

Interview with the Gum Sing Chinese Music Club

Place: Office of the Gum Sing Chinese Music Club (557 ½ Fisgard Street)

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Interviewers: Zhongping Chen; Charles Yang

Interviewee: Henry Low (刘鸿就)

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Zhongping Chen: When was this society established?

Henry Low: 1980. At first we're at the Chinese Friendship Association location. In 1982 we rented this space.

Zhongping Chen: From 1980 until now, almost thirty years.

Henry Low: thirty-one years, ya.

Zhongping Chen: How many people found this?

Henry Low: We have maybe eighteen members.

Zhongping Chen: So I guess you were one of the founding members?

Henry Low: I'm not the founding member. The founding members still come in to play every week. He's 92 years old. He's the founding member, Kwong Yip Leung. It says in that book too, the red book.

Zhongping Chen: Ya there's some but very short description. So how many people found this society at that time?

Henry Low: Right now, we have maybe twenty members.

Zhongping Chen: So the membership increased or decreased? Compare with before.

Henry Low: Decreased, you know, hard to find new members because an instrument takes a long time to master. Singing too, Chinese opera is not for everybody.

Zhongping Chen: Ya, that's true.

Henry Low: Either you love it or you don't like it, Chinese opera. So it's very hard to have new [members]. Actually there're also not a lot Chinese people [here]. The majority of them are in Vancouver. Vancouver has a lot of

people who enjoy Chinese opera. But the population in Victoria is very small.

Zhongping Chen: How often do you get together to practice?

Henry Low: We come here just once a week, Saturday.

Zhongping Chen: So, every...

Henry Low: So we have the leading music instruments, Erhu, Gaohu, Zhonghu and also Yangqin.

Zhongping Chen: The whole set.

Henry Low: There's also the Daxian.

Zhongping Chen: But if you want to perform, you want to perform a play, you have to get actors, actresses?

Henry Low: Yes, we have performance. We have pictures that show we have performance. You have makeup, costume.

Zhongping Chen: You have to recruit people from outside as actors?

Henry Low: Our member too.

Zhongping Chen: So usually the play's band in this society receive training somewhere?

Henry Low: Training... Right now I'm learning Erhu, the founding member--

Zhongping Chen: Oh, you learn it from him?

Henry Low: We learn from him. For singing we just learn from DVD and just listening to tapes.

Zhongping Chen: So you said every year you perform once.

Henry Low: Every two years we perform once to raise money for our association.

Zhongping Chen: So this performance is like a whole opera. Really? That would take like one, two hours.

Henry Low: Ya, every song is maybe 25 minutes. Maybe I show you one of the music sheets. That is interesting too. A lot of stories is in the Sui Dynasty, Qing Dynasty, Ming Dynasty. This is the Chinese opera's music sheet.

Zhongping Chen: So you know, actually in Chinatown before there was a Chinese theatre. Actually not only one.

Henry Low: Ya, theatre, Theatre Alley. There was a theatre alley.

Zhongping Chen: So you saw the theatre before? You came in 1965--

Henry Low: No. In 1965 when I came, there were no more theatres.

Zhongping Chen: So right now where do you perform here in Chinatown?

Henry Low: In Ambrosia, next to the CCBA.

Charles Yang: Ambrosia, that apartment right beside--

Zhongping Chen: It's a theatre or...?

Charles Yang: It's just a big hall.

Henry Low: It's a hall, catering hall. We use it as a ...

Zhongping Chen: Like a meeting hall, you turn that into a theatre.

Charles Yang: It's where Chinese school has their graduation as well.

Zhongping Chen: What are the general backgrounds of the audience? Usually they lives in Chinatown or they came from outside...?

Henry Low: Mainly in Chinatown because it's easier to find for the people, to come down to Chinatown and watch us, the show, Cantonese opera. So normally we like to stay in Chinatown.

Zhongping Chen: So, no Caucasians join this?

Henry Low: One or two, you know, to watch.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, just watch, they cannot sing anything else.

Henry Low: No, well in the old days in Hong Kong, they have English opera.

Zhongping Chen: So, each time how many people would attend the performance?

Henry Low: 200.

Zhongping Chen: Still a lot. How many times will you perform?

Henry Low: Just one time. One time a year....

Zhongping Chen: How long are you going to perform?

Henry Low: Four hours, five hours. Altogether it's six or seven songs, maybe two shows, two opera costume shows and five singing songs.

Zhongping Chen: The performance is mainly just singing.

Henry Low: Ya, singing and then maybe two operas with costume and everything, with costumes like that.

Zhongping Chen: So they will show, tell stories.

Henry Low: Ya, stories.

Zhongping Chen: Ya, they're pretty. So do you perform in other cities apart from Victoria?

Henry Low: I do sometimes. They invite me and my wife and sometime another member from here to participate in fundraising or to sing in Vancouver. Like I'm going over July to sing a song over there.

Zhongping Chen: Only Vancouver, not other cities?

Henry Low: Only Vancouver. Edmonton, you know you get invitation to go there and join their celebration or annual celebration or whatever. Edmonton, as far

as Edmonton, Calgary. Vancouver, quite often in Vancouver because I know a few music clubs in Vancouver. I know quite a few people in the opera circle in Vancouver so I get invite to sing there. But I have to pay for the singing.

Zhongping Chen: You have to pay for singing?

Henry Low: Ya, it's--

Zhongping Chen: But they invite you there...

Henry Low: To sing a song, maybe anywhere from \$200 to \$600.

Zhongping Chen: You pay for that?

Henry Low: I pay.

Zhongping Chen: They invite you there...

Henry Low: You pay because they... most of them are free admission, you don't need to pay for the tickets. For people to watch, they don't have to pay for the tickets. Sometimes they pay \$10 maybe a ticket. So that's why we have to pay to... for rental of the hall, the theatre, the musicians. Musicians have to be paid. So the singers pay a lot of money. If you sing an opera show, could be \$600 for the man, \$600 for the woman to sing, so \$1,200. And if just singing, could be \$200 - man \$200, woman \$200 to sing a song.

Zhongping Chen: So this is totally for a hobby. You cannot make any money from it.

Henry Low: It's because some of them, some of the shows, if it's not in a theatre, if it's [in] a Chinese culture centre, it's to entertain those senior people- senior citizens, Chinese people. They have something to do, look forward to. They like to listen to Chinese opera. So most of them are at old age, for people like this kind of song, so we sing to entertain them and then maybe they, the music club can apply for funding from the city. Gambling money, you know gambling money? The gambling money, the lottery foundation.

They have money to donate to different groups to promote their... Canada is a multicultural ... country. So they encourage people to keep their culture. So Chinese opera and martial art is a culture, right? Kung fu is a culture, Chinese culture. So they like to encourage groups to open the music clubs and have shows and entertain some of the senior citizens.

Zhongping Chen: Does your society receive any grant from government?

Henry Low: No, we haven't done that because you know, for... somebody said that you should contact the city and see if you can get some funding from them, from the society, from the government, from the lottery funding.

Zhongping Chen: So basically you actually paid the money from your own pockets?

Henry Low: But right now, our members, we have to pay membership fee every month. So in order to pay for the rent and utilities and...

Zhongping Chen: So this is the major income, revenue for the...

Henry Low: For us, it's from the members and from the maybe once every two years we have performance, then we raise money, like maybe we could get as much as \$5-6,000 to us.

Charles Yang: From each performance?

Henry Low: After each performance, after we pay all the musicians from Vancouver blah, blah, blah, dinners and blah, blah, blah, we can maybe get \$5,000 to our club.

Zhongping Chen: But that's like every two years.

Henry Low: Ya.

Zhongping Chen: So how much is membership fee?

Henry Low: Right now it's just \$10 a month.

Zhongping Chen: Oh \$10 each. It's about twenty people.

Henry Low: Twenty people ya. We pay for the gas, the electricity and we also have four, five members that play rock and roll music, western music here. Chinese songs, some Chinese songs and western music here. They use the space for their practice.

Zhongping Chen: What is age of the members...?

Henry Low: Members here? I would say youngest one is anywhere from sixty, to ninety.

Zhongping Chen: sixty to ninety?

Henry Low: Youngest one is sixty.

Zhongping Chen: Oh, youngest sixty. Should get some younger people here.

Henry Low: Well the young people don't like Chinese opera.

Zhongping Chen: But they will like rock and roll.

Henry Low: Rock and roll. You only have the few people that are able to play and sing. Not too many people can do that.

Zhongping Chen: So they are also members of your society?

Henry Low: Ya.

Zhongping Chen: How old are they?

Henry Low: Only four of us. I'm one of them.

Zhongping Chen: So you also play rock and roll.

Henry Low: One of them and we just pay \$10 a month.

Zhongping Chen: So it's always like over sixty, all the members?

Henry Low: Around sixty, ya.

Zhongping Chen: So it's more like westernized.

Henry Low: Ya, we will play those old style western music. Western rock and roll, old style.

Zhongping Chen: Ya, that's interesting. So like every Saturday how long are you going to... you know, the activity will last?

Henry Low: From 8 o'clock to about 12.

Zhongping Chen: Oh to 12.

Henry Low: Ya, 4 hours.

Zhongping Chen: Just practice?

Henry Low: Ya, just practice song, rehearse a song. They give the musician a chance to play the music and give a chance for the singer to sing and later on we have a nice snack, gathering.

Zhongping Chen: So did you get teachers from China to teach you like this stuff? The performance...

Henry Low: No, we just... if we want to learn we can go to Vancouver. There's a--

Zhongping Chen: There're teachers there?

Henry Low: Opera instructor is willing to teach for nothing.

Zhongping Chen: Oh really?

Henry Low: He'll teach you to perform, the costume makeup. Like last time we just went back, six members from our club went to Vancouver and learn how to put [on] makeup like that, costume and makeup. Six members went to Vancouver and then this woman knew everything about opera and she is willing to teach to us for no charge.

Zhongping Chen: So like these instruments you bought individually? by the members...

Henry Low: Those belong to the club, those instruments. But some of the musicians have their own instruments, better instruments. More expensive instruments, they buy from China and they keep it to themselves. They bring it here to play and this is just all belong to the club. Those music instruments belong to the club.

Zhongping Chen: So basically you entertain each other every Saturday.

Henry Low: That's right, exactly. Keep up the art of opera, keep up the tradition.

Zhongping Chen: So none of these members is professional actors, actress.

Henry Low: Not professional, we're all amateur. It's just a hobby.

Zhongping Chen: So how do you choose these plays? Like operas, where did you get this?

Henry Low: Oh those are from, either from Hong Kong, from Vancouver, different ones. In music clubs they say you got to learn this song so they give you this song and you learn it, right? So some of them are from Hong Kong, some of them from Vancouver. Maybe even some from Mainland China, from Guangdong somewhere.

Zhongping Chen: So these look like love stories or?

Henry Low: Love story and more about the emperor and the queen, the empress. You know, love, different dynasties.

Zhongping Chen: Historical stuff...

Henry Low: Quite often they're about the Four Great Beauties.

Zhongping Chen: The Four Great Beauties.

Henry Low: Xishi...

Zhongping Chen: Wang Zhaojun...

Henry Low: Tang Dynasty, Wang Zhao Jun, Guangxu Emperor, etc, Qing Dynasty. There're also Mongolian, Yuan Dynasty stories. A lot of history.

Zhongping Chen: So when you perform these... you got only a couple Caucasians. Most are... the Chinese audience...

Henry Low: Mainly older people.

Zhongping Chen: Older people. No young audiences?

Henry Low: Young? No. Young people, they don't understand. They don't have the patience to sit half an hour to listen to the song, one song, right?

Zhongping Chen: So you have a leader for this society?

Henry Low: Yes like I said the founding member, he's our president. I'm the vice president.

Zhongping Chen: No election? Just voluntary.

Henry Low: No election, just volunteer.