

Wong Hong Mok (黄宏墨): The Wild Man's Dreams

by **Kong Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Few xinyao singer-songwriters touch on the subject of nature. Even rarer is one who sings with a raw and primeval power. Meet Wong Hong Mok, whose songs are often personal reflections on the self and nature.

Of all the *xinyao* singer-songwriters, Wong Hong Mok (黄宏墨) belongs to the rare species whose works often touch on the subject of nature. His singing voice, bold and unrestrained, has a very raw and primeval power. Although his spoken style of singing was said to be similar to that of Liang Wern Fook, another *xinyao* veteran, they are actually very different. Liang's songs are more reserved and well-crafted. In terms of subjects, Wong's songs are usually personal reflections on the self and nature.

On his deep and sonorous voice quality, Wong explained, "Yes, it's probably very unusual in Singapore. It came about maybe because of a period in my life when I spent quite a bit of time near the sea. I had a friend who was working in the fishing industry, so I would often visit him with my guitar. We would sit serenading the ocean. That's perhaps how I trained my voice."

Wong credited his love of music to his father, who had died when he was 11. "My father loved to hum and sing all the time. All my siblings inherited that from him. We all love to sing."

It was also Wong's father who had instilled a love for literature in him. Wong grew up in an environment filled with books. The senior Wong had been a teacher before migrating to Singapore from China. His father's stories about a beautiful China had filled the young Wong's mind with fantasies of a wonderful world.

"So it was culture shock for me when I finally made my first visit to China in 1986. It had been barely ten years from the end of the Cultural Revolution. China back then was far from the utopia my father had painted. It provided the impetus for me to write the song *Childhood Homeland* (《童言故乡》). Through the use of metaphors, I expressed my disappointment at having a childhood dream dashed by the harsh facts of reality. From then on, I believed that beauty could only exist from a distance."

That would in turn influence his personal style of writing, "I don't believe in being direct when writing. I often express my thoughts through metaphors, my feelings always veiled or implicit. I think there is a unique flavour in looking at things from a distance and that is where the beauty in art lies."

Wong had picked up playing the guitar when he was still studying in secondary three. His family was too poor to afford music lessons, so he taught himself how to play by fiddling with the instrument, "When I had questions, I just asked around." That was also how he figured out how to play the harmonica and piano. He was working part-time after school to support himself and had to save up to buy the coveted guitar.

The photo studio where Wong has been based since 1987 is located in an industrial park in the East. He has been working professionally as a commercial photographer since the early 1980s. Product shots and family portraits adorn the studio walls.

“The thing I enjoyed most in my younger days was to ride on my bike and travel to different parts of rural Malaysia alone. I would stop along the way, taking photographs of the scenery. It was on these trips that I fell deeply in love with nature and mountaineering. I found peace as well as rediscovered myself in the mountains.”

Given the nature of his profession, it should not come as a surprise when Wong admits readily that he prefers to stay behind the scenes, away from the limelight.

“I just don’t fancy being the centre of attention. Sometimes I would even ruffled up or aged my brand new clothes so people won’t notice me,” he said. “I also used a pen name, Lie Ren (列人), when I first started songwriting and always got someone else to sing the songs I wrote. I kept such a low profile that I discovered recently that many friends from the *xinyao* days also did not know that some of my early works were actually penned by me.”

He had gotten into the public spotlight quite by accident. It was in 1989 when he wrote the song *Endless Enchantment* (《万种风情》) and could find no suitable singer to present the song. The organisers of the Xinyao Festival persuaded him to sing it himself. He recalled, “I was shaking throughout the whole performance. I was so nervous. I eventually overcame this fear and got used to performing on stage, but I avoided it as far as possible.”

Wong had always loved writing. His prose had been published in the local Chinese newspapers. It seemed the most natural thing to cross over from literary writing to penning lyrics and putting a tune to them. Wong’s compositions were first heard in 1984 on the Chinese radio programme *New Voices, New Songs* (《歌韵新声》), which had provided many young Singaporeans an invaluable avenue to air their music creations.

The 1970s and early 1980s was a time when romantic ballads dominated the Chinese music scene. Wong had found most of them quite meaningless. He was, however, moved to start writing his own songs after hearing the songs of Lo Ta Yu (罗大佑), a Taiwanese singer-songwriter who, during the 1980s, exercised a profound influence on the Chinese pop and rock music scene with his melodic lyrics, love songs and witty social and political commentary that he infused in his more political songs. His conversational lyrics had touched on issues of life, social responsibility and the political problems of China and Taiwan with an underhandedly critical strain of dark humour.

“I wrote my first song, *Discard* (《抛》), sometime in 1982, before *xinyao* was even an official movement. Nobody back then had thought it possible that we could write our own songs. The mentality back then was such that if you had not gone for formal music lessons where you are trained professionally, you won’t be able to write your own songs,” Wong disclosed.

He would go on to release two albums which are compilations of his songs – *The Wild Man’s Dreams* (《野人的梦》) in 1990, and *The Soliloquy of a Stupid Bird* (《笨鸟的独白》) in 1991.

By then, Singapore was already hearing the last strains of *xinyao*, its heyday fading out with many of the recognised names moving on to develop their music careers overseas.

But his albums, with a unique sound and style that differed from pop songs of the times, resonated with the public and became instant hits. *Childhood Homeland* and *Endless Enchantment* were selected and adapted as part of the repertoire of Hong Kong singer Paula Tsui Siu Fung's albums (徐小凤). *Childhood Homeland* also won the Best Lyrics Award at the 1990 Xinyao Festival. There were even plans to promote his albums in China and Taiwan. That would have meant taking time off his photography work. He turned down the offers without any hesitation.

Wong continued singing and writing songs, releasing three more albums on his own. The last of these in 2009, *This Shall All Come to Pass* (《这一切都会过去》), included several songs sung by three young newcomers Alfred Huang Ye Xiang (黄业翔), Huang Xiu Ying (黄秀莹) and Ye Hui Xin (叶慧馨), whom Wong had discovered through a singing competition he organised. He is grooming these new talents under his music school Sifon Music (十方乐廊). For six weeks at the end of 2009, they had gone on a singing tour in many cities of China, including Beijing, Wuhan, Chengdu, Xian, Nanjing, etc to encouraging reception.

“I still harbour dreams to write more songs. I would also like to nurture young talents to help sing and interpret my creations. But the Chinese standards of young Singaporeans nowadays are a big issue. And that's the greatest problem confronting the local Chinese music scene.”

Over the years, he has also amassed many compositions written for various Chinese theatre productions and television shows. The narration-style song for Kuo Pao Kun's signature stage play *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (《傻姑娘与怪老树》), which Wong took a mere 30 minutes to write, was one of them.

“When the lyrics or the script is very well-written, it will provide ample inspiration. The melody would flow naturally and quickly. Inspiration is everywhere. But you can't wait for it to land on your lap. You have to be constantly reading, thinking, observing the world around you, going out there to experience life first hand. The free associations you make regarding the things happening around you could inspire you to create. You can't hide at home and expect to be creative.”

“Take for example, the song *This Life and Before* (《前世今生》). I had met an Indian girl on one of my trips to New Delhi. I found something very familiar in the look in her eye. After that, I watched some movies and read some books. One of the movies was *Rouge* (《胭脂扣》) starring Anita Mui (梅艳芳) and Leslie Cheung (张国荣). On another trip to Pakistan, I met another lady with that same look in her eye. I thought perhaps we had known each other in our previous lives. That was how I come to write this song. So the more experiences you have, the greater the possibilities of putting them together in your creative work.”

Wong also feels that creativity follows no formula, “One must be willing to break out of the mould. It's from my personal experience. When a melody doesn't quite work with the lyrics,

leave it. After a while, look at it again. If the time and mood is right, something better that works may come along. Just write what comes naturally and things would fall into place. The only criterion - it must move you. Also, when I tried composing the melody for lyrics written by others, one example being the recent song, *Loving You Has Become an Addiction* (《爱你上了瘾》), they also helped me break away from my usual style.”

At the end of the interview, a visibly relieved Wong ushered me to a corner away from public eye, where he enthusiastically showed me landscape photographs displayed on the wall, taken on his trips to such exotic destinations as Tibet, Pakistan, Nepal, Mongolia, etc. He beamed as he gushed about the strange encounters on his solo sojourns into nature.

There is no doubt at all that Wong Hong Mok, the self-professed man on the fringe, is happiest being the “wild man” living his dream trekking in nature, and being able to sing about his experiences is really “a thankful blessing from the heavens”.

Quote

“I’m always a participant on the fringe. I can never be part of the mainstream or create something for the mainstream. I just like to do what I like and what I do well, being at ease and being free.”

Awards

1990: Xinyao Festival, Singapore, *Best Lyrics Award* for 《童言故乡》

Discography

1988: 《曲折之路》 (compilation) for 《情却幽幽》

1989: 《锦绣年华》 (compilation) for 《万种风情》

1990: 《野人的梦》 (BMG)

1991: 《笨鸟的独白》 (BMG)

1996: 《惜缘》

2007: 《借唐朝再燃烧》

2009: 《这一切都会过去》

Other Works

Year of Release	Song Title	Artiste	Title of Album/Project	Lyricist	Composer
1990	飞天	-	新加坡艺术节舞台剧《飞天赋格》	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
1993	逃亡	-	实践表演艺术学院舞台剧《巨人传奇》	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
1994	怪老树	-	舞台剧《傻姑娘与怪老树》	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
1996	营火歌	-	电视剧《老师日记》	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
1999	监牢歌	-	舞台剧《红鹰》主题曲	陈瑞猷	黄宏墨
1999	无耳传奇	-	舞台剧《无耳传奇》主题曲	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
2001	小小一间店	-	教育电视《公民与道德教育》	吴倩如	黄宏墨
2002	结霜桥	-	舞台剧《玻璃动物园》主题曲	黄宏墨	黄宏墨
2003	将你的心装上翅膀	-	教育部《中文特别课程》	黄宏墨	黄宏墨

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