6. Translating the *shigu* from the streets to the stage

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Video footage relating to this chapter is available online at:
http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/sounds_translation_citation.html

The large barrel-like drum the *shigu* is part of a percussion ensemble that accompanies the Chinese lion dance during New Year celebrations and other folk festivals. The din created by the *shigu*, together with the gong and cymbals, heralds the arrival of the lion-dance troupe and also serves to symbolically drive away evil spirits. This chapter seeks to chart the abstraction of this drum from its traditional context and function to its subsequent appearance on stage. It attempts to throw light on the changes in sound when ‘translated’ from one domain to another and raises the question of how this transplantation has impacted on the ability of the *shigu* to represent Chinese culture in Malaysia.

Before I proceed, let us take a closer look at the contextual background from which the *shigu* emerges. As mentioned, the large drum is part of the accompanying ensemble of the Chinese lion dance. The dance is a celebration and practice steeped in ritualism, martial arts and clan rivalries. As part of the ritual, the noise-making instruments serve to herald the arrival of the ‘lion’ and to exorcise the performance place of evil spirits. The performance is usually held as a street procession leading to the entrance of a shop or house whose owner had requested the performance (Slovenz 1987). This part of the ritual is complemented with blessing and good fortune, as symbolised by the snatching of a red envelope containing money and a bunch of green leaves (usually lettuce). There are two versions of the lion dance—a northern and a southern—and its performance during festivities is practised in China and Chinese diasporic communities (Slovenz 1987; Sarwar-Yousof 1986; Johnson 2005a, 2005b). Two performers hidden under the papier-mâché head and its silk tail animate the ‘lion’. The performers manipulate the head and tail in vigorous expert martial art movements to the drumming of the *shigu*. Very little research has been carried out on the sound aspect of this performance in its current practice. Much of the current research focuses on the lion-dance performance and its ritual implications. Slovenz, however, did note in her account the change in drumbeats of the *shigu* that seemed to signal the change in movements of the lion. Thus, the drum plays

an important role as a communicator—to the general public of the entrance of the lion to the scene and to the lion-dance performers of change.

Politicising the lion dance in Malaysia

In Malaysia, it is the southern version of the lion dance that is most widely performed (Sarwar-Yousof 1986). It has the same ritual significance as elsewhere, however, the lion-dance performance and its socio-cultural significance have evolved over the years, involving some 'reworking and reinvention' (Carstens 2005:168). For example, although street performances are still apparent, the performance has also evolved into annual competitions held at the Genting Resorts near Kuala Lumpur, attended by national and international performance troupes.¹ Although an interesting topic, it is, however, not the focus of this chapter. As described above, the lion-dance performance holds import and significance for the Chinese community in Malaysia. The Malaysian population comprises 64 per cent ethnic Malays/Bumiputras,² 26 per cent ethnic Chinese, 7 per cent Indians and 3 per cent minority and mixed ethnicities (Department of Statistics 2000). The lion-dance performance is significant because the dance is representative of the Chinese community in Malaysia and their struggle for recognition and acceptance as equal members of the Malaysian political entity. According to Carstens (2005), the lion-dance performance is an important aspect of Malaysian Chinese culture because it epitomises 'the lessons learned by generations of immigrants: that success in life and good fortune did not come easily, but ultimately derived from a combination of skill, hard work, and auspicious circumstances'.

Within the Chinese diaspora, the street performance has held an honoured role of representing Chinese culture, community and tradition vis-a-vis a majority community (Slovenz 1987; Johnson 2005a). As a folk practice that dates back to the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Carstens 2005:168), it could even serve as a cultural link to a traditional past and place of origin. In Malaysia, however, this representation is eminent.

In the decades between 1970 and 1990, the lion dance took on a highly politicised position in the ethnic tension-ridden social landscape of Malaysia. The national cultural debate began with the National Culture Policy of 1971³ that stipulated that only culture practiced by the indigenous people of Malaysia would be recognised as part of the national culture. In practice, this policy welcomed mainly traditional art forms and practices of the Malay community. The exclusion of other traditional cultures (namely those of the Chinese and Indians) was compounded when government ministers such as the Minister of Home Affairs, Ghazalie Shafie, labelled these cultures and practices (including the lion dance) 'archaic', 'extinct', 'futile and a waste of time' and a 'hinderance [sic] to the emergence of a national culture' (Kua 1990:10–11). *The Straits Times* (20 May 1979, quoted in Kua 1990) reported that Shafie said specifically of the lion dance

that, 'with its musical accompaniment, [it] could not be easily accepted as a Malaysian dance form and music'. He went on to say that 'the dance had originated from China where it was now extinct and as such it could not develop further and be accepted by all'.

Representatives of the Chinese community—the Democratic Action Party (the opposition of the incumbent Coalition Party), the Chinese Malaysian Association and the Malaysian Chinese Association—reacted against this, arguing for a multicultural national cultural policy and identity that would recognise the contributions of all Malaysian citizens regardless of ethnicity. They persisted that the lion dance was an inextricable part of Chinese culture and its practice should be absorbed into a Malaysian national culture (Kua 1990; Tan 1992; Carstens 2005).⁴ The fragmented Chinese clan associations (which traditionally were rivals and these rivalries were displayed during the lion-dance performance) were brought together to form the Federation of Lion Dance Associations in the early 1970s (Carstens 2005:152–3) to create a united Chinese front against the perceived adversarial charges of the pro-Malay government and its policies. It was in this context—the politicisation of national culture—that the lion dance began to take on a symbolic status as representative of Chinese struggle for recognition in Malaysia.

The ethnic tension subsided somewhat after an operation to clamp down on political dissidents, 'Operasi Lalang', in 1987 (see Crouch 1996:80–2, 106–13). In 1991, Mahathir Mohamad, the then Prime Minister of Malaysia (1982–2003), announced his new vision for a fully developed Malaysia by 2020 (<<http://www.epu.my>>). This plan placed emphasis on development not only economically but in education and culture. One of the first challenges to this aim, he contended, was to confront the ethnic divisions and tensions that were ingrained in the sociopolitical landscape of Malaysia. He campaigned for a '*Bangsa Malaysia*', which in simple translation could mean a 'Malaysian race' or 'Malaysian nation'. This concept engendered many ensuing discussions and debates about what it meant and the practicalities of its application. Mahathir himself attempted a definition in 1995: '*Bangsa Malaysia* means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia⁵ and accept the Constitution' (*Straits Times*, 12 September 1995); and, in its realisation, Malaysians are not expected to 'give up one's culture, religion or language' (cited in Tan 2003). New and revised policies were put in place to achieve Mahathir's vision, which some argued gave rise to economic and cultural liberalisation (Loh 2002; Tan 2003).

This swing to an acceptance of diversity and difference from the top-most echelon of the national government opened up further discussion and debate about what it meant to be Malaysian. This fomented much discussion within communities of Malays and non-Malays (including Chinese and Indian communities). Local

academics wrote about how *Bangsa Malaysia* might or might not differ from 'Bangsa Melayu' (the Malay race/nation) (*Business Times*, 19 August 1995; Sani 1992), local newspapers conducted forums on it (*New Straits Times*, 2000, 2002), the smaller political parties headed by ethnic Chinese such as the Parti Gerakan latched on to this for their political thrust (*New Straits Times*, 21 August 2000) and conferences were held in its honour (Fourth International Malaysian Studies conference in 2004). For the realisation of *Bangsa Malaysia*, it has to first overcome the incumbent, ethnically conflicted sociopolitical landscape and Malay/non-Malay altercations. Suffice to say here that *Bangsa Malaysia* has not yet become a reality, but is still in the process of negotiation. The Malaysian national consciousness is still an imagined community.

In this multicultural and more liberalised political environment, the lion dance again came to the fore in the debate about national culture and identity. While it still represents the Chinese in Malaysia, it is no longer a symbol of their struggle for recognition, but is harnessed to symbolise the Chinese contribution to a multicultural Malaysia (*Bangsa Malaysia*) by the State that once denounced them. At present, the State's definition of *Bangsa Malaysia* is based on a multicultural rubric, as demonstrated in *Citrawarna* ('Colours of Malaysia'), a street parade organised by the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism annually since 1999. The theme of the parade emphasises cultural diversity as represented by the various performances (including *kompang*⁶ ensemble and the lion dance), the variety of 'traditional' costumes and the popularised versions of folk melodies of the various cultural groups strung together into a medley. It is obvious in many respects that this is a performance, not so much for Malaysians themselves (for many Malaysians are not aware of the parade or its telecast the next day),⁷ but for foreign tourists. All announcements and speeches are carried out in Malay and English, the (television) audience⁸ is constantly reminded that there are 1.5 million people in China watching and it is claimed that this is to showcase the '*kehebatan Bangsa Malaysia*' (the Malaysian nation's greatness) to the world. That notwithstanding, it is still quite a show of Malaysia's recent turn to multiculturalism.

One of the performances in the parade is, of course, the lion dance, as the cultural representation of the Chinese community. While in the past, the State saw the lion dance as a threat to the enshrined national Malay culture, here it is a convenient instrument to indicate the State's 'change of heart'. It is important to note that despite this perceived change, the National Cultural Policy remains in place. The lion-dance performance no longer represents only the Chinese; it is harnessed towards the construction of a larger identity—that of multicultural Malaysia. It is used here to represent Malaysia's embrace of diversity and difference. Where in the past, the lion dance was a cultural marker of Chinese-ness necessarily stated and distinguished from a local Malay-based

majority, the lion dance now retains its role as a Chinese symbol and also represents the Chinese contribution and presence in an ostensible display of 'multicultural Malaysia', as stated and distinguished by the regional and global stage of international tourism.

Against this backdrop, I will now reintroduce the *shigu*, the sonic abstraction from the lion-dance performance. This began in 1988 with a schoolteacher, Tan Fui Choong. Together with a friend, he came up with the idea of removing the drums, *shigu*, from their traditional ensemble of drums, gongs and cymbals, and their association with the lion-dance performance, and placing 24 in an ensemble performing in unison, incorporating martial arts and dance movements in its choreography. The focus is on its abstraction from the folk performance and its subsequent re-assemblage as an ensemble of *shigu*. The number, 24, has special significance and is based on the Chinese 'agricultural calendar'. The number of drums correlates with the 24 solar terms, a system that charts the movement of the sun through the course of a year from Earth's perspective. The agricultural calendar divides this movement into 24 nodes, which are used to mark agricultural seasons.⁹ Tan formed the first 24-drum troupe. The performers came from Chinese high schools and various lion-dance associations. Presently, there are 50 such troupes in Malaysia and Hands Percussion, the troupe in focus in this chapter, is one of them.

The *shigu* and being Malaysian Chinese

In an interview with the local newspaper, Tan was emphatic that this new creation was 'uniquely Malaysian in concept' and such a troupe was 'reflective of the multi-racial scenario' (*Star*, 8 January 2002). This last point most likely meant that cultural performances in Malaysia included Malay and non-Malay traditions. The keenness to express a Malaysian identity (as opposed to a Chinese or Malaysian Chinese identity) is perhaps the result of what Tan Chee Beng (2001:215) terms 'localization—the process of growing up and being socialized in a local setting thus acquiring local consciousness and being influenced by local political and sociocultural forces'. Tan Fui Choong expressively states his association with the nationality and 'place' of this creation, despite the historical origin of the practice and tradition. The origins of the *shigu*, as part of the performance of the lion dance as a folk practice common to migrants from China, are not a concern to him. What is of concern is the re-creation of the drums as an ensemble of their own as founded and 'placed' (as in situated and imbricated by the socio-historical forces of the place) in Malaysia. Another interesting aspect Tan raises in this report is that these performances are not scripted.

From this 'Malaysian creation', we move on to a more contemporary modification of the 24-drum ensemble. Bernard Goh, previously a student of Tan, formed his own drum troupe, Hands Percussion, in 1997, in Kuala Lumpur with Eric Ch'ng. Respectively, they are the artistic director and administrative director of this

semi-professional team of drummers. They currently have eight full-time performers, seven part-timers and 12 in training. Their web site (<<http://www.hands.com.my>>) delineates their vision as not only to 'preserve traditional Chinese percussion and its performing arts', but 'to make Chinese drumming more artistic and creative' by introducing 'new dimensions to theatrical drumming and [exploring] innovative permutations in contemporary percussion music'. On the one hand, the troupe is concerned with the conservation of the practice of this performing tradition; on the other, it is also their aim to extend the practice into a different level of artistry. This dual purpose raises an interesting paradox: here art and folk practice are expected to coexist in the same space, in the same instrument, in the same performance. Is not art conventionally on the opposite end of the spectrum from tradition and traditional forms? 'Tradition' by definition is about the maintenance of a specific practice with an emphasis on continuity (Layton 1992); art, and particularly modernist art, emphasises the transcendence of nature (Hegel 1975:29–30) and of society (Marcuse 1978). By implication, the phrase 'traditional Chinese percussion' could simply mean the instrument in question having roots in a traditional practice, but its current usage could differ tremendously from that original practice as the work of what Hegel (1975) terms 'human hands'.

This is evident in the set pieces for performance in Hands Percussion's repertoire: *Ritual of Drums* and *Dialogue in Skin*. The former comprises four parts: 'The Five Elements', 'Awakening', 'Reincarnation' and 'Sound Play'. The group's web site (<<http://www.hands.com.my>>) states that it is their aim to present the drums as more than mere 'noisy instruments', rather as 'communication tools through which thoughts, emotions and feelings can be expressed'. Composed by Goh, *Ritual of Drums* begins with a calm and gentle introduction that culminates in a fast-paced section that intermingles with solemn chanting. Jerome Kugan (*Kakiseni*, <<http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDE1OQ.html>>) writes in his review: 'Goh's...compositions...took the show beyond Chinese drums and into proper theatre as they explored in a rather spooky avantgarde way...interesting uses of movement...and voice.' Despite its rather drawn-out introductions and repetitions, the performance was generally well received, according to Kugan.

As with Tan's initial concept for the drum performance, Goh's Hands Percussion similarly claims a Malaysian identity. In our conversation (Interview with Bernard Goh, Kuala Lumpur, 28 June 2002), Goh was emphatic in insisting that 'the 24-drum team is a form of the Malaysian identity'. He continued by saying that Hands Percussion 'is locally formed and not from China, although we use the drums that we bought from China...Our drumsticks are not normal drumsticks that Chinese drummers use. We use *lamin* wood [hardwood] from Malaysia...The style of drumming is a local creation, not from China.'

It is interesting to note that despite statements such as 'I'm Chinese educated. I learnt the Chinese drum...I [was] born here [in Malaysia]. My father [was] born here', there seems to be a conscious or unconscious need for Goh to distinguish himself and his troupe from Mainland China. He said:

When I perform elsewhere, like in Taiwan or in Singapore, people never think that our performance is from Malaysia. They always think that it is from China...If I perform in Australia, let's say, when they hear us, they'll know this is Chinese but it is not from China...[But] how do we identify it as coming from Malaysia? (Interview with Bernard Goh, Kuala Lumpur, 28 June 2002)

There appears to be a need to set himself and his troupe apart from other performances that are based on Chinese traditions and to 'locate' this form of performance in the 'place' of Malaysia.

I want people to know Malaysian Chinese can do something like this, influenced by all the different cultures here. It must be very different from other Chinese who play Chinese drums. Of course, we use Chinese drums, but the way we play them is different because I was brought up here [in Malaysia]. Every night I have to go to the *mamak* store.¹⁰ That's already part of my culture. I can speak Malay. I don't take porridge for breakfast, instead I eat *nasi lemak*.¹¹ I don't think we should so clearly define ourselves as 'Chinese' nowadays. We are so 'mixed', so rich in culture. (Interview with Bernard Goh, Kuala Lumpur, 28 June 2002)

Hands Percussion's web site (<<http://www.hands.com.my>>) also informs us that as part of their goal, the group aims to study the 'different percussion cultures to produce multi-ethnic sounds and beats in its performances', with the objective to *perform* a multicultural identity. Goh was quick to emphasise the use of local materials and the influence of other cultural traditions: 'I try to create new things, like the ways [of] beating the traditional drums, movements that my *sifu* [teacher] taught me. I learnt the *rebana*¹² and the *tabla*.¹³ When they play together, and oh, that is harmonised, that's truly "Malaysian"' (Personal communication 2002).

Nonetheless, it is not so much the multicoloured range of diversity that Goh emphasises and envisages; rather, it is the hybridity that arises from the generations of intermingling of the different peoples and cultures. For Goh disputes the mere display of diversity in performance when he says 'I think we must do something beyond' playing together in harmony with the *rebana* and the *tabla*. Goh and Ch'ng's vision aims for a more nuanced understanding of the convergence of ethnicities and cultures. They conceive of a Malaysian performance as an intercultural performance—that is, to explicate the

intersections of different cultures by exploring the space in between cultures. I shall return to this later in the chapter.

Between noise and music

At this juncture, I shall return to the initial aim raised at the beginning of this chapter: to chart the abstraction of the drum from its traditional context and function to its subsequent appearance on stage, and how this transplantation from a street performance to a staged performance has impacted on the *shigu* in its representation of Chinese culture in Malaysia. Before I proceed I will attempt to give an account of the full dress rehearsal that I attended. The rehearsal was held at the performance venue in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur. For this performance, there were five red drums placed in an inverted 'v' on the left side of the stage, while five black drums were placed in a circle facing each other on the right side of the stage; another three were positioned behind these. The drums at the front were positioned lower so that the drummers could sit and hit them, while the ones at the back were placed higher so that the drummers had to stand to hit them. The piece began with the drummers at the front playing in unison with occasional shouts of 'hey' and 'ho' from the players. After a short pause, a solo drummer at the front gave a signal and the drummers at the back jumped up and began to play in unison with those at the front. Here was a distinct change of strokes and rhythms, with the two groups in front playing in alternating patterns. The piece cycled through various stroke styles, striking points and rhythmic patterns, producing a variety of sound qualities. Halfway through the piece, the drummers on the front left of the stage changed position: standing with feet apart facing the audience and striking rather aggressively at the drums at an angle while moving in time to the rhythm. The players at the back moved away from the drums and lowered themselves to the ground to change instruments. They started to play handheld chimes (usually associated with Buddhist chants). Shortly after, the drummers on the front right of stage stood up and struck the drums in a similar position as the other group. The piece picked up tempo and volume; there were more shouts and vocalisations from the drummers as the piece rose into a fury. After several minutes of this, the drumming came to an abrupt end at the height of activity and volume (see Video 6.1).¹⁴

In the process of transplanting the *shigu* into its new art context, it has been *abstracted*: first, from a larger mixed ensemble of gongs and cymbals to an ensemble of drums playing in concert; and second, from its function as an instrument of exorcism and folk ritual to one of artistic expression. It is removed from its context as part of the lion-dance performance and its socio-religious function. As with all abstracts, however, they bear a resemblance to what they have been abstracted from. The drum ensemble therefore does serve to remind, to invoke memory, of the street lion-dance performance and by this it is not

devoid of its connection to its previous context, function and role of representation.

It has also been *displaced* from its previous place of performance—the streets—and *re-placed* on the stage in a proscenium theatre. In the course of this transplantation, the *shigu* has also been *transformed* as a noise-making instrument into one of music making; the social codes associated with the street performance have been broken and, as a stage performance, new codes are imposed on it; and its role as the sonic representation of Chinese identity is also thereby called into question. As ‘noise’, the sound produced by the drum and its ensemble on the streets was not restrained. As noise, it had power to silence, for anyone within the listening realm either had to speak above the din or be silenced. As noise, it created a community and articulated a space (Attali 1983:6–9) within hearing distance. In its abstraction as an art form, however, and re-placement in the concert hall, the sound produced by the ensemble of drums underwent a process of organisation and moulding by ‘human hands’ (Hegel 1975). As Attali (1983:6) writes, ‘with noise is born disorder’; however, as organised sound—that is, music—‘is born power and its opposite: subversion’. Once noise undergoes a process of organisation, it takes on a different form—music—and is, thus, subverted and becomes ‘the source of purpose and power’ (Attali 1983:6). In this case, noise produced by the *shigu* is subverted for the purpose of communication and self-expression (*Malay Mail*, 5 April 2002), particularly for Goh and Ch’ng. It is their voice and vision exteriorised in the performances and this is clear in their communication with me, with reporters and on their web site. Their subversion of the instrument involves changes to the way the drums are placed, positioned and struck.

The ensemble’s capacity to produce a high volume of sound does not suit the confined space of the concert hall, particularly when more than one drum is used. To compensate for this, Goh told me that he had to derive a number of different ways of playing the drums: the different strokes and strength levels and striking at different parts of the drums to produce softer sounds and other sound qualities—for example, striking the side of the membrane cover produces a softer and different quality from striking the drum in the centre of the cover. Striking the side of the drum, the wooden part of the body, also provides a different quality. Thus, any one piece comprises a variety of strokes, striking strengths and styles. He also said that due to the confined space of the hall, it was impossible to strike the drums with too much force, as this would have produced too much volume. Thus, players are required to restrict their stroke strengths.

In its previous incarnation, the drum was placed on its bottom while it was struck on the top membrane. While there are varying numbers of strokes and striking spots on the drum, its position is always the same. In his artistic

incarnation, however, Goh has positioned the drums tilted to one side and in different placements on stage (or off, in some performances). This, according to Goh, produces a different sound quality by virtue of the fact that the sound produced is allowed to resonate. This is in contrast with its traditional placement, where the sound produced is immediately absorbed by the ground it is placed on (see Figure 6.1 and Video 6.1). This revised position requires the performers to strike the drums at an angle. To do so, the performers have to position themselves lower than in the traditional way of performance and with a slightly different stance than in the traditional manner. In addition to this, Goh has also ensured that the stance is, first, balanced, and second, aesthetically pleasing by incorporating martial arts stances and choreography. The different placements of the drums on stage (as demonstrated in the examples here) are purposeful for various reasons. The different positions and placements will produce a variety of sound qualities and sound displacements, from the louder and better resonance of those placed higher and on their side, to those tilted slightly and placed on the stage floor. By placing the drums in clusters facing towards each other, it also allows the production of different sets of sound possibilities that will resonate among themselves.

Attali (1983) also writes that sound articulates space and community. While in its previous performance context, the sound produced by the *shigu* on the streets was allowed to resonate uninhibited and undefined, in its new context, there was a necessity to contain it within the confines of the concert hall. The space and community articulated by the drum ensemble are necessarily exclusive, localised and limited to the walls of the concert hall. The community articulated is limited to the performers, stagehands and organisers and the paying audience. Only these few are privileged to witness the spectacle and experience the sound emanating from the stage. Anyone outside of those walls fortunate enough to be able to listen in is really eavesdropping. It is within these walls, then, that Goh and Ch'ng hold power, dictating to what and when the audience should listen and see. It is their directorship that commands attention from the lighting booth, the stagehands, the performers on stage and any other person involved. This power relation, however, is certainly not one sided; for on the flip side, the audience holds pre-eminence as to what it will pay to attend. As Goh says, Hands Percussion does not have any source of income other than the paying audience; it is not supported by government funding or any other funding bodies (Personal communication 2002).¹⁵

While traditional performance was conducted for a spirit world, to scare away 'evil spirits' and to usher in good ones, this new performance is now performed for a paying human audience. While the previous audience is unseen yet omnipresent, the new audience is seen (and heard, in terms of applause and the usual sneezes and coughs) and is held at bay to one side of the performance space (recalling that the normal performance space is the proscenium theatre). In short,

Hands Percussion's performance has transformed the drums from a ritualised context into one for entertainment, and with an exchange value. The better the show, the bigger the crowd it will draw. Where once the value was in the function the performance fulfilled, having been relinquished of it, a different value is placed on the *shigu*.

As an entertainment, the *shigu* performance involves a sonic and visual display, which explains the need for illustrative choreography. From being a sidekick in its previous performance, the *shigu* is now the main attraction. The multiple groupings of drums positioned in a variety of ways on stage provide a visual spectacle, particularly when coupled with choreographic movements. The movements employed in the performance are derived from martial arts and interpretative dance. The entire performance is quite demanding physically, as the performers are required to strike the drums as well as move in choreographed sequences across the stage. Some of their stances also seem quite awkward, requiring them to stand facing away from the drums while twisting their bodies around to strike the drums. This stance was meant to show off the costumes Goh had designed, for the costumes were significant. As Figure 6.1 shows, the costumes the performers wear do not necessarily place them culturally—in other words, the costumes are not derived from Chinese traditional costumes, as is the case with Tan's performers, who are 'clad in traditional Chinese costume with red bands on their heads and waists' (*Star*, 8 January 2002). Hands Percussion's performers are clad in sleeveless tops tied with a sash and pants in rather neutral colours—beige and khaki—which connote an association with the earth. The fabric for the top reminds one of natural fibre from coconut trees. The costume—the sleeveless top and the slits in the pants—is designed also to show off the physique of the performers, particularly when they move around on stage. In previous performances, the lion dancers' bodies were always obscured by the papier-mâché lion and the presence of the musicians (and their bodies) was masked by the thunderous sound vibrating from the instruments they played. The bodies of the musicians in comparison with the lion dancers' are less conspicuous and therefore do not have the same immediate visual attraction. Furthermore, because these musicians' performances are not based on virtuosic display, it is much less a spectacle. In contrast with this more traditional setting, the bodies of the performers in the present performance become the focus of the audience's attention. The physicality of their bodies in movement and in each execution of every stroke becomes the visual spectacle for the consumption of a paying audience.

The transplantation of the *shigu* into a different genre and performance space has inscribed on it a different value of a different system. As Deleuze and Guattari (1983) write, in the process of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, codes are translated and destroyed at the same time. The codes associated with the ritual the lion dance performs are carried over into the new 'territory' to some

degree. These remnants of the previous incarnation are assigned an 'archaic, folkloric, or residual function' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983:245)—that is, the *shigu's* previous ability to communicate as part of a ritual exercise is now relegated to a 'residual function', labelled as 'archaic' and 'folkloric'. It is, however, important to note also that this 'archaism' is not without value in the new 'territory'. As a source of entertainment for a paying audience, the *shigu* has entered into a different system, a capitalist system (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), which immediately identifies the instrument (and its performance) as a commodity, having exchange values.¹⁶ The previous codes are rendered meaningless in this new system. It no longer communicates exorcism and the celebratory ushering in of blessings and prosperity; instead, it has been subverted to communicate the composer's (or in some cases, Goh and/or Ch'ng's) vision and voice and to appease a paying audience (and possibly whoever is involved in organising the performance). This is not to say that its previous 'archaism' and 'folkloric function' are of no value; on the contrary, they sell: these aspects that pass from the 'old' to the 'new' hold exchange value in an (art) economy of difference, 'exchanged as a currency' (Frith 2000:306), as evinced in the global popularity of 'world music'.

For identity

Here, I return to my earlier discussion of the role of the lion dance (and thus, by extension, the *shigu*) as a representation of Chinese culture and presence in Malaysia. As discussed earlier, the meaningful symbolism of the lion dance has changed over the years. Before the 1990s, the lion dance was the symbol of Chinese striving for recognition in Malaysia, while, since the 1990s, it has been deployed as a symbol of the Chinese community in a multicultural construction of Malaysia's political landscape. It has taken on a symbolic role of Malaysia's growing acceptance and tolerance of diversity within its political boundaries.

While the lion-dance performance is harnessed to the visual representation of Chinese-ness, the drums are its sonic representation. In its abstraction from the traditional ensemble and function and into a new ensemble of its own, the *shigu's* representation of Chinese-ness has also changed in the process. In its previous performance context as part of a larger ensemble of performers (including the lion dancers), it was an ostensible, in-your-face display of Chinese-ness. The performance itself demanded attention, visually and sonically, and was therefore an easy and immediate symbol of Chinese identity. In this abstraction, however, the drums on their own, stripped of the lion dancers, are a toned-down version of the ostensible display of Chinese-ness. Re-contextualised in an ensemble of drums, the *shigu*, as a Chinese representation, lacks the immediacy of a visual and sonic street display of the lion-dance performance. Aside from the ethnicity of the performers and the recognisably Chinese origin of the drums, the Hands Percussion performance could easily pass for a *taiko* performance.¹⁷

In its new ensemble and in a concert performance space, reinscribed onto the instrument is a fractured Chinese identity. This is reflected in the mission statement on Hands Percussion's web site as well as by Goh himself: to preserve the tradition on one hand and, on the other, to transform the tradition into a modernised art form. As an art form, it is un-moored from its anchorage in ethnic difference, and this difference is flattened out and repackaged (stylised) for a universal audience. While the traditional performance of the lion dance is an ostensible display of cultural difference, which immediately projects the presence of Chinese-ness, the *shigu* ensemble as an art form does not have the same effect. Just as with the costumes and the choreography, the drum ensemble on its own bears only superficial connections to its Chinese origin: the drums themselves are recognisably those used in the lion-dance performance, the ethnicity of the performers themselves and the themes on which the performance pieces are based. The performance on the whole bears an imprint of hybridity; on the one hand, it looks and sounds 'Chinese', but on the other, it does not. In some ways, it is a 'modern' performance—that is, not traditional and stylised, yet 'archaic' at the same time. By extension, the 'Chinese' identity represented by Hands Percussion is set apart by its difference and particularity, but also bears a notion of universality and sameness. As an instrument of representation, the *shigu* serves as a palimpsest, where the 'modern' and universal are inscribed on the 'traditional' and particular.

Despite this trace of tradition in this otherwise modernised performance, Goh's mission (particularly when he talks of how 'Malaysian' these Chinese drums are) not only speaks of the Chinese contribution to the national consciousness, it is a conscious effort on his part to emphasise the Malaysian factor in this performance of seemingly Chinese origin. This is, of course, a counteraction to a very early denouncement of non-Malay contribution to the Malaysian national culture as was evinced in such claims that the lion-dance performance should not be included as part of the national culture, being deemed of 'foreign' origin. So, in this present abstraction and re-contextualisation of the *shigu* performance, Goh (and Tan as well) is consciously claiming the performance as different from its traditional role as lion-dance accompaniment. While the lion-dance performance originated from China, the *shigu* performance itself did not. Goh says, 'I just hope I can create something that belongs to us [Malaysians]. The style of drumming is a local creation, not from China...I want people to know Malaysian Chinese can do something like this, influenced by all the different cultures here' in Malaysia (Personal communication 2002).

In an interview with Jad Mahidin of *The Malay Mail* (5 April 2002), Goh said: 'Though we use mainly Chinese drums, we're not playing them the traditional way...The music will sound more Malaysian than Chinese.' Apart from the geophysical space in which Goh and the rest of the Hands Percussion team reside, the place where the concept is founded and the origins of the materials of the

various parts of the ensemble and performance (drumsticks and costumes), how these Chinese drums are a 'Malaysian sound' is yet to be determined.

Perhaps 'being Malaysian' is performative, in that identity is a *productive* process. Based on J. L. Austin's (1975/2004) speech act theory, Judith Butler (1990/1999:173) argues that identity is an 'enacted fantasy' in which 'we perform to create who we are' as opposed to 'we are, therefore, we perform'. Thus, for Goh to claim that the *shigu* performance is 'Malaysian' does not mean that it is essentially so, but rather that the ensemble enacts their national identity with each performance. One way of *performing* Malaysian identity could be in contributing to the nation-building project. Goh said in our conversation, 'I formed a group in Taiwan. They were amazed by what we are doing. They wonder how people in Malaysia can come up with something as powerful as this' (Personal communication 2002).

Underlying this statement is very likely the consciousness of the aims of Mahathir's Vision 2020 and its slogan, '*Malaysia Boleh*' (Malaysia can). While the slogan was composed to foster a sense of confidence in the capability and capacity of Malaysia's mission of achieving developed-nation status by 2020, it has been taken up at the level of everyday living. The slogan is chanted in sports arenas and displayed on banners and its realisation has been symbolised in the construction of the Petronas Twin Towers, the breaking of Guinness World Records, and so on (see Bunnell 2004; Goh 2002; Tan 2003). Reading between the lines of what Goh said in our conversation, it is possible to conclude that he envisions Hands Percussion as participating in the nation's drive for global modernity, and thus, it *performs* its Malaysian-ness.

While the lion-dance performance has been harnessed for the display of multicultural Malaysia, as invoked in the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism's *Citrawarna* parade mentioned earlier, the *shigu* performance as advocated by Hands Percussion is an appropriate conduit for the performance of the imagined community of *Bangsa Malaysia*. The lion-dance performance used in that parade and used in everyday Malaysian living renders a picture of cultural and ethnic harmony, of tolerance and acceptance, particularly in the cross-ethnic use of the lion dance, as in the case of Indian Muslim Salim Khan Kabor's annual invitation for lion-dance performances at his restaurant. Such an event has been reported positively in the local newspaper as demonstrative of a 'multicultural society' (*New Straits Times*, 1 February 2006). The *shigu* performances by Tan Fui Choong and Bernard Goh's Hands Percussion similarly promote a multicultural perspective, particularly when playing in concert with instruments such as the *gamelan* and *tabla*. Of note is not so much what is being played, but what cultural background each of the instruments stems from and therefore what ethnicity they signify. Thus, each time these various instruments are used in a concert, it is a performance (or enactment) of identity, an imagined *Bangsa Malaysia*,

above and beyond the literal coming together of these instruments. It is a *performative* enactment of an identity that is yet to be realised.

Goh's vision, however, goes beyond a display of diversity. As I mentioned earlier, his conception of 'Malaysian' involves inherent hybridity as a result of the generations of intermixing of various ethnic groups living together. I have argued elsewhere (Chan 2005:33) that performance pieces such as those by Hands Percussion are ready-made spaces for the 'creative production and fabrication...of new identities'. This conception of Malaysian identity is echoed in other art forms and by fellow practitioners in Kuala Lumpur—for example, Mew Chang Tsing and her performance of *Lady White Snake* and *Re: Lady White Snake*. Mew Chang Tsing is the artistic director of RiverGrass Dance Theatre, established in 1996 and committed to 'establish[ing] a Malaysian identity that future generations can identify with' (<<http://www.rivergrass.com.my/new>>). Mew says she seeks to 'do something Malaysian' (<<http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDE1OQ.html>>). She defines Malaysian culture not as Malay culture but as

a distinct blend of often separately identified cultures such as Malay, Chinese and Indian. She thinks Malaysians can be too compartmentalised when looking at themselves. Mew herself is a product of an 'inter-cultured' society—her word...She thinks Malaysians are 'inter-cultured'. 'You only have to look at our every day language and food, such as *roti canai*¹⁸ and *laksa* to see that we are much more mixed culturally than we sometimes think.'

(<<http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/reviews/MDE1OQ.html>>)

Goh shares this notion of a hybrid identity and performance, as demonstrated in the piece *Dialogue in Skin*. The piece is in five parts: 'Drumbeat Inferno', 'The Time Jungle', 'Fluency', 'Armour and Skin' and 'Centre of Gravity'. In its performance at the 2004 Penang-YTL Arts Festival, the *shigu* was joined by a Beijing opera drum, several *gendang*,¹⁹ a *gamelan* set and *sitar*. According to a report in the local newspaper, the *New Sunday Times*, and the Hands Percussion web site, this piece attempts to investigate the notion of inter-culturalism on the basis of drumbeats, as metaphors of the 'heartbeat', 'the essence of life' (*New Sunday Times*, 6 June 2004). Here cross-culturalism is constructed on the concept of dialogue and interaction between the instruments based on a very fundamental element of humanity, the heartbeat. The performance enacts the intersections of the multiracial society. As the unnamed reporter of the *New Sunday Times* article wrote, 'it was about an active conversation, a living relationship that ignites between the skin of the drum and the touch of the drummer' (*New Sunday Times*, 6 June 2004).

Without further research and close reading of each of the performance pieces, it is impossible to ascertain in more detail what inter-culturalism means to these practitioners, Goh included. Suffice to say, they envisage an inter-cultural

Malaysian identity as more than a mere acceptance of diversity where each community is allowed its differences without external intervention. Their vision of a Malaysian identity is a hybrid mix of the various cultures in Malaysia, founded on the geophysical 'place' of the nation, accepting that it is a 'meeting place' of these various cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to investigate the abstraction of the *shigu* from its traditional function as noise maker in its role as accompaniment of the lion-dance performance on the streets and its 'translation' to a modernised traditional context as art in a drum ensemble on stage. It also sought to ask if this process of 'translation' had changed its representation of the Chinese in Malaysia and, if so, how. What I have attempted to demonstrate in these past few pages is that in the process of 'translation' or transplantation, the *shigu* as an abstraction of the lion-dance performance has been subverted for artistic expression and communication by (usually) a single person—Bernard Goh—for a paying audience, and thereby, commodifying the drum and its performance. It has become a spectacle that has an exchange value placed on it. Its representation of the Chinese in Malaysia, too, has changed in the process. From a representation of Chinese culture and presence in a pro-Malay national environment, the drum ensemble has been seized to represent intercultural Malaysian identity, *Bangsa Malaysia*, albeit with a residual element of Chinese-ness. It would be interesting to note how recent events—that is, specifically the emergence of a stronger and more vocal opposition in the Malaysian Parliament—will have trickle-down effects on the lived culture and, thereby, its cultural products.

It is apparent that such an abstraction, although simple to do, is definitely not so simple in its implications. What this chapter seeks to reveal are some of the complexities and the multiple layers of meanings and significance in the simple act of removing the drums from their original setting to an artificial and artistic one. Not all, however, is changed. The sound of the *shigu* remains unmistakable and is still capable of evoking a memory of the lion dance, despite the staged performance, varying drum stokes and the new ensemble.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For further information, see <http://www.genting.com.my/en/live_ent/2000/liondance/video2000.htm> (viewed 14 August 2006). A short chapter such as this cannot do justice to an investigation of the significance of the emergence of these competitions and the changes wrought on the cultural practice itself.
- ² Bumiputra can be translated as 'sons of the earth', and refers to those who are recognised as indigenous to the place—that is, including Malay and aboriginal communities.
- ³ The National Culture Policy was therefore based on the following principles: the national culture of Malaysia must be based on the cultures of the people indigenous to the region; elements from other cultures that are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture; and Islam will be an important element in the national culture (quoted in Tan:283).
- ⁴ The 1970s and 1980s were highly wrought with politicised assertions of Malay-ness and non-Malay-ness, and this altercation took place within the representations of culture (see Carstens 2005; Kua 1990; Tan 1989/1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 2003).
- ⁵ Bahasa Malaysia is the Malay language adopted and adapted as the national language.
- ⁶ The *kompang* is a single-sided membranophone that comes in several sizes and shapes (Harnish 1998:768); it is also known as the *rebana*, popular in certain states of peninsular Malaysia.
- ⁷ It was telecast by NTV7, a local broadcasting company with coverage restricted to only the Klang Valley, which includes Wilayah Persekutuan (Federal Territory) and parts of Petaling Jaya.
- ⁸ I was watching a delayed broadcast of the performance the next day, during working hours.
- ⁹ For more information, see <<http://www.hko.gov.hk/gts/time/24solarterms.htm>> (viewed 17 August 2006).
- ¹⁰ A *Mamak* store is a local feature of the Kuala Lumpur urban night scene. These 'stores' are temporary cafes set up from the early evening to near dawn the next day by Indian Muslims, specialising in *roti canai* (Indian bread) and *teh tarik* (Malaysian-style milk tea). They are patronised by locals of various ethnicities.
- ¹¹ *Nasi lemak* is another local feature. It is rice cooked in coconut milk and taken with fried anchovies and chilli and prawn paste.
- ¹² See note 6.
- ¹³ The *tabla* is a set of drums usually associated with Indian music.
- ¹⁴ Due to copyright issues, I am only able to show this version of the performance. Hence, Video 6.1 will not fit exactly the description earlier but it is the closest of all performance videos I have.
- ¹⁵ The National Cultural Policy of 1971 dictated the funding guidelines of the incumbent ministry in charge of the arts; however, there were some exceptions to this restriction (see Chan 2005 for more information).
- ¹⁶ This is not to say that the exchange value is based solely on the instrument itself; the performance being a product of labour adds value to the commodity.
- ¹⁷ For information regarding *taiko* performance, see <www.eitetsu.net/>; <www.taiko.com>; <www.taiko.org>; <www.taikoarts.com>

¹⁸ *Roti canai* and *laksa* are popular local dishes; the former is a staple menu of the previously mentioned *mamak* store, and the latter is a spicy noodle dish.

¹⁹ The *gendang* is a double-sided barrel-shaped membranophone in varying sizes. It is 'played with both hands, one striking each face' (Nasuruddin 1992:15).