there are some famous songs in the performance,

but some of them are quite old, nostalgic Taiwanese pieces such as 1930s Taiwanese language song, and depends on the audience some Cantonese song or Teochew song were also sung. Such multilingual stages, especially the stages that needed the understandings of dialects, would become the cause of less interest of young generation. *Getai* has been portrayed rather negatively and regulations have been imposed as a result. Here are examples of regulation: regulation on the performing time as it was regarded as noise pollution, no drinking of alcohol while on stage, regulation on the performers to go down the stage and interact with audience.

Another example is the religious procession or *Yewkeng*. As Elliot and Chan introduced in the past, *Yewkeng* is part of the dimension of *tangki* 童乩 (spirit medium) worship usually conducted during the relocation of temples, opening new temple rituals and the *fenxiang* 分香 (the exchange of incense) ritual in the celebration of gods, etc. When these processions emerged on the street, the gods descend to *tangkis* of temples or *Sintua* 神壇 (Hokkien, shrines) are believed to give blessings to public. *Yewkeng*, however, is also strictly regulated. Permission has to be requested before the procession and the duration of performance is shorter than the traditional funeral procession. Even when permission is requested, it may sometimes not be permitted. Roads have to be closed to make away for the procession and it may become a nuisance to people who are not involved in this procession. Moreover, of course, there are people who don't like *Yewkeng* and its sound actually. Because closed road caused the traffic jam, many troupes such as golden drum troupes, lion dance, dragon dance and *Gongguan* 公館 (Hokkien) make a loud sound, people can complain about it. It will be so loud actually if we do the acoustic research on it. Even though, is it possible to decide it as noise without thinking of its social context? And whether the scenes that are showed off the specific characters of *tangki* such as piercing and tattoo have to be kept at a distance as something that stir people up a kind of violence or negative images? Moreover, as most fundamental question, is it possible to put the people who make *Yewkeng* depends on their own belief of *tangki* in the social "fringe group" as Chan mentioned us in her book (Chan 2006, 122)?

3. Creativity on the Soundscape

The examples provided above have illustrated that there are certain elements in these performing art forms that are not readily accepted by the society today. However, there are still important elements attached to some of these performances that are in separable from the history of Singapore and its people. Some of these performances that I will pick up as examples to illustrate my point are *Getai* and *Yewkeng*. In addition, the example of *Gongguan* will also be included.

Gongguan is a kind of performance and ensemble in the rituals in the temples. It is conducted among the Hokkien dialects group. However, elements of the performance, such as people, musical instruments, and context of the performance are a mixture of the others

actually. As for the musical instruments, *Cimbo* 深波 (Teochew) and *Doulo* 斗鑼 (Teochew) are included that are the very characteristic gongs for Teochew performances, and drum, cymbals, and its construction is also same with Teochew *lorkor* 潮州鑼鼓. Among the people who play *Gongguan*, there are some people who play *lorkor* also, and actually after a few days of their *Gongguan* performance, we can see their performance in *lorkor*. In addition, it is quite common that dancers of the *Tongzi* 童子 for the performance who are needed physical strength and toughness and performers of the gongs and cymbals include non-Chinese members. This performance is regarded as a common practice in Singapore. However, from the eye of an outsider or foreigner, this performance is rather unique. For example, during the lunar seventh month of 2012, Taoist priests from Wenzhou, China who were invited to perform rituals in Singapore, run up to the performance when they found it and shoot it with their handy phone or cameras because of the rareness for them. Probably same things are happened on the lion dance and dragon dance in the city.

Despite being a relatively new form of performing art, *Getai* performance has displayed its ability to perform some functions that are regarded as necessary as part of traditional Chinese religious problematiques. For example in the two cases observed, *Getai* in a cemetery requested by devotee to pay respect for the ancestors, and *Getai* in *fashi* 法事 or *foshi* 佛事. Both cases occurred in 2011 and reported in *Shinmin* newspaper. As a result, more people became aware of the new function of *Getai* in taking part in religious rituals. In the past, this function was usually carried out by Chinese Opera.

Another example is *Yewkeng*, again. The Chinese character for the meaning of the procession are not only 遶境, but there are so many variations such as 游境, 巡游, 游景, 犒軍. Even though there are many variations, the performance of the procession still called as *Yewkeng* or *Yiukeng* and it is a very interesting point of Singapore. The orthography in alphabet that is already gotten consensus from the people don't same as pin yin of Mandarin, neither pin yin of other dialects, and it is quite difficult to assign the orthography in Chinese Character. Moreover, not only Chinese Character but also in alphabet, there are variations in orthography. Even though, because people don't misunderstand it in their conversation, it is probably true that people imagine and assign the performance and happening in the expanding images out from acoustic conversation or orthography. In addition, it can be seen that putting new elements on *Yewkeng* to show off the procession. Other form new incense pot, sedan chair, statues of the gods, flags of the gods and temples, it is also added such as new uniform for the members, costume of the *tangki-s*, mobile-*Getai* and *Namshaolin's* 南少林 mobile music car. Something new is actually happen around the *tangki-s* their selves. Addition to the deities who already had descend to *tangki*, new deities come down on them and it can be seen that the creativities on the costume and make up with their descent. Familiar deity's costume is renovated, new deity's costume is created or invented with the help of costume maker. And the

deities in gorgeous costumes appeal their existence, their power and the context that they are needed socially in the performance as procession in the city.

One more example is a kind of Buddhists ritual. *Zaokee* 走旗 (Teochew) is one of the ritualistic performance in *Siangng* 善堂 (Teochew) that are conducted by children and young boys with lantern and flags. Originally it is a ritualistic performance by monks with five colors flag³ conducted in the very opening⁴ of the series of the rituals and called *Wufangyuantan* 五方圓壇.⁵ Nowadays, this ritual is conducted in night time, and it is said the creation of the *Zaokee* was a kind of modernization of the social and rituals.⁶ The changes of the performer from monks to children, and addition of the lantern are kinds of creation. In the case of Newton Circus, these lantern became the important objects for the auction in next day, and after children offered it to the certain place for the auction, run back to alter while they were waving their five colored flags. In addition, sometimes, the new performance venue is also created such as *Getai*. The example in here is *Zaokee* in front of alter in the cemetery. Why did this group conduct this ritual in the cemetery during the lunar seventh month? The reason was not sure. Nevertheless, this running lantern dance with the gorgeous sounds of *Teochew foqu* 潮州佛曲 in the cemetery was in spot light.

4. Concepts over Public Memory of the City and its Sustention

It is a natural thing that people who are living now in the city or the geographic space where many people and cultures came across, become to have strong interests on their roots as their fundament. Where we came from and how did we build the life in here? Especially in Singapore where people have the strong aim to be “the nation”, people made their best endeavors to keep the desire to their variant roots and to keep each remembrance. It is, however, true also that some of the records and remembrances were lost in the change of their life and customs, modernization and nationalization. Exploration for, collection of, and sharing individual memories before they varnish away to make of public memory and to make common history is very important thing. In the crisis of the loss, the project in National Archives of Singapore that are collecting individual remembrance/memories becomes very progressive one in the world from the view of archives studies as a result of people’s consciousness.

Positive participant to the project and sharing the information of people make public memory and history newly, and the society that support the public memory and history is not same as Maurice Halbwachs’s one that are entrenched strongly. Halbwachs’s cohesion and society that make the public memory is a kind of society that has a certain clear identity with a clear boundary, but how about the cohesion in Singapore? Do people make a society with a kind of exclusivity? When we think that it looks like people moving freely, there is no border in languages, religion and “cultural” performance, we have to know the limits of the theory of

the public memory by Halbwachs. In the fact, the flexible cohesion that people are freely join in or off from is emerged with acceptance of the others, and its cohesion makes flexible public memory or collective social memory and history.

Moreover, spatio-temporal sphere that is made by this flexible cohesion and is shared by the people have a function of public sphere. Even there is consideration for individual background and remembrance, public benefits becomes most important thing in that public sphere. Nevertheless the public sphere in here is also different form Harbermas's one. On the one hand, Harbermas's one tends to protest and give battles to the pre-existing society over the public benefits, on the other hand, public sphere in Singapore is the cohesion emerged from the private sphere that is not fight to pre-existing society, but loosely cooperating, negotiating public sphere without clear boundary for others. Because of the reason, it becomes a big issue if we bring the talk about such a flexible cohesion to ethnicity, politics, religion, and nationalism, etc.

If so, how we should describe the flexible cohesion in the geographic space or "city"? The key concept to dissolve it is "heritage". Heritage means to make emerge or find individual remembrance and public memory, to object-ize it, and to make it "resources". Individual remembrance is collected, becomes public memory and history, and becomes heritage. Moreover the cohesion that is sharing the heritage becomes flexible cohesion in the society. Namely it means the appearance of the strategy in modern community and society to keep the harmony and unity when people see the heritage in the sounds of the city and soundscapes.

In that case, what is the building heritage in the soundscape in the city? It is not only making some kind of "beauty" such as aesthetic mentioned in performing arts on the stage, also not only preserving "traditional", vanishing performance or performing arts or practices on the street or in the city. However, keeping and continuing the creativity in the soundscape of the city is the most important point.

Conclusion: the Creativity on Spatio-temporal soundscape

The city or geographic space of Singapore is a "node" of multi-dimensional sphere. In the soundscape of the city as one side of the sphere, many of the global or wide floating objects are included such as people who are not only performer but also floating people including migrants, performance or performing arts, musical instruments, repertoires, costume, design, thought and philosophy. All of the elements meet in here, be mixed and rebuild in the form of "something new", and emerged as performance as the soundscape of the city.

To sustain the role, function and centripetal force of the city as an attractive "node", it is very important spatio-temporal flexible cohesion and its vitality. To sustain the flexible cohesion dissolves dissatisfaction and conflict among people, and the exclusivity is also removed. However, the static cohesion makes people lose their interest, after that the cohesion

itself will decline, and it makes difficult to sustain it because the loss of the attraction of the pre-existed city as a certain geographic sphere. How it can attract people, it is the most problem to sustain the city.

It is the spatio-temporal soundscape and the creativity of culture to show the people such flexibility, to embody the sense of the certain cohesion, and to sustain the power of it. As I already argued in above, the soundscape is a mixture of geophony and biophony that are already including the human recognition, remembrance and history, and sound environment made by human elements, then the performance that are not only constructed acoustic sound but include the other performances. Performances on the street that are thought as quite usual performances are also such kind of soundscape, and it attract people, then it have a kind of role and power to sustain the flexible cohesion. In that meaning, the soundscape in the city is a strategy for the harmony and unity of the society.

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Notes

- 1 Part-time lecturer, Taisho University, Keio University, etc. Without written permission from author, any quotation from this paper is not allowed. Contact: alasarum@yahoo.com
- 2 What is the professional is a big issue. In this paper, I use the term “professional” to describe people who earn a living with it. It is not concern in professional skills of the playing opera techniques.
- 3 Five colors are black, white, yellow, red and green.
- 4 It is the morning of the first day of the rituals.
- 5 There is a same ritual in Hong Kong called as *Zouwushi* 走五士.
- 6 A man in the *Siangtng* also told me: there were the reason that the children have to go to school in the morning, and because of the reason, the ritual changes its timing from the very beginning of the rituals to night.

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