

# **Cantonese Music Societies of Vancouver: A Social and Historical Survey\***

HUANG JINPEI and ALAN R. THRASHER

The Guangdong (Cantonese) of South China comprise one of the largest Chinese subcultures. The centre of the Guangdong subculture is the city of Guangzhou (Canton). As well, people in four counties to the west (notably Taishan, Kaiping, Enping, and Xinhui) are culturally similar in many ways and speak closely-related dialects. The earliest of these groups to arrive in Vancouver (around 1858) were workers from Taishan (Toisan). These were soon followed by people from the neighbouring counties. Much later, Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan arrived (Lee 1967). Because the Taishan people spoke a dialect only slightly different from Cantonese, they quite naturally developed an affection for Cantonese opera and instrumental music. At the turn of the century, they brought Cantonese music to Vancouver, where it has dominated Chinese music making to the present day.

## **Cantonese Opera and Instrumental Music**

Cantonese opera was derived primarily from the Han opera of North China. Before the 1920s, texts were sung in the Zhongzhou dialect, which is similar to the Mandarin of the North. The opera stories also came from the North, most dating from before the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). During this period two to three dozen operas were regularly performed. Musicians followed scripts in which melodies were written in traditional character notation (gongche pu). Instruments were tuned in the old 7-tone system, utilizing both whole- and 3/4-tone intervals. Unlike other aspects of Cantonese opera, these forms of notation and tuning have remained relatively unchanged in contemporary practice.

By the 1930s, texts were increasingly sung in Cantonese dialect; melodic structure was altered as local idioms were incorporated; and to the traditional ensemble of *erxian* (short-neck fiddle), *suona* (shawm), and other instruments with strong, projecting tonal qualities, were added instruments newly introduced from the West: for example, saxophone, violin, and Hawaiian guitar. Opera sung in Vancouver during the 1930s already combined these old and new elements.

Cantonese instrumental music developed alongside the opera tradition. Its performers did not necessarily sing opera music. Small instruments, such as the *dizi* (bamboo flute), *gaohu* (fiddle), and *qinqin* (long-neck lute), were relatively inexpensive, easy to play, and not so loud as to annoy neighbours. Because instrumental melodies were learned without notation, an amateur instrumental ensemble was considerably easier to form than was an amateur opera troupe. We have little documentation of these early Vancouver groups, but they were certainly very popular among the local population and overseas Chinese. Professor Huang states that "from my own experience as a boy in Singapore (1928 to 1931), I recall that Cantonese instrumental music was heard everywhere. I learned the music by listening to other boys play. Once learned, never forgotten. Friends I have met similar to my age tell me they remember these same experiences."<sup>1</sup>

Around the beginning of the 20th century, both instrumental music and opera songs were performed in the larger teahouses (*chaguan*) of Guangzhou and Hong Kong, a milieu similar to the venues for narrative song in Suzhou and "silk-bamboo" instrumental music in Shanghai. The teahouse tradition declined sharply in the South during the 1950s and Cantonese music is rarely heard in this environment. Vocal and instrumental traditions survived best within the context of amateur societies. In Guangzhou, there were dozens of such societies. Most disappeared between the 1950s and 1980s; some are now being revived. In Hong Kong there were just as many, and these have survived well. In Vancouver, the nature and organization of the amateur society are well preserved.

According to the old Vancouver Chinese-language newspaper *Dahan Gongbao* ("Chinese Times"), Cantonese opera troupes visited Vancouver regularly (often annually) between 1916 and 1941, performing full-length programs in Chinatown. From the 1920s onward, 78 rpm recordings of famous songs were available to the public. However, no music society was established in Vancouver until the mid-1930s. An organization in Guangzhou called the *Bahe Huiguan*, a strong union responsible for organizing all Cantonese opera activity, exercised strict control over its actors. The first Cantonese music society of Vancouver, *Jin Wah Sing*, which served initially as a broker for invited opera troupes, contacted the *Bahe Huiguan* and registered itself as an opera troupe. As a result, the Vancouver society was able to invite famous actors from China.<sup>2</sup> After the 1950s, the *Bahe Huiguan* was disbanded. Hong Kong opera troupes grew in prominence, and more musicians and actors travelled out from the colony.

During this period, especially in the 1940s, instrumental music became very popular in local urban culture. Fifty to sixty composers were active, including Chen Deju, Yan Laolie, Lu Wencheng, He Liutang, and other famous musicians. Their compositions, unlike the older repertory of the

Confucian heritage<sup>3</sup>, were mostly bright and lively, reflecting the high spirit and optimism of the time. Examples of this animated repertory include Hantianlei ('Thunder in the Drought') and Sailong Duojin ('Challenge of the Dragon Boat'). Many pieces were performed to accompany dances in the ballrooms, usually with added harmony and percussion.

The introduction of modern media into South China during the 1920s and 1930s proved a decisive factor for the widespread dissemination of Cantonese opera and instrumental music. Most of the repertory was recorded by highly skilled professional artists, released on 78 rpm discs, purchased by an enthusiastic public, and broadcast on radio. In the newly built cinemas, instrumental music was played during intermissions, most notably by the renowned instrumentalist and composer, Lu Wencheng. If there was a "classical" period of Cantonese music, this was it.

### **The Music Societies**

Of the many Cantonese music societies in Vancouver, the most prominent are Jin Wah Sing, Ching Won, and Ngai Lum. All are centrally located in Chinatown. Established in 1935, **Jin Wah Sing** is the oldest, largest and most conservative. It has a membership of about one hundred, meets on Sunday afternoons, and occupies one of the old landmark buildings of Chinatown (on the northeast corner of Pender and Carroll). The society has a stage on which Cantonese opera can be performed for an audience of up to 200 persons, and owns a complete set of stage properties, stage lights sets, costumes, recording equipment, and musical instruments.<sup>4</sup> The society's "teacher" (shifu) through the early 1990s has been Wong Tou, a famous Hong Kong musician who came to Vancouver in 1961. Now in his late 70s, Wong Tou still teaches part-time and plays. Other prominent musicians include Owen Wong, past president for eleven years, Yu Kwong-hon, and Lee Bing-chuen, who has made a special effort to collect old songs.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, some Jin Wah Sing actors returned to China to perform in support of the Chinese effort in the Sino-Japanese war.<sup>5</sup> Jin Wah Sing stopped meeting during this period (Wong 1983). In 1954, the society was revived and its name was changed to Jin Wah Sing Music Association and registered. For its opening ceremony, the society presented the Cantonese opera, Xixiang Daiyue ('Waiting for the Moon in the West Chamber'). The show was performed at the Majestic Theatre to a full house, and the Cantonese audience was quite happy to see its native opera on stage again. Since the 1950s, the association has regularly presented operas for charities and entertainment, and has been known as a strong force for traditional Chinese opera promotion.

**Ching Won** Music Society was also established in the 1930s and, like the Jin Wah Sing, disbanded for a few years during the war. It occupies a second-floor complex of rooms directly across from the Chinese Cultural Centre on Pender Street, and meets every Saturday night (often until 2:00

a.m.). Its resources being somewhat more limited than Jin Wah Sing, Ching Won owns some musical instruments and costumes, but fewer stage properties. Having fewer than 100 members, Ching Won, like Jin Wah Sing, consists of older, established Cantonese-Canadians. Ching Won, though it has no "teacher", has been led by several highly skilled musicians, notably the 88-year-old Louis Chang (Chang Long-you), an instrument-maker and yangqin performer, and until recently, Lee Bing, student of the famous Cantonese violinist Won Ji-jong. There is at present some turnover of personnel at Ching Won and other musicians are now emerging.

**Ngai Lum**, formed in the early 1960s, is considered a "younger brother" to the two older societies. Having recently moved its meeting hall because of urban renovation, it now occupies a ground-level facility across from the Sun Yat Sen Classical Garden on Carroll Street where it meets on Sunday afternoons. There are about fifty members, generally somewhat younger and better educated than those of the larger societies, and including recently arrived musicians from Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Its "teacher" is Yan Jun-ho, who is also a part-time Chinese herbal doctor and teacher of martial arts. Also prominent as a player is Raymond Li, a percussionist and saxophonist who also serves as the society's spokesperson. In its outreach to, and welcoming of, non-Chinese visitors, Ngai Lum is more open than the other societies, no doubt because of the energy and education of its younger members. For the society's yearly Spring Festival (the Chinese New Year), more than four hundred friends typically attend a banquet, which is always a lively event, with ongoing staged performances during and after the meal.

Outside Chinatown, there are other music societies, but these come and go, and membership is considerably more fluid. The most active is **Fai Lok San** Chinese Music Society (established in 1982), which is attached to the Mount Pleasant Community Centre. Fai Lok San rents a room for its music-making every Wednesday afternoon. The founders and leaders of this society, Wong Wun-wah and her husband, Mak Shu-wing, contribute all the musical instruments for performance and provide refreshments for each meeting. There are about thirty regular members, all between 50 and 70 years of age. In Fai Lok San, performance standards are somewhat more relaxed than in the other societies, but the members are extremely enthusiastic and attend regularly. Other societies exist, and there are also home parties which meet occasionally but have no formal basis.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is a Cantonese opera school in Vancouver, the **Yuet Sing Guangdong** Song-Arts Research Academy (established in 1987). This organization specifically provides singing lessons and collects fees directly from students. The president is its principal instructor, others teaching part-time. Students include wealthy women and very few young people.

### **Cantonese Music in Vancouver: The Social Setting**

The members of Vancouver's Cantonese music societies are mostly middle-aged and older people. Approximately 95% are first-generation immigrants from Hong Kong. Most work five or six days a week at other jobs, especially in the restaurant business. They have little time for cultural diversion and consider themselves "amateurs," but not for lack of skill. Each club has a president, a rotating position elected annually. Membership is comprised of female and male singers, who dominate, and some instrumentalists. Most of the instrumentalists are men between 50 and 70 years of age. Only a few are in their 30s and 40s, or late 70s and 80s. Although some of them have had formal music instruction, most are self-taught.

There are no fully professional Cantonese musicians in Vancouver though, at present, there are two shifu ('teachers') who function as part-time ensemble directors and teachers, and other, less prominent instructors. The teaching of Cantonese opera singing is difficult and time-consuming. A teacher is required to provide his own notation, usually hand copied, in about ten copies for the accompanying musicians. Notations of older pieces can be obtained in Hong Kong. However, if a student wishes to learn a new piece, it must be written out by the teacher, a tedious task taking nearly a week. Since students are generally untrained in such technical aspects of music as singing of scales and knowledge of music theory, teachers rely upon the method of demonstration, imitation, and repetition. Within the last two decades, students have also learned to sing by listening to cassette tapes of Hong Kong singers.

The societies meet once a week, primarily to sing Cantonese opera songs in unstaged settings, and occasionally to play instrumental music as well. Meetings are essentially "get-togethers", in which actual "rehearsal" (as this term is used in the West) is relatively limited. Songs and instrumental pieces are generally performed from beginning to end without stopping, unless a serious musical problem arises (e.g., the singer losing his or her place in the music). Singers stand behind microphones at the centre of the ensemble, and take pride in their accomplishment. Most "teachers" are very hesitant to correct errors in public. This would be embarrassing and might alienate the student.

The atmosphere is usually casual, non-performing members talking among themselves and drinking tea or coffee. The Chinese conceptualize a "happy garden" (leyuan), where self-entertainment is one of the principal aims. Some members sing the same one or two opera excerpts each week, whereas others perform a wider variety of old and new songs. Often, certain songs become associated with specific singers, and gradually only these singers will perform them. As in most Cantonese music making, singers rotate in performing. The accompanying instrumentalists, however, usually play without break. Particularly scarce among Vancouver's instrumentalists

are percussionists, who traditionally assume an important role in ensembles. As a result, it is common for a society to have only one person playing all the percussion instruments at the same time, cymbals with the left hand, gong with the right, and wood blocks when the cymbals and gong are not in use. The several players in the city who have this skill travel among the different societies and are always welcomed by all.

Songs, unlike the instrumental music, are predominantly slow and set in a minor-sounding mode utilizing neutral fa and ti (known as yifan). Such songs are thought to express melancholy. This favoured style is technically easy to perform and so widely known that musicians may meet and perform together without preparation or rehearsal. The texts express a variety of emotions and narrate well-known old stories. Some concern faith, love, and loyalty, traditional values which are still important to the older Chinese. Other songs reverence the past. Yet others recount sad events, and since they are written in the first person, the singer performs as if the misfortune were his/hers. One man, more than 60 years old, has tears in his eyes when he sings "The Death of Liang Shanbo." He sings this song at every meeting, so it may be that he himself had been disappointed in love when he was young.<sup>7</sup>

Of interest to the better trained instrumental performers is a type of paid accompaniment known as the "special engagement" (teyao). This involves travelling weekly to private homes to accompany the singing of ladies. Skilled performers can work as many as five half-days per week, rotating among different homes. For a full afternoon (or evening) of accompanying, a musician may receive about \$40.00. For this, he is expected to accompany the singers one after another. Although the "special engagement" is one of the less visible aspects of Vancouver music making, it is socially important and eagerly sought by accompanists.

Funding for society activities is based upon membership fees and donations. Annual fees range from about \$5.00 to \$20.00 per member, wealthier members sometimes contributing as much as \$100.00. At Chinese New Year and special festivals, additional donations may be made. Some funding is occasionally available from the British Columbia provincial government through its support of multicultural enterprises. However, the best sources of income are found in the sales of tickets for opera performances and banquets. In 1985, for example, the Jin Wah Sing association held its 51st anniversary celebration at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, and the Cantonese community responded enthusiastically by buying tickets for all 2800 seats. Similarly, annual \$25.00-a-plate banquets, which attract Euro-Canadians as well as Cantonese, produce significant profits. In general, society expenses are low; the largest are for rent, electricity, and amplification/recording equipment. The shifu also receives a small amount from weekly student fees, but the society pays him nothing. Work for

upkeep is done voluntarily, each member having a specific duty, such as accountant or secretary. The Vancouver societies are quite active. Each has a regular performance schedule, playing for events throughout the year. Of these the most important are commemorations of the Chinese New Year and annual celebrations of the societies themselves, to which the other societies are often invited. In addition, such city-wide events as Vancouver's occasional Asia Pacific Festival, the 1986 Vancouver Exposition, radio/television performances, and a host of banquets involve performances by the more active societies.

### **Preservation**

Western practices have influenced professional Guangzhou opera troupes in important ways. For instance, ensemble accompaniment is now fully arranged and written out in cipher notation, the parts played in equal temperament and in harmony rather than in traditional tuning and heterophonic texture. Ensembles now have conductors who formally rehearse their groups. In 1986, this new style of opera was introduced to Vancouver, but it met with considerable criticism from traditionalists who did not like such strictness and formality. Their complaint was that the opportunity for spontaneous creativity and inspiration had been taken out of opera performance and actors' roles had become like those of puppets.

Of perhaps greater threat to the societies and their traditional music is the disenchantment and lack of interest among younger, second-generation Cantonese Canadians. The old stories, performance styles, and temperaments are not suited to the changing tastes of young people, who like brighter and more joyful songs in faster tempos. In today's world, love affairs and marriage practices are not the same as in the old world, and young people have little understanding of, or sympathy for, the old conventions. Also, the texts of these songs are written in the old literary style and are difficult for the young to follow. Professor Huang recalls that during his first term of residency at the University of British Columbia (in 1987), he was asked by the Hon Sing Athletic Association to teach young people to play Cantonese music. These children, whose ages ranged from 11 to 14, could speak only English and had adopted very Euro-Canadian cultural attitudes. After studying for little more than a month, they abandoned their music classes for such other activities as gongfu (boxing). This was a disappointment for their parents, amateur musicians themselves, who had hoped their children would share their interest.

Some younger men and women in the Ngai Lum society appreciate Cantonese opera and its songs. But youths in Vancouver tend to favour either the excitement of pop music, in which they seldom participate creatively, or Western classical music, in which as pianists and violinists they are extremely active.

In sum, the older style of Cantonese music is well preserved in Vancouver, but principally among the older immigrant generation. A well-known statement, attributed to Confucius, puts this type of "marginal survival" into partial perspective: "You can find the ritual in neighbouring countries when it is lost [at home]." But for how long? About abandonment of the heritage by youth, Confucius was silent.

## NOTES

- \* Huang Jinpei began the research reported here in 1987, with the support of a "Foreign Scholars" grant awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In 1993, he and Alan Thrasher updated and revised the study, Professor Thrasher adding some social observations.
1. In 1929, Huang Jinpei and Charles Chu of Vancouver, a relative of one of Huang's old friends, played in a Singapore ensemble attached to the Jing-wu Athletic Association. They performed music there on many evenings and Mr. Chu still remembers something of those times.
  2. Among the invited actors were Sun Ju, Gui Ming-young, and as many as thirty others.
  3. Expressive ideals deriving from the Confucian heritage have penetrated all areas of Han China, though most superficially in the Cantonese subculture. The "old and refined" (*guya*) music, with simple melody and slow tempo, performed in the "covered and controlled" (*hanxu*) manner, is not especially valued by the Cantonese. The Cantonese prefer newly composed music, performed by large ensembles, with showy expression. Especially in instrumental music, the prevailing ideal is "happy and fast" (*huankuai*).
  4. For the most part, these items were presented to the society by Hong Kong or Guangzhou Cantonese opera troupes. Although Jin Wah Sing more recently has purchased new costumes, the society's resources are so complete that other troupes, both visiting and local, often ask to borrow equipment and sometimes even musicians and actors. A recent instance involved Jin Wah Sing lending musicians for an evening performance.
  5. For an account of Jin Wah Sing during the late 1930s, see Leung 1977, 10.
  6. The Vancouver Chinese Music Ensemble, not specifically a Cantonese ensemble, was organized in 1979 to play the more recent "national music" (*guoyue*), though this ensemble also includes some Cantonese music in its repertory. Most of its members are Cantonese, although a few are from North China. There is also a Peking opera society in Vancouver, but, owing to sharp differences in dialect and musical style, there is little contact between its members and the Cantonese music societies.
  7. There is also a loud and lively style in Cantonese opera (*dahou*), requiring more forceful vocal production and accompaniment by *suona*. This style is not very popular among the Vancouver music societies.

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**Sommaire:** *Huang Jinpei et Alan R. Trasher nous livrent l'histoire des associations de Vancouver qui ont interprété des opéras cantonnais de même que de la musique instrumentale, depuis l'arrivée des premiers Cantonnais, au milieu du XIXe siècle, jusqu'à nos jours. Les auteurs concentrent leur analyse sur trois importantes associations, et examinent tout particulièrement leur contexte d'insertion; les auteurs défendent la thèse que de telles associations ne pourront dorénavant survivre que de manière marginale.*