

Guangdong Song-art

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Bell Yung on the art of Douwun

“I think most people who research on art history focus on the research of high art. They pay less attention to folk art, and particularly, to recording the lives of such artists. This song Reminiscence of Douwun the Blind documents the plight of an artist of a meager status. It is his perspective, expressed in his own language. I think it is highly valuable to academic research. It is precious material that provides valuable information for those who are to research on folk artists in future. What touches me most is that Douwun, having experienced so much, remains optimistic and forward-looking. He doesn't grumble or complain. Having learnt about his story, I respect him even more.”

Dialogue between Douwun and Bell Yung on the various singing methods in Guangdong song-art

1. On the features of Banyan

BY: I think singing Banyan is the toughest.

D: Of course. One has to ‘insert characters’ and ‘insert lines’ into the songs, say, “Good! Good!” If you don't do that, it doesn't sound right.

2. On the difference between singing Jiexin (Yueou) and Nanyin [Note: Jiexin is another name for Yueou]

D: Jiexin sometimes presents one character, singing one character, then the second, then the third, they are sung together. You could also sing them with nanyin. The number of lines is the same.

BY: I think the vocals are similar.

D: But it is slower, and freer. Nanyin makes the four ban a fixed format, but there is no such thing in Jiexin. You can sing half a line, and then sing the whole line, using the last character for to stretch the vocal.

3. On the difference between singing Nanyin and Longzhou

BY: Do you prefer singing Wu Song in Nanyin or Longzhou?

D: Longzhou is better, but more demanding. Nanyin is more leisurely.

BY: I think you sing Longzhou in a faster pace.

D: No, and indeed it feels less brisk. Nanyin is slow. It's not so suitable for singing such songs.

BY: Not suitable?

D: It's slow. The atmosphere isn't suitable. Longzhou is more suitable in terms of atmosphere. But it is more demanding because you can't stop. In Nanyin, you can stop. Nanyin is slower, Longzhou can't be slow. You sing all the four lines in a row.

Yuen Siu-fai on Douwun's song art

Since the 1970s, Nanyin began to be re-discovered by scholars in Hong Kong and overseas. Douwun's artistic achievement has become recognized. From singing on the streets, he went on to more formal performance venues, such as the City Hall, Goethe Institute, St John's Cathedral, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In the Hong Kong Art Festival of 1973-1974, Nanyin was part of a programme that presented traditional culture.

Dr. Yu Siu-wah on Guangdong Nanyin

Dr. YU Siu-wah is Associate Professor, Music Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Yu's research interests include Chinese Music History, Music of the Manchus and Mongols of the Qing Court, Composition and Performance Practice in Cantonese Opera, Chinese Instrumental Music and Musical Instruments and Music in the Popular Culture of Hong Kong. During his directorship at the Chinese Music Archive (2005-2012) of CUHK, he had contributed to the publishing of Dou Wun's prestigious South Sound collections. He was also the Chief Editor of the Hong Kong editions of Chinese Opera Music Anthology and Chinese Opera Directory.

1. Multiple theories on the origin of Nanyin

Nanyin, in a broad sense, refers to "Southern Music" or "Sound of the South". As Chinese Music, Nanyin is divided into "Fujian Nanguan" and "Guangdong Nanyin". The former began in the Song Dynasty, sung in the dialect of Minnan. The lyrics were dated and traditional instruments were used. Another theory claimed that "Guangdong Nanyin" could be traced back to the Tanci of Yangzhou or Suzhou. However, since Nanyin had always been sung in Cantonese, how it began and transformed are still open questions.

2. Guangdong song-art and Nanyin instruments

In Guangdong song-art, Muyu, Longzhou, Yueou, Banyan, even “Shu Bai Lan” are interchangeable terms. Yueou and Nanyin are almost the same. They both feature seven-character lines, although the rhythm and format are slightly different. Professional musicians like Douwun know how to sing all of them. Nanyin 以歌行體, to perform Sorrow of the Traveller 《長恨歌》 and The Pipa Tune. 《琵琶行》 Nanyin is usually accompanied by the gu zheung (zither), ye hu (coconut-shell fiddle) or song hu (pine fiddle). Blind artists work by themselves. Douwun can play the zheng on his right hand, beat the baiban (clapping board) on the left, while singing at the same time. It’s amazing. When it comes to recording, the set-up becomes more meticulous. More instruments and musicians are included. In those days, RTHK used to present regularly this outstanding pair: blind master Douwun would sing and He Chen 何臣 would accompany Douwun with his singing and clapping. 拍和.

The resonance of the string instruments ye hu and qin hu are different from that of er hu and guo hu. Ye hu has a deeper and huskier sound. It matches well with the melancholic mood of Nanyin. People who sing Nanyin today no longer use the er hu or guo hu. They always use the ye hu. In the movie “Rouge”, there is a scene playing the sound of ye hu, but what is shown on the screen is the er hu. In Longzhou, gongs and drums are used, while in Muyu, there is no instrumental accompaniment.

3. Di Shu Nanyin - style of the blind

Parents of blind children usually sent them to particular trades to become apprentices. Their masters taught fortune telling and augury. Fortunetellers also played er hu or zither to attract customers. Since the whole industry can practiced fortune telling, the song-art became known as “DiShui Nanyin”. “DiShui” is a jargon in fortunetelling. It represents one of the eight trigrams. Not all blind people are musicians, but Douwun’s Nanyin was so amazing that he did not have to rely on fortune telling to make a living.

Blind singers practice a coherent singing style with particular techniques of the voice, rhythm, and pronunciation, which gradually become a unique music style distinct from seeing singers. Yuen Siu-fai once mentioned that as a singer he could see the reactions of the audience. He sometimes worried that the audience might be bored by the slow rhythm of Nanyin. However, the Nanyin in Cantonese Opera is usually shorter and more concise. There pace is faster and there is more variation. Besides, Nanyin involves both singing and story-telling. It is preferable that the singer has a neutral voice – neither male nor female so that it is easier for him/ her to switch between roles. Even though a voice may not be particularly beautiful and at times, deep and husky, it may still be able to grab your attention for two whole hours. This is only possible if the singer’s techniques are brilliant. Douwan’s Longzhou and Nanyin are entirely distinct from the Nanyin in Cantonese Opera and Cantonese Operative Songs. There is a high degree of freedom. His ability to adapt is truly impressive.

4. The style of Douwun and other singers

It is apt to describe Douwun as “whimsical” 鬼馬. He is actually quite presumptuous 得戚. Although he is a prominent Nanyin singer, his voice is of a relatively high pitch when compared to other singers of DiShui Nanyin. It is exalted and forceful. He is extremely absorbed in his singing, which is very animated 生鬼. He never spends time warming up his voice. In two or three lines, he gets into mood. That’s very professional indeed. Since Nanyin is a form of entertainment, he tries to bring out laughter in tears and tears in laughter, even in a tragic story. In DiShui Nanyin, different singers have different voices. Their singing technique varies, some are more melancholic, and others are more exalted.

5. Nanyin of prostitutes and erotic songs

This is how the singers earn a living – they find a shop, hold a Longzhou right in front of the people there, and sing. When it’s done, they collect the money. If you don’t want to pay, he would turn around and shake the water (a symbol of wealth) out. Female blind singers (shi niang) have a different identity. Besides taking care of their husbands and children, many housewives would invite shi niang home to sing “Third Madame Educating Her Son” 《三娘教子》 or “A Dream of Red Mansions” 《紅樓夢》. It was a way for them to learn history, culture and other traditional values. They would even ask them to sing erotic songs. This is why Nanyin is more than a form of entertainment. There is the educational side. The women back then were particularly eloquent. Why? That’s because they watched theatre performances and listened to Nanyin.

6. Nanyin on the radio

I remember when I was a kid, whenever there was a storm, we would listen to the radio. Once the public announcement about school suspension was over, there would be the Nanyin of Douwun. Every day, he sang out the news at seven or eight o’clock in the morning. When I returned home from school around three or four in the afternoon, he would be singing traditional Nanyin songs at Commercial Radio, such as “The Brutal Trial of Liang Tianlai,” 《梁天來》, “Wu Song” 《武松打虎》 and “Birong visits the prison” 《碧蓉探監》. Various radio stations invited him to sing Nanyin. You can imagine how outstanding he was, and also how Cantonese Operative songs and Nanyin were very important in the soundscape of Hong Kong in those days. You could hear them any time. It’s a pity that resources were not available at the time, and Douwun’s Nanyin wasn’t regarded highly so that no recording was made or kept.

7. Preservation by the people

Mr. Ho Yiu-kwong loved Nanyin so much throughout his life that he would invite Douwun to his home every year to sing. He would record the singing. I am not sure if any members of the public have any copy of Douwun’s

Nanyin, but I believe there is probably not much. This is why the forty hours of recordings by Professor Yung made in the 1970s are very precious. It is also a wonderful idea of him to reconstruct Nanyin in the teahouse.

8. Reconstructing Nanyin

Each time a Nanyin singer is invited to sing on stage, in a concert, it is a re-presentation that is modernized and urbanized. It has nothing to do with the original context of Nanyin. We may lament that the original contexts are gone, but we cannot possibly re-construct an opium house. This kind of preservation is a decontextualized and museum kind. What we can do is to preserve the recording.

9. Writers of Cantonese operas include Nanying in the Songs

Both Cantonese Opera and Nanyin are performed in Cantonese. Players usually pay a lot of attention to the characters so that the audience can hear clearly each and every word in the song. So, is Cantonese opera imitating Nanyin, or the other way round? If we consider the history of Cantonese Opera, during the Taiping Rebellion, in Guangxi Jintian village, people used operas sung in Cantonese (白話) to promote the rebellion. After the Qing court suppressed the Taiping Rebellion, Cantonese was forbidden. Singing had to be in 'official language' 官話 to prevent rebellions. Therefore from Taiping Rebellion to the 1930s, no one sang songs in Cantonese. It was only until the 1930s that Sit Kok-sin and Ma Shi-zheng began to turn Cantonese Opera from the official language to Cantonese. The professional players could not adapt instantly. So they invited blind singers to their home to study Longzhou and Nanyin. You can call it 'mimicry' 偷師, or you can call it a kind of 'reference'.

When Nanyin is inserted into Cantonese Opera, it is another story. It is totally different from the kind of mimicry, techniques or expression we just mentioned. Ever since the 1930s, Nanyin and Muyu became one kind of Cantonese Opera singing, hence absorbing Nanyin into its art.

10. Personal experience of Professor Yu

Since ten years ago, I began learning Nanyin from a group of singers (including auntie Mui), which I enjoyed very much. I realize that Nanyin is indeed a very different world; its musical qualities are unique. However I do not think in terms of having to rescue Nanyin as if we are in some emergency situation, nor do I have any high expectation. Hong Kong is so extremely commercialized and focuses so much on cost-effectiveness today that Nanyin would not mean much to the market. And Hong Kong is still dominated by the British and Western ways of living. When one thinks of local culture, one may not immediately mention Douwun. There is so much entertainment in Hong Kong and there is so much beautiful music around the world. But one can only truly appreciate them if one enters that culture.

Many people regard Nanyin as old-fashioned. I do not mind that view. Nanyin may carry many attributes that one does not find pleasing. For instance, it may be a bit shabby, dirty, or pornographic 咸濕. If you do not appreciate its characteristics, simply ignore it. However in terms of music, it carries many fascinating and elegant elements. It is even a good reference for pop singers. For example, many masters of Cantonese Operas know the importance of Nanyin. They know that if they could sing a little of Nanyin, they would be more self-assured. Nanyin is not easy at all. It demands a high level of skills. Not every one dares sing it.

For sure I want to promote Nanyin from the historical point of view, as well as from the Guangdong and Hong Kong cultural point of view. This is important. In fact Dou Wun's artistic achievement is higher than any artist. Listening to his "Farewell My Concubine" compels you to raise your hats up. Not every one can reach that level of artistic achievement. Even the erotic songs are first-rate.