

## TUNES OF HAKKA / Singapore Chinese Orchestra / Review



**TUNES OF HAKKA**  
**Singapore Chinese Orchestra**  
**Singapore Conference Hall**  
**Friday (14 September 2012)**

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Who were the Hakkas? According to *The Singapore Encyclopaedia*, the Hakkas or Khek, literally “guest people”, were a Chinese dialect group that migrated from Northern China to the South over the past millennium. Settling mostly near Huizhou in Guangdong province, they are distinct from the Cantonese and known for their circular community houses or *tulou*. Further afield, the Hakka diaspora has spawned illustrious descendants in Singapore like Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew (Happy 89th Birthday!) and his family.

This specially-themed evening devoted to Hakka music, conducted by Yeh Tsung, was the Chinese counterpart of a Western classical concert highlighting Gypsy and Hungarian music. Central to this theme is its rigorous song and dance tradition, which began with Lo Leung Fei's *Medley of Hakka Tunes*, a celebratory suite of three folksongs. The slow central movement delighted in the pastoral *xiao* and a lovely melody on the *gaohu*.



Two guest Hakka singers then stole the show. Well-known Chinese soprano Huang Hong Ying sang six folksongs, beginning with more traditional numbers like *Profusion of Olive Blossoms* and *Faraway Sight of Your Arrival*. Her highland twang and comely demeanour had native Hakka speakers in the audience cooing with glee.

*Welcome to Huizhou* was an undisguised advertisement of her native city, extolling its virtues, scenery and culinary treats. Even Hakka *yong tau foo* gets an honourable mention. This and the strophic *Boat Song* revelled in a yodel-like refrains that goes something like *hei-ya-lo-ti-hei*, to which the audience gamely clapped along.



Taiwanese singer-songwriter Huang Lien Yu was more like a country singer, a Khek Kenny Rogers if you will. He played the guitar, harmonica and crooned along in *A Path of Mountain Songs* and *Hakka World*, songs which reflect the itinerant way of life and how Hakkas are well-adapted to wherever they be. In *Rising Sun*, his inebriated guttural grunts were chorus to the joys of waking up with a hangover.



The second half was more serious. Kuan Nai Chung's *Folk Song* for piano and orchestra could have easily been called *Hakka Rhapsody*, for its slow-fast form and Lisztian pianism from the unerring fingers of Clarence Lee, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize winner of the 2011 National Piano Competition. The longest work was the world premiere of Wang Ning's *Earth House Nocturne*, which was more a symphony in one movement.



Xu Zhong's evocative solo cello opened by depicting a sage spinning old yarns from within a *tulou*, soon it evolved into a dance and the film music-like score introduced different groups of instruments, supported by women's voices of the Nanyang Khek

Community Guild Choir. Somewhat overlong by half, the profusion of ideas in its 25 minutes served to usher in the two solo singers, who were united for a final sing-out. A more grandiose *piece de occasion* for Hakka pride will be hard to find.

