



Tong Siu-yin, who went blind after contracting measles, rehearses in To Kwa Wan.
Photo: Nora Tam

Singer keeps alive the spirit of a bygone era

Blind former telephone operator Tong Siu-yin is working to preserve a unique local artform

Annemarie Evans

Singer Tong Siu-yin comes down off the small stage at a workshop in To Kwa Wan after performing several naamyam songs - the "music of the south" that fans are keen to preserve as part of the city's heritage.

For centuries, the artform was a way for blind people to eke out a living at a time when they were allowed to do little else.

"Throughout the Qing dynasty," Tong says, "they would go and sing in brothels and nightclubs to earn money."

In ancient China, naamyam entertainers would move from village to village singing about the familiar topics of love, but also about everyday issues that might act as warnings or education for the listeners gathered around.

Tong lost most of her sight at 18 months old to a bout of measles and is "officially blind". She declines to give her age - "I won't reveal my secret," she says, smiling in her blue-tinted sunglasses.

While she also sings Cantonese opera, naamyam is harder, she says. Nowadays she is a bit hoarse, but she's still keen to show off a tradition she has been a part of since 2008, accompanied by sighted musicians - a man on the yehu, a string instrument, and a woman on a qinqin, a form of guitar.

The make-up of the team marks a departure from the conventional group of three blind musicians and the singer.

Tong came from a poor family and grew up in Kowloon, the middle child of three. Her father was a self-employed carpenter, while her mother worked at a towel factory in San Po Kong.

"I went to St Francis' School in Wan Chai," she says, referring to the now St Francis' Canossian College. "I learned Braille there. I liked singing folk songs at school. I worked hard at my studies, hoping to change my life."

She would go on to work for 30 years as a telephone operator at the Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute in Kowloon Tong, which is now under the Institute of Vocational Education. Naamyam was something she took up in 2008.

"I play the clapper," Tong says, referring to the wooden instrument similar to castanets. "I can keep the rhythm with them."

Tong is a nominee for the Cultural Preservation Award of this year's Spirit of Hong Kong Awards, organised by the South China Morning Post. She performs regularly, including recent concerts at Sha Tin Town Hall and the Lock Cha Tea House at Hong Kong Park in Central.

Later this year, she will sing at the Central Library.

She is pleased people of all ages come to hear her sing, harking back to a time when life was slower and simpler.

"The main performers were blind people," she says. "And as they went round the villages, they would sing about social issues and tell them not to do bad things or cheat people."

She gives an example of such moral storytelling.

"There is a man who takes money from his girlfriend in ancient China. He then sits the imperial examination, is successful and finds another love. His former girlfriend comes back to haunt him and closes her hands over his throat," Tong chuckles, making the hand motions, "... until he dies."



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