







# The Mysterious Life of WAH KWAN GWAN

BY JACKIE WONG

**V**ancouver's Chinatown is changing fast. On East Georgia, Union, Keefer, and Pender streets, the bright newness of independent art galleries, coffee shops, performance venues, and cocktail lounges stand in sharp contrast beside the now-dwindling number of traditional, generations-old grocery stores, bakeries, and butcher shops that were once the main features of the streets.

"Chinatown has changed," says Paul Cheng, who immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong in 1975. "It's only [busy] in the daytime for tourism, or for people who live close by to get groceries. Historically, it's nice to have it there. But the real functions, the real developments [that formed Chinatown's social and economical hubs] are not there anymore. Now, Richmond is said to be the new Chinatown."

Cheng frequented the neighbourhood during his first 20 years in Canada. He'd regularly pop in to the

martial arts clubs, and he was part of a Chinatown musical society that has since moved its headquarters to Richmond. Speaking with me today from his home in Surrey, Cheng rarely finds himself in Chinatown; he's had little reason to visit in the 13 years since the death of his friend, Wah Kwan Gwan, who used to live in an East Hastings Street rooming house.

Gwan was a longstanding member of Chinatown's Cantonese opera community. His presence and contributions to the community were largely unacknowledged during his lifetime, but his memory lives on in Vancouver's present-day Cantonese opera community powered in large part by Cheng and his wife, Rosa.

Cheng and Gwan would occasionally meet for dim sum at the Pink Pearl Restaurant on East Hastings Street near Gwan's apartment. They frequently saw each other when working backstage together on Cantonese opera productions mounted by the Jin Wah Sing Musical Soci-



ety, which has since moved to Richmond. “I worked with him for almost seven years backstage,” Cheng says of Gwan. “In Cantonese opera, they follow traditional rules. He’s the one who showed me all the rules.”

Back when Chinatown’s streets were awash with neon lights in the 1950s, ‘60s, and part of the ‘70s, people packed the after-hours musical societies, gambling clubs, and clan associations that formed the nucleus of Vancouver’s Chinese community. Restaurant workers would drop by late at night after they had finished their shifts to socialize, play games, and make music together. Gwan was a regular fixture in the halls of Chinatown’s musical societies. The neighbourhood’s two oldest musical societies were the Jin Wah Sing Musical Association and the Chin Won Musical Society, formed in 1934 and 1935, respectively. Both groups were hubs for practicing, performing, and preserving the art of Cantonese opera.

This musical art form elevated the lives of Vancouver’s young Chinese men who worked long hours at multiple jobs to make ends meet. Yiucheung Ling, now 84 years old, spent his working life in Chinatown restaurant kitchens and at a poultry shop where he would slaughter, de-feather, and butcher chickens for customers. He fondly remembers the lively spirit and camaraderie of the after-hours musical societies.

“Even though we were tired after work, we felt energized once we got there,” Ling says of Chinatown’s musical societies. “When I heard the gong and cymbals of the opera music, I felt at home.”

Ling met Gwan when the two frequented the Chin Won Musical Society as young men in their twenties. There, Gwan was a familiar, if unusual, face. When he wasn’t quietly observing the rehearsals and performances, he would provide valuable instruction on costume comportment, props, and performance. He had spent formative years of his life with a Cantonese opera family in China, and he was eager to pass on his knowledge to others.

This Cantonese opera expert with a mysterious past lived on the margins of both Vancouver’s Chinese- and English-speaking communities; he was, in fact, ethnically Aboriginal, but had lost all ties to his birth family. While he was fluent in two dialects of Chinese—Toishan and Cantonese—he could not speak English, so like many Chinese bachelors, he spent his days in Chinatown. During his lifetime, only a few people appreciated his wisdom derived from a textured, often misunderstood life that transcended geography, language, and the colour of one’s skin. “The Chinese and Aboriginals saw Vancouver’s Chinatown as a refuge,” explains Bill Chu. He chairs the Canadians for Reconciliation Society, a grass-

roots movement to honour and acknowledge the history of Chinese and Aboriginal people in British Columbia. “From the folks I ran into, they usually refer to that as their common experience; that Chinatown served as a place of refuge for both, because both are subjected to discrimination.” An understanding of the history of Chinese-Aboriginal relationships in Vancouver is now fairly minimal, underlining the importance of revisiting that part of history, Chu continues. “I think there’s a deep need to understand that piece of history again.”



Throughout the course of a friendship that grew from their shared participation in Chinatown’s musical societies, Ling, just one year older than Gwan, learned that the two shared a similar family background. Both had spent significant parts of their childhood in the Cantonese opera community in Kaiping City, also known as Hoiping, in Guangdong Province, China.

Ling’s father was a script-writer for a Cantonese opera company in Kaiping. Gwan’s adoptive family was part of the city’s thriving Cantonese opera community. Gwan, born in 1929 near Hastings and Carrall Streets to Aboriginal parents, was separated from his birth family as a boy. The details of the separation—and whether it was, in fact, abandonment—are unknown.

According to what Ling gathered from casual conversations with his friend, a Chinese man named Mr. Gwan adopted the boy and named him Wah Kwan Gwan, the name he lived with for the rest of his life. His Aboriginal birth name is unknown. The adoptive “uncle” took the boy with him back to China, to Kaiping City. There, Mr. Gwan, the benefactor’s brother, owned cinemas and restaurants in Kaiping, and the entire fam-



Rosa Cheng and Yiucheung Ling. Mr. Ling, 84, is a friend of Mr. Gwan’s. Both lived in Kaiping, China, and trained in Cantonese opera as children



ily was also deeply involved in Cantonese opera.

By the time Gwan returned to Vancouver in the 1950's, he was a young man in his twenties.



Even though the return to Vancouver marked a return to his birthplace, Gwan would live the rest of his life on the margins of Canadian society. After years spent in China, Gwan had lost all connections to his Aboriginal roots. While not fitting in entirely within his adopted community, his inability to articulate in English further isolated him and restricted his ability for economic and social advancement. Consequently, he did not have steady work and relied on social assistance and ad-hoc



#### OBITUARY OF WAH KWAN GWAN

Mr. Wah Kwan Gwan, (1929-2000) a legendary figure in Vancouver's Cantonese opera community was born in a First Nations family in Vancouver and found abandoned in Vancouver's Chinatown. He was adopted by a Chinese family and returned with them to Baoan county in Guangzhou, China. His adopted father was a scriptwriter in a Cantonese opera company in Guangzhou, Mr. Gwan was brought up in the surroundings of Cantonese opera and immersed himself in the art form. In the 1950's Mr. Gwan returned to Vancouver. He was active in the Vancouver Cantonese opera community. He helped out in the performances and loved to share his knowledge of the backstage skill with the younger generation. In the year 2000, Mr. Gwan became sick, and passed away on 26th December, 2000. His passing is a great loss to the Vancouver Cantonese Opera community.

housing arrangements provided by Chinatown community members to sustain his livelihood.

Gwan spent his days in Chinatown, where his fluency with the Cantonese language and interest in performance art helped him connect with the local Cantonese opera community. He frequented the Chin Won Musical Society, and the chairman temporarily rented him a room in his home. Gwan used his skills learned from his adopted family in Kaiping to help mount local Cantonese opera productions. He worked backstage, and he eagerly shared his extensive knowledge of the intricate, traditional rituals around costuming and props with younger performers and stagehands.

Gwan's contributions and commitment to the opera community went largely unacknowledged. He was often left with the opera-related grunt work that few others wanted to do.

"When you go out to all the opera groups in Vancouver, nobody is interested in the backstage. The backstage is a very dirty job, a lot of heavy moving, and nobody appreciates it," says Paul Cheng, who used to work with Gwan backstage during Jin Wah Sing Musical Society productions in the 1990s. "People wanted to put [Gwan] backstage. He was quite a helpful person. The only thing is, nobody respected him."

Gwan had been dealt a difficult hand in life. He lived in poverty, relying on social assistance and the goodwill of Chinatown community members to help him find places to live, meals to eat. He turned to drinking that sometimes resulted in abusive, polarizing behaviour that alienated him from the people who knew him. "People thought he was a nobody," Paul's wife, Rosa, says.

Working against the odds, Gwan proved himself as a talented singer and performer in the opera community. He eventually earned onstage roles, but he was never able to play the principal male roles typically filled by conventionally attractive male actors.

"If you are a principal male role, he's usually the hero of the show. Traditionally, it's someone who's good-looking, the prince," Rosa says. "So he [Kwan] was not in that kind of role."

Rosa and Paul became involved with Vancouver's Cantonese opera community at the same time in 1993, and they met Gwan in the same year. If Gwan did appear onstage, he played a villain or political leader. He loved it, Rosa said. He shone.



Gwan was, to Rosa and Paul, a very special, essential player in the traditional Chinese artistic community. "We learned a lot from him," Rosa says of Gwan's ency-



cloned knowledge of the Cantonese opera art form. The couple is working hard to keep Cantonese opera alive and pass it on to future generations through the Vancouver Cantonese Opera Society they founded in 2000, the last year of Gwan's life.

"It's like literature, a poem, when you sing," Rosa says of Cantonese opera. "The performance technique—the miming, the gestures—is very unique. It's an art form."

The Vancouver Cantonese Opera Society, Rosa says proudly, has a mission to popularize the art form in English-speaking mainstream society. It's hard work, she admits. But she and her husband are no strangers to working against the grain in the interest of those on the margins.

"For me, it's an art. I want to preserve it, I want to promote it," Paul says. "We're not involved in any Chinatown groups anymore. We're totally different; it's not for people to hang out after work anymore. We do real production, we do real training." For his part, 84-year-old Yiucheung Ling continues to share his knowledge of costuming and props work with Rosa, Paul, and the Vancouver Cantonese Opera Society. "As long as I'm healthy, I'll keep going," he says, smiling.

"He's a gem," Rosa says of Ling. "He's the only one left in Vancouver who knows the traditional ways of Cantonese opera costume preparation."

It's rare, special knowledge that Ling and Gwan used to share.



It was raining on Boxing Day 2000 when 71-year-old Wah Kwan Gwan died alone in a government-subsidized rooming house on East Hastings Street. His passing was quiet and without fanfare, much like the years he spent in Vancouver's Chinatown. Gwan was on income assistance when he died, and with no next of kin, the provincial government stepped in to sort and do away with his possessions, which included numerous valuable texts on Cantonese opera.

"Suddenly, I got a call that *Wah Suk* [an affectionate Chinese term of endearment for Gwan] passed away," Paul recalls. "But by the time I knew, everything was gone."

Intent on preserving the memory of a man they respected and admired, Paul and Rosa cobbled together what they knew about Gwan's life to write an obituary that ran in Vancouver's *Sing Tao Daily* newspaper in January 2001.

The story of Gwan's life and connection with Vancouver's Chinatown community should give us pause to reflect on historical relationships between Vancouver's Chinese and Aboriginal citizens, says Bill Chu of Canadians for Reconciliation.

"For a long time, we had been subjected to similar treatments, and we'd co-exist and help each other on those fronts, during those terrible times," he says. "If you look back, anything before 1967, the Chinese were subjected to all kinds of discriminatory legislations, both provincially and federally. And the indigenous people, at that time, had their own limitations in terms of what the government allowed them or not allowed them to do. So both were subjects of big-time, official discrimination."

The situation with Gwan and the Cantonese opera community, Chu says, should not be considered to be an anomaly restricted to a few relationships between select individuals.

"It's not just something exotic that we should be looking into, but something which is real, which should cause us to reflect on how we should relate to indigenous people today."

"We learned a lot from him," Rosa says of her relationship with Gwan. "A lot of people will think he's nobody." She pauses and looks to Gwan's friend Ling, seated next to her. They both know that he led a remarkable life, and that his memory deserves to be preserved, honoured, and celebrated



Wah Kwan Gwan with good friends, Kim Ming Chau (left) and Philip Chiang (right). Chau works for a company specializing in providing backdrops and props. Philip Chiang, Kwan's landlord, operated a rooming house on East Hastings St. Kwan later taught Chiang backstage work and prop assembly.