

# Karaoke Queen of Pek Kio CC



by Verne Maree

Did you know that every neighbourhood in Singapore has a community centre? If so, I bet you never thought it was there for you, too. Here's how my local community centre – Pek Kio CC – helped me achieve my admittedly unusual goal of singing a song in fluent Chinese to a banquet hall full of well-heeled diners in the city of Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

**Why I Did It**  
In March last year, I accompanied my husband, Roy, to a

social-cum-business weekend in Kaohsiung. The highlight was the host company's annual Spring Wine Festival dinner. After a lot of fairly drinkable Taiwanese wine and repeated 'yam-senging' (toasting) with excellent single malt whisky, jollity levels reached fever pitch and the karaoke started. As VIPs, Roy and I were requested – nay, firmly instructed – to ascend to the stage and entertain the masses with song.

**What I Did**

Under the influence of the next morning's hangover, I vowed that I would learn to sing a song in Chinese, properly, in order to do better if there was a next time. Sure enough, 11 months later Roy confirmed that we'd again been invited to attend the annual event on 4 March in Kaohsiung. I'd promised to sing a Chinese song, but how? What was I to do? Vaguely, I wondered whether a community centre (or CC, as Singaporeans love to call them) might be the place to teach me. I'd noticed the Cairnhill CC near Newton MRT, and thought I might pop in and enquire.

There was no question of refusal; it was a matter of face: theirs and ours. Wine and whisky made me brave, but couldn't make me sing well, unprepared as I was. That night, I murdered *Moon River*. There was polite applause, of course, but I bet they'd rather have chucked their chopsticks at me.

Thank goodness for Singapore cabbies! The first one I asked declared that Pek Kio CC, just a five-minute drive from home, had Chinese singing classes and was bound to be able to help me. At my request, he took me straight there, clearly delighted to have been able to help.





Helpful Madam Lee at the desk gave me a schedule that included all sorts of activities such as *aikido*, yoga, *taekwondo*, social dancing, piano, ballet and line-dancing. Further down the list I saw conversational Mandarin and – aha! – recreational karaoke dialect singing in Cantonese. When I explained that I just wanted to learn to sing one

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Taiwanese song (an easy one, for a contralto voice with limited range), she phoned the singing teacher, Ivan Chua, and arranged for me to meet him the next day.

Properly chaperoned by his sweet wife, Carol, we met the following Friday afternoon in one of four private karaoke rooms at the centre. He had prepared *hanyu pinyin* (phonetic Chinese) copies of the words of two songs; I listened to both on the karaoke machine and chose the one that most appealed – *Bie Rang Wo Deng Tai Jiu*, meaning 'Don't Let Me Wait Too Long'.

A man with a lovely voice himself, Ivan first gave me a bit of voice coaching: breathe with your diaphragm, open your mouth, and project. Then he began to teach me the song. It wasn't easy: Chinese tunes have unfamiliar rhythms and forms, and getting my tongue around the language was a challenge. At our second hour-long lesson, a week later, he brought me the karaoke VCD (a snip at \$7!) to practise to at home.

At the end of my third and final lesson, Ivan propelled me into the CC's main karaoke lounge to 'perform' my song before a dozen heartlander karaoke enthusiasts. With community centre kopi-C in my belly instead of malt whisky, my knees trembled and my voice shook, but I did it anyway. The encouraging cheers, handshakes and palpable warmth of that handful of friendly people made my day.

### Showtime!

As I write this, I'm on a China Air flight back from Kaohsiung, Taiwan, to Singapore. So, did I sing my song? You bet I did! And after hours of singing my little ditty in the bath (I know – poor Roy), I could probably have sung it backwards. This time, when the MC hauled me up onstage to sing I was ready, my nerves settled and my knees stiffened with a few tots of 20-year-old MacCallan's.

It's difficult to describe the electrified amazement of the 27 tables of ten Taiwanese when the music started and I began to sing a Cantonese song. Asians generally believe that we all want to be singing stars: that's why karaoke is such a big thing, not only socially but also in corporate team-building.

And I have to admit that it was deeply satisfying. I could have sung the whole song off-key – perhaps I did! – and still have brought the house down. Best of all, our hosts were as pleased as Punch that I had made the effort and my husband was delighted.

The only problem, though, is that Pek Kio CC may have created a monster. I've stood on the stage, I've been in the limelight, I've gripped that microphone and I've heard the roar of the crowd ... I want more! I'm already starting to think about my song for next year. Anyone keen on joining me at the CC one Friday afternoon?