Chinese popular music as a musical heritage and cultural marker of the Malaysian Chinese

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ABSTRACT
Chinese popular music, inspired by pre-war Shanghai music known as ‘shidai qu’ (时代曲) (songs of the era) and evolving to include Canto pop and Taiwanese Mandarin songs, has always been popular among the Chinese in Malaysia. This music is featured on radio, television, karaoke, and performed by orchestras such as the Dama Chinese Orchestra (大马) to enthusiastic reception. The songs have a broad appeal that transcends time, generation, and place. Of significance is the observation that the music has become a cultural marker and musical heritage for Chinese in Malaysia and in the region. The paper looks at factors behind this development.

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Chinese popular music; Chinese diaspora; cultural heritage; identity; Malaysia; China

Introduction
It is argued in this paper that Chinese popular music is increasingly regarded as a cultural heritage and marker of the Chinese. The case in Malaysia is used to explain what makes Chinese popular music, consisting initially of the shidai qu and, later, Cantopop and Taiwanese Mandarin songs so much a part of the Chinese community and its identity. The paper traces the rise of the pre-war Shanghai music. It then examines the changing social and political environment within which these songs have become a favourite among overseas Chinese communities. It will point out that much of the flow of Chinese popular music to the region and its place in the cultural life of the Chinese has been possible through the initiative of private individuals. This flow, to an extent, has also been driven by commercialism. Globalisation and technological change have also contributed to the continuing appeal of the Chinese popular songs. Finally, the paper argues that attempts by the state to define a national culture have had the effect of marginalising the cultural expression of diaspora Chinese and, as a reaction, led to the rise of Chinese musical groups such as Dama.

Popularity of Chinese songs
A striking development in the Malaysian music scene today is the popularity of Chinese songs. Chinese popular music with roots in pre-World War II Shanghai has evolved to include songs of post-war Hong Kong and Taiwan, including those of Teresa Teng. The pre-war Shanghai songs known as shidai qu (时代曲) (songs of the era) or lao ge (old songs) continue to be played on radio and television, performed by Chinese orchestras and featured in ge-tai (歌台) (open stage performances) and karaoke. Over the years, however, different genres have appeared – such as the huang mei diao (Mandarin folk songs) – followed by Hong Kong’s Cantonese pop and Taiwan’s Mandarin songs that attracted younger fans.