

# Old Hong Kong in Recollection

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Sonia Ng Voice-over and Douwun Saying

## Canton and Hong Kong in the 1920s

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun moved to Hong Kong in 1926 and breathed his last there in 1979. Throughout the 54 years, he had lived with the changes of the city for more than half a century. In 1975 to 1976, Douwun had his nanyin and other song-arts recorded at the request of Dr. Bell Yung, a US-based scholar. He sang for three months. After tens of hours of recording, he improvised a 6-hour song, Reminiscence of Douwun the Blind, which recounts the story of his life. In the previous section (“The Story of a Virtuoso Blind Musician”), Douwun’s nanyin has fairly acquainted us with the old Hong Kong. During the recording sessions, Douwun had also given a personal note on what he saw and felt throughout the years when being interviewed by, and sometimes chatted with, Dr. Bell Yung. This is a valuable primary source for us to understand the history of the Hong Kong society and the way of living in the past. This section is accordingly a compilation of Douwun’s remarks about old Hong Kong. In the 1920s, Canton was convulsed by the frequent warlord warfare. In 1925, Douwun got to Hong Kong for the first time when the Canton-Hong Kong Strike broke out. He had made a comparison of the living conditions in Canton and Hong Kong.

### **Douwun Saying**

I dreamt of going to Hong Kong. They said everything’s cheaper here. Say, you could buy 20 catty of rice in Hong Kong with the sum that gave you only 10 or 9 or 8 catty in Canton. With 1 cent, you could have 10 eggs in Hong Kong but only 3 or 4 in Canton. So things were more expensive there, and it was more difficult to earn money. What’s more, warlords were everywhere. Sometimes they shelled merchant ships, and sometimes people counter-attacked. Wow, complete chaos! Canton was hell to us! We were in a hail of bullets. The worst years were the 9th, the 10th, and the 11th, 12th and 13th years of the Republic. These were the worst. Every year we had one or two battles, and battles meant curfews. They never stopped fighting...

## Songstress and the House of Ba Yam Gwun

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun settled down in Hong Kong in 1926, and was married to a songstress in 1929. Performance of songster and songstress was a popular, and major, form of entertainment in those days. What actually was this profession about? And where did they sing?

### **Douwun Saying**

Cong geok (literally “singing role”), that is, what we called “cong geok” in the past, means singer. There were just a handful of them in those days. They sang in teahouse or some private parties; that’s what a singer’s about. Since they’re good at singing, we also called them “singing folk”. There was a music house called “Delicate Ba Yam Gwun” in Yunam Street. I was friendly with all the staffs there, and that’s how I met them.

## String player, the eight-sound instrumentalist

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The venue in which people listened to music performance was called Ba Yam Gwun, literally the House of Ba Yam Gwun. Musicians were called “string player”, and were commonly known as “aai aai man” in the industry. Opium was sold publicly in the past. Musicians in the House of Ba Yam Gwun were mostly opium smokers.

### **Douwun Saying**

We often gathered and chattered after work in “Delicate Ba Yam Gwun”, the music house in Yunam Street. In there we got to be friends. But blind musician did not belong there. I just knew them, the eight-sound instrumentalists. I knew all of them in that House of Ba Yam Gwun. So why I got to know them? You know, the aai aai men were all opium smokers. That’s why I got acquainted with so many people when other blind men in Yau Ma Tei got just a few friends. That’s why I had so many friends! (Yung: because of the dope, huh!) Yea! Because of that... You know it was such a fashion. You could find it here, there, and everywhere!

## The splendor of blind musicians

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun had made a name in opium dens and brothels soon after he arrived. He managed to earn a good living out of singing. Accomplished nanyin singer was much in demand, and enthusiasts were often respectful to them.

### **Douwun Saying**

Staging was a different thing! Here they offered you a bowl of fruit; there they gave you a dish of salty olive and rock candy. And also a pot of tea. The moment you set down the zither, the moment they handed you the fruits. Ah! When you started singing, or started doing anything, someone was there to fan you. What a pleasing job to do! How lordly we were? Let’s say for night snack, they asked you what you’d like to have. “Sir, what night snack do you want?” they asked. Let’s say for dinner, they would cook you rice when even the host was eating fried noddle.

## 30s

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## Flower carouse in different parlors

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In the 1920s and 1930s, prostitution was yet to be prohibited in Hong Kong. During those years Douwun sang in brothels around Yau Ma Tei, the Western District and Shek Tong Tsui, attending fa guk, literally “flower banquet”, in those places. What was a fa guk, or fa zoek (literally “flower carouse”)? What was sang in those occasions?

**Douwun Saying**

A fa zoek was held in brothels. You see, fa zoek was when you arranged for a parlor, small or large, depending on the number of guests. A small parlor held six or seven people. Large parlors were in the front, like the “Longevity” room here. It’s called da gwun. Small ones were at the back, near the kitchen. Large parlors were close to the balcony. The largest were all end bay rooms. Sometimes they had several tables! That’s the way: each table sent for their own “flowers”. They were called hau tou (literally “earth at the back”), and the party where you sent for a girl as drinking company was called zau guk (a carouse). (Yung: And you sang while they were eating?) Normally yes. Sometimes I sang before the meal. Sometimes I sang before the table was ready. It was rather random. In a carouse it was different. Most of the time I sang Sorrow of the Traveller, Farewell My Concubine, Poem Purloined, A Whore Seeing the Shaman and the like. In brothels I usually sang Mourning for My Lady and Mourning for My Man.

## Opium feast on the arhat bed

**Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In the 1930s, both prostitution and opium smoking were legal in Hong Kong. How was an opium feast hosted in the brothels?

**Douwun Saying**

It was like this: in the parlor there was an arhat bed, with two dama square stools at the front. That was an opium feast. There someone smoked opium, and others were playing mahjong or other games at the side. That was the setup. We would rest the zither on a teapoy and sang. Those on the arhat bed could listen, and those playing mahjong could also hear us. That’s the thing. (Yung: So it’s a fixed setup of the parlor?) Yea, it was always like this! It was open in those days. We had legal opium in Hong Kong!

## Fusing nanyin into Cantonese opera

**Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Nanyin, originally the trade of blind musicians, was later fused into Cantonese opera and operatic songs. Douwun recollected that some eminent Cantonese opera writers like Ng Yat Siu, Nam Hoi Sup Sam Long and Chu Ting Hok adopted the nanyin of blind musicians by sneaking it in their Cantonese operatic songs.

**Douwun Saying**

You know, Chu Ting Hok came up with Celebrating New Year because he heard so much of my Gander at Lantern! He was there every night, in Yau Ma Tei. For our profession, this indecent profession, everybody knew us. We worked overnight. Every night we sang more or less the same songs, like Gander at Lantern, Farewell my Concubine and Poem Purloined. That was a long time ago. Let me think who wrote ... who wrote those songs... only the dreadful stuffs at the end were Chu Ting Hok’s. I think it was Sam Long... think it was Sam Long, and Ng Yat Siu. That’s it. The Great Seducer, you know, came from our Poem Purloined. They heard us so many times and they sneaked it in. The Great Seducer... aha, I forget who wrote it. So why

do I know? Because the part about seduction's unchanged. It's still our nanyin, our lyrics. So it's obvious The Great Seducer came from our Poem Purloined. Look, Chu Ting Hok's Celebrating New Year and Farewell My Concubine! He was there every night, on the farthest bed. I was singing in the parlor and he curled up there facing the darn lamp and jotted down every sentence, every word of my song. He'd come the next night if he hadn't copied them all. Then he used it to write a zihou (i.e. a falsetto)... in nanyin.

## Helpful neighbors and working staffs

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In the old Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok there were the houses of Ba Yam Gwun, brothels, opium dens, and tenement houses for the grass roots and blind men. The grass roots had their own community and were used to help each other out.

### **Douwun Saying**

I've always lived in Mong Kok. (Yung: How did they call you?) Call me? Oh right. They called for me from a lot of places. Before the war, there was a smoking stall in Pak Hoi Street, a bootleg. It was in Pak Hoi Street, crossing Yunam Street. There I chattered with friends all night. The bouncer, you know, watched me blather for hours. (Yung: And they called for you at the smoking store?) At the smoking stall. The staffs were very nice! They would cycle to the stall and ask me out. I mean when it was early. If it was late they kept the record. Anyway they would surely cycle to the stall to pick me up before 10:00pm.

## Meal boarding is the norm

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In old Hong Kong, dap sik (literally "join meals"; means boarding) was popular among working class. Before the Second World War, restaurant was not the same as teahouse, which served mainly tea and dim sum.

### **Douwun Saying**

I used to dap sik before I got married. It was very common in Hong Kong. Many people in the tenement house boarded with others, sometimes with the first room, sometimes with the second room. That is, we boarded with those who had a family. We didn't usually dine out. No we didn't. Teahouse didn't provide meals in those days! There were no meals. It was after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, on 7 July, that teahouse in Hong Kong offered meals. There were no meals before that. (Yung: So teahouse offered only tea?) Tea, dim sum, bun, pastry, that's all! They did have lotus-leaf-wrapped steamed rice in the afternoon and morning, but no meals. After the Marco Polo Bridge Incident they offered braised beef rice and braised pork rice, in pots. No, we had no meals in teahouse in the past. After that they started to make fried rice and noodle. But there were no meals in the old teahouse.

## The bounteous date

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun, himself a smart lad, made a good living in the late 1920s as an accomplished songster. In those years he met his first wife, a songstress. They dated after work. With his income Douwun managed to maintain a rather affluent romantic relationship.

### **Douwun Saying**

She (his first wife) was fair-to-middling, as a songstress, not first-rate anyway! Well, she wouldn't take a fancy to me if she had been top-notch. You know, I was quite well off then, and we could spend quite nicely. In those days it was quite something if you spent a few cents on a woman.

## Loads of rental rules

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

After marriage Douwun rented an apartment on the 3rd floor of a tenement house in 47 Woosung Street. There were, in fact, some unwritten rental rules at that time.

### **Douwun Saying**

It was very irksome in Hong Kong. If you were pregnant you had to let them know, and you needed a lot of money for this. They would ask for a number of live chickens and a sum of pocket money. You had to pay obeisance to the Deity of the Earth. That's it. If you had children in the first place, they wouldn't say a word even if you were pregnant. But if you moved in expecting the first baby it would be irksome. So we didn't let them know since she was just in the first or second month.

## Infant deaths abound

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

All the four children of Douwun died young, mostly in infancy. The toughest one lost his life at the age of five. Douwun recalled that Hong Kong had a high rate of infant mortality in the past. Infant deaths were found every day in Kwong Wah Hospital.

### **Douwun Saying**

There were all kinds of illness, like convulsion. A real tough job to raise a child. Never easy! You know, 20 or 30 babies went belly up in Kwong Wah Hospital every morning! It was not like today. So I say it's tough to raise a baby. Now it's easy, but not in the past. Really tough. In my family only 4 survived out of 9 births. Not like today's 90% survival. It was still difficult when I got to be a father. Still tough before the war. Well, I was supposed to have raised four babies.

# Three thriving sorts in Hong Kong

## **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Three types of people were moneymakers in pre-war Hong Kong. They, in Douwun's words, were the "three thriving sorts". What were the three sorts?

## **Douwun Saying**

In the old days, that is, the decade after I got to Hong Kong, the government hadn't yet outlawed prostitution. The flowery world was still there. You know, the flowery world was outlawed in 1935. The prohibition of prostitution. First they interdicted those for the foreigners. The year after they banned those for the Chinese. The prohibition of prostitution! Look, when there were prostitutes, the clubs... you know what was in fashion? You see, Hong Kong had three thriving sorts, the black marketeer, the Tanka, the Hakka. The three thriving sorts. So why these three sorts? Tanka were those on the boats, and they transported stacks of goods. There were all kinds of thing in those stacks. You know, the plainclothes police stationing in Tsim Sha Tsui and Cheung Chau called the places "golden hill ports". Those were places of prime importance! They got to secure these places when any movements broke out. Then, the Hakka. Hong Kong belonged to the Hakkas. They were influential in both Hong Kong and Kowloon. So interpreters — you know, they needed interpreters in every police station, and inspectors and foreign superintendents would bring interpreters along for operations — were all Hakkas. They were born here, you see, it was their place. That's it. Before 1935. The black marketeers, that's it. (Yung: the gambling den operators, right?) Yea, those smuggled and evaded tax.

# Old tael and new silver dollar

## **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Today we can still hear people say they "were paid two fen and four", which means they had meager income. The phrase "two fen and four" has to do with the silver specie standard in the past. When Douwun joined the blind men organization, he paid 1.4 silver dollars, that is, 1 tael, for a permanent membership. How to do the conversion?

## **Douwun Saying**

1.4 silver dollars. You paid 1.4 and you were permanent member (membership fee for joining a union-like blind men organization). We called it 1 tael in the past. They took 1.4 even if it was 1.5. You know, there were 8 centi more for 1 tael. 8 centi more... and no renewal!

# 40s

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## Food shortage during WWII

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The fall of Hong Kong during the Second World War was a nightmare to the people. Douwun could recall the days vividly and gave an equally vivid description. Before the British Army surrendered to the Japanese, Hong Kong was dogged by water and food shortage. Douwun, a blind man, could only get through with the help of neighbors. A few days before the surrender he followed some friends to raid rice in the Holt's Wharf in Tsim Sha Tsui.

### **Douwun Saying**

Alas! The three years and eight months in Hong Kong and Kowloon were dreadful. Why dreadful? Too many incidents, too many changes. Look, the first time, we had no rice at the beginning. It was even more awful for us blind men. Fortunately, I was well liked by many neighbors and friends in Yau Ma Tei, and so I survived with their helps. Then we got through to the first month of the year, and we were rationed half a catty of rice each day. So the atmosphere became less flustered. But on the 12th of the sixth month we heard a sound! What sound? The drill. And the Japanese changed the exchange rate to 1:4. It was ghastly. Again we were all starved. Then, another wave of panic, and things got a bit settled down only near the end of the year. Okay. In 1943, we had another great change on the 1st of the seventh month. It was just a few months, seven or eight, of rest. Then bang! Standardization! They decided to boycott Hong Kong dollars. They confiscated all Hong Kong dollars! Suddenly the price of everything went up threefold. That's it... A week later we were all starved again. In Temple Street... what we saw in Temple Street was terrible. We heard moans of pain every night in every empty shop. In the morning a whole lot of corpses were waiting to be picked up. I had counted it... I personally bumped into six or seven dead bodies!

## Casualty and panic all around

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

After the fall, many people in Hong Kong fled to the Mainland. Blind musicians either died or went away, leaving only a handful in the city.

### **Douwun Saying**

Alas, it's so sad, thinking back on those days. Really, you'll be heart broken if you were there, and be brimmed with tears if you recall it. Hope these kinds of thing will never happen again. I wish heaven bless all of you. So here! In gloom we got to 1944. But then the Japanese stopped rice rationing! Yipes! Another wave of panic. Anyway, it wasn't that bad this time, and the mass calmed down like a month later. That's it, and lives went on. For me, I was quite lucky then. Why? Because other blind musicians were gone! Ah! My fellows either died or fled elsewhere, and there were only a few of us left in Hong Kong. Right. But I was not gone. One year, at the time of standardization, I got on really badly. That year was the blackout! It crushed me much harder than it did to others. How? I was wretched!



## Getaway to Free Zone

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun had thought about fleeing to the free zone inland, but he decided to stay in the end because there he would have no means to sustain his life.

### **Douwun Saying**

It was like this in 1943: the Japanese did a lot of things, like the blackout, like the military scrip standardization. On the 1st of the seventh month they decreed the blackout, so all lights had to be switched off at 12:00am. Then... you know, nightlife was very important to me. I relied on nightlife. Afterwards no one dared to call me at night. I thought, oh I had to leave. I didn't think I could get over that period, and many of my fellows had already fled away. They were mostly gone; only I remained. It was so bad. Then everything was used up. A couple dozen of military scrip, a hundred-some Hong Kong dollars, a jar of rice... I used them all up. I got only thirty or so Hong Kong dollars left. No more military scrip and rice. Now what? Leave? Where? We had no place to go if the Japanese hanged on in China. We could only go to Huizhou or the neighborhood. But then nanyin was nothing there; they liked Cantonese opera. They wouldn't listen to nanyin! Those were Hakka places. How could they possibly listen to nanyin?

## Singing in private brothels

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

After the war, Douwun resumed his performance in brothels. By then, however, he was singing in private, underground brothels as prostitution had long been prohibited in Hong Kong.

### **Douwun Saying**

(Yung: did your regular patrons return?) Yes. I would be damned if they didn't! Along the two streets there were about ten brothels that called on me frequently. Others were not quite into me. (Yung: who sent for you at that time? The whores or their customers?) The whores! (Yung: So the customers paid for it? How long did you sing?) Most of the time, an hour or so. Two songs were about an hour or so. See, two songs, say A Whore Seeing the Shaman and Mourning for My Lady made about half an hour. Yea, it was an hour or more. (Yung: Did you sing when they got there, or when they left?) No! No, it was not like this! It was overnight. Those were not ordinary customers. They all stayed overnight, and gave you night snack. They paid for everything the hooker wanted for a whole day!

## Casinos and entertainment houses

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The city recovered a few years after the war, and entertainment houses emerged in time of peace. At that time entertainment houses were mainly casinos. In late 1944, according to Douwun, casinos were established one after another in Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok and Yau Ma Tei.

**Douwun Saying**

Entertainment houses popped up in 1944. That was 23rd December 1944, on our lunar calendar. Entertainment houses came out since that date. In Sham Shui Po there were “Dai Wa” and “Heng Fong”, and many more I hadn’t heard of. In Yau Ma Tei we had “Pin Sum” and “Dai Gwun”. “Dai Gwun” is today’s “Meng Sau Palace”. And also “Nathan”... (Yung: They were mainly gambling hubs, right? What did they play? Mahjong?) Sic Bo, Pai Gow and Fan Tan. These three.

**Casino manager became a fan****Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The new casino brought to Douwun a new patron — the manager of the casino.

**Douwun Saying**

In “Nathan” I sang till 5:00am or so every night. He, you know, he made a living in Nathan. He kept a room there. He was the head, and lived in the casino with his family. (Yung: he was the owner of the casino?) No, the manger, not the owner. He managed the casino, and brought his wife and children along. He lived there. (Yung: So you were not singing for the gamblers.) No I wasn’t. (Yung: You sang for the manager! Did you sing in other entertainment houses other than “Nathan”?) Entertainment house, no. I started singing from the 19th of the second month, till... (Yung: in “Nathan”?) till the 7th of the fifth. In 1945!

**Smoking dens and private brothels in Central****Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In 1935 prostitution was outlawed in Hong Kong. After that, private brothels mushroomed, and they seemed more public than private. Why?

**Douwun Saying**

We got to Hong Kong in 1926. Prostitution was banned only in 1935. It was not before, but after the prohibition! After the decree, in 1935, 1936 and 1937, there appeared a shedload of dens like this in Shanghai Street and Yunan Street! There were so many hostesses in those red smoking dens. They were just like whorehouses! Private is above board, so it was like public. No laws governed them. They were not really private, but with all the money flowing the government kept its eyes shut! No, there were smoking dens all around. They were not legal, true, but it didn’t matter so long as the police did nothing! In Hong Kong, you see, nothing was clearly legal or illegal. Like the dens in Central, they looked really like a whorehouse! They showered notes and joss papers everywhere. This was exactly the practice of brothels in the past, right? They did it publicly. They were illegal, that’s right, but they were obviously brothels. That was what they became.

## 50s

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### Sheltered under an opium den

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The Hong Kong government interdicted opium smoking in 1931, but many opium dens were still running, illegally, in the 1950s. In 1955, Douwun came back to Hong Kong after a few months' stay in Macau. Having no place to live, he had lodged in an opium den in Hung Hom for some time.

#### **Douwun Saying**

The owner of an opium den in Hung Hom sent for me soon after I came back! Seeing him... "How's it? Got a place to dwell?" "Naw! Where am I supposed to find one?" "Natch! It's always like this in Hong Kong. They give you a place to eat but not one to sleep. Look, you can live here, if you feel it all right. You know all the people here, and you get the smoke. Rice? Well, pay for it if you can, or just take it. Ask them to open the drawer. It's the den's money, my money. I don't often have friends here... since I came to the place." Great! So I always think it the best kind of thing in my life, a thing quite hard to find. Who am I? I am blind. I can't fight for him, I can't talk for him, I can't bring him business and I can't help with the den. Who am I? Anyway I lived in the den since then, until 20 July 1955 when I found a job in RTHK.

### Entertainment in the George Park

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

With peace, Douwun's performance in the George Park at Yau Ma Tei received a standing ovation. It reflects an aspect of the lives of Hong Kong people in the past.

#### **Douwun Saying**

Then I sang in the George Park. That was excellent, because I was not used to sing at the doorsill and beg for money. So, with the help of friends, a good lot of friends who helped me with the set-up, I started singing in George Park, and I stayed there for two years. The neighbors were nice, and they were happy with my performance. My singing satisfied their appetite. If it rained, I would move to the wet market nearby. Look, it went so well that almost all of my audience cared about my performance more than I did. If it rained, you know, they would help me move the stuffs into the market. Then I could sing again. So you see how good I was doing...

### New fun with Rediffusion

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In 1949 or 1950, Hong Kong was placed under curfew. After that, the life style of people changed with the appearance of Rediffusion, a broadcasting company.

**Douwun Saying**

And Rediffusion appeared. There were several things indeed, like the curfew. In 1949, or 1950, they declared a curfew. No noise from 12:00am onwards, so no one could play mahjong. Then there was Rediffusion. It made our lives very difficult. Like, in Kowloon they all listened to Rediffusion, because they didn't have to use the landlord's electricity. So they needed my singing no more! You see, they had Rediffusion in the morning, and they dared not listen to anything at night. So we had to go public somewhere. I pondered and pondered, and thought about a lot of places before decided to make it in Kwun Chung.

**Nanyin on RTHK****Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Many golden agers will recall that both RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) and CRHK (Commercial Radio Hong Kong) broadcasted nanyin in the 1970s. RTHK had in fact aired the performance of blind musicians before the Second World War. The things that Douwun remembered about these blind musician friends were probably a historic record so rare that even RTHK might have already lost.

**Douwun Saying**

Before and after the war we had fellows going to RTHK for nanyin broadcasting. When you were in, you did as it was told. At the beginning they had Ah Kan and Blind Fuk. They did one day. Only one day in a week. Then there was Sam Yan, also one day per week. You did as it was told. During the Japanese occupation Ho Yiu Wah was in. After that, when peace returned, I joined in with Hung Zit Wing. So we went there, thinking that it might do something good to our business. It was like advertising, to boost our orders. That's it. After two weeks I thought of quitting, and in the end I left after four weeks. I quit after four rounds. I had just one round per two weeks. How could it help? Anyway, Hung Zit Wing persisted and asked a sighted to partner with him. But then after one round... in the second round Lau Siu Chun — you know Lau Siu Chun was in charge at that time — terminated the show. That was what happened. After Ho San and Hung Zit Wing became sworn brothers — that was good — they talked Lau Siu Chun into resuming the show. Then, Friday, it was only Friday, and they did it for two years. Some time later Lau Siu Chun was unnerved. He quit and went to Canton because he thought it was thriving. Then Chan Yat took his place. That was the thing.

**Radio broadcast as promotion****Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In the late 1950s Douwun's nanyin was brought on the air in RTHK. How much did he earn from it? How was his life then?

**Douwun Saying**

(Yung: how much did you get from one show?) At that time? Only \$35 at the beginning! How could it help? I got just one show per week. (Yung: \$35 was quite something at that time!) Yes, yes, I know! When I thought of quitting a friend stopped me.

He invited me to his place and said: “at least you got thirty-something a week. You could do a good round in restaurant or smoking den with this sum. You don’t have to quit, right? And you could boost your orders somehow!” So, you see, I went there on the 10th of July and quit in late August. Then Chung Yan Lung told me: “We’ll see. They say they’ll give you one more show. Perhaps in the second month.” In fact it was confirmed, but he said “perhaps”. It was his humor. That’s it. In September they gave me two shows, and I got \$70 per week. Next year they gave me three. It was 1957. In 1957 they gave me three shows. You know, I had been doing two shows per week for a long time, and they gave me one more in 1957. So I got three shows. That was very good! Three shows per week. In 1958 I got \$10 increment. So it was \$45. And it was such a motivation!

## 60s

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### End of nanyin programme in the 1970s

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Douwun sang at RTHK for 15 years, airing three times a week until he left. Nanyin broadcast was obviously popular among Hong Kong audience. In late 1970, however, the music trend changed. RTHK terminated nanyin programme to make room for Chinese and Western pop.

#### **Douwun Saying**

In 1970, oops, they got a different taste. “Take a rest”, they said. Of course they said so, nit. Certainly not “we’re axing the show”! It sounded better, right? So Romance of the Next Life was ended quite abruptly. It should run a year more if we were serious. It needed one more year to finish the song. But they gave you a one-month notice and you had to finish it as soon as possible. (You were doing three times a week, right? Monday, Wednesday and Friday?) Right, Monday, Wednesday and Friday. (Yung: And the show time was?) It varied greatly. Sometimes they changed the time every year. The longest was like 3:00-4:00. I can’t really remember! (Half an hour per show?) Yes, only half an hour! (It’s good having \$45 for half an hour!) Well I didn’t say it bad. I didn’t say it was bad!

### A druggie’s anti-drug recital

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

The Hong Kong government launched an anti-drug movement in the 1960s. A variety show was held in the Queen Elizabeth Stadium as one of the promotional functions. Ironically, Douwun, a druggie, was invited to write a nanyin song for the occasion. As an episode of Hong Kong’s anti-drug programmes, it was not without fun.

#### **Douwun Saying**

Chung Yan Lung and I wrote the lyrics for the anti-drug movement. He said: “Just don’t project yourself in the song!” See, I wrote like a sentence or two to deter people

from taking drugs. It was in the Elizabeth Stadium. We participated in the anti-drug movement. Later the boss curled their lips at me! “You quit, did you?”

## 70s

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### Scarcity of opium and the tough withdrawal

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

Soon after Douwun moved to Hong Kong he became addicted to opium. He was not yet 20 at that time. Since then he had never stopped smoking. It was widely believed that many singers smoked opium because it gave a unique touch to their breath and vocal. But Douwun saw no connection between the two. He blamed himself for being ignorant in youth and got into this detrimental habit. Douwun overcame the addiction in around 1971. How did he pull through?

#### **Douwun Saying**

(Yung: Was it difficult to overcome?) Naturally! You need a long time, a very long time to fight against it. It can't be done in one go. We can't afford it. You make it lighter, and lighter, and lighter. My case was this: at the beginning I made it 1 tsin, with 2 taels of water, for 3 days. The second time, I also made 1 tsin for 3 days. The third time also for 3 days. The fourth would be 3.5 days. (How much was 1 tsin of opium in those days?) Not much. Only ten something for 1 tsin! (Where did you buy it?) Of course I asked the junkie for it. (Why did you decide to overcome it?) Lawks! Where could I get hold of it? It was expensive and hard to find. (Harder to find in those years?) Since the past three or four years! It was four years, I think! (That is, you couldn't find it even if you try hard?) Well, I could if I tried hard. But it was expensive, like \$60 or \$70 for 1 tsin. It was four times the price in the past. So I had to get over it.

### Living hand to mouth

#### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

After the nanyin show in RTHK was axed in 1970, Douwun could only go back in the street. He sang in Mong Kok, mostly at the entrance of Sincere Department Store. Sometimes he received five or six calls in a month. He had to live hand to mouth.

#### **Douwun Saying**

(Yung: Could you make do with just 5 or 6 household calls in a month?) Well, tolerably. I was not going to buy a land or anything! Just work harder if it's not enough. In that case I went to Sincere for two more nights! (How much did you get from a night at Sincere? You couldn't sing for long there, right?) It depends! It was like an hour or more, and you can't be certain about the money. Sometimes a nanyin lover

would give \$10 or \$20. On average I got \$50 or \$60. On average! Not in absolute terms. Sometimes I earned \$10 something, or \$20 something in a night. Anyway, normally, that is, on average it was around \$40 to \$50.

## Disability allowance backs the poor up

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In the wake of social and economic growth, the Hong Kong government started offering old age and disability allowance in 1973. Though a modest sum, the subsidy was helpful to the poor.

### **Douwun Saying**

Thank goodness, thank goodness we have a hundred something to use now. The disability allowance, you know? The government subsidizes us, the handicapped, with a hundred something. Well, in fact it's no big deal. We lived through to this day even though we didn't have any subsidies in the past, right? (Yung: since when?) Last year! (Why did the government offer it suddenly?) Hmm, the council members; not sure what it's about. They asked for old age allowance, you know, for the 75! I'm not yet 75, but I get disability allowance. That's good. You get a hundred something if you're disabled. A hundred something is good. In the worse case I get at least a few bucks, right? People like us have too many entertainments, like we want to go to the teahouse all the time. The sum is enough if we're like others who stay and cook at home. You can't consume a catty of rice, right? A catty, you can't consume it all. Steam a salted fish. It is enough, isn't it? It is enough. But we have to buy smokes and go to teahouse. We want to go out. That's the point.

## A day's spending on foodstuffs

### **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

What actually was the consumption pattern of grass roots in the 1970s? Just look at how Douwun spent his money in a day.

### **Douwun Saying**

A dim sum breakfast costs \$3 something, no matter which dishes you order. It doesn't have to be a nosh-up, say, a rice pot costs \$2 something, and a basket or a plate of siu mai (pork prawn dumpling) adds up to \$3 something! And the pot of tea. So it's \$4 already! What a sum. Then, at noon, like 11:00am or 12:00pm, you spend \$4 in the least. Sometimes it is \$7 to \$8! After a while you have a meal at 5:00pm. A soup rice, or a soup plus plain rice, costs \$4 or \$5 something. You see what a sum it is! It's okay if you don't count, but if you do you know it's quite a sum. It is more than \$10 a day! And sometimes you will hang out ...

# The past lost in birds' twitter

## **Sonia Ng Voice-Over**

In 1975, Bell Yung proposed to record the singing of Douwun in Fu Lung Teahouse, where they could reconstruct the environment of the blind musician's teahouse performance. In Fu Lung, customers hanged up their birdcages like what people did in the past, and servers cried their dishes and poured tea as they used to be. Douwun's performance was accompanied by a motley of sounds, like the chattering of customers, the twittering of birds and the crying of the servers. Obviously Douwun was delighted with all these. Fu Lung was the last traditional teahouse in Hong Kong. It was demolished a year after Douwun's recording, and Douwun himself passed away in 1979. The sounds of teahouse vanished as this traditional teahouse became a part of history. .... This is the story of Douwun, a blind musician, and the story of Hong Kong.

## **Douwun Saying**

Gee, the birds twitter! Birds are fine! (Yong: It's noisy!) Birds are fine... birds are fine, really... (Played the recording) What brand is this? (Yong: an American brand, this machine.) Oh! (Yong: Now you've finished twelve songs. What will you sing? For the next time?) Vengeance, I'll say... That day I told you it was... 40%, now altogether I've sung 80%, 70% or 80%... Next time I'll do Vengeance. Vengeance!