

Xiaohan: The voice of the city dwellers

Written by Jaime Koh on 15 January 2014

Xiaohan was born in 1973 in Singapore. Although she has been writing lyrics since her school days, she only started writing for commercial publication in the 1990s. Since then, the fluently bilingual and award-winning lyricist has penned more than 150 songs for artistes including Stefanie Sun, Tanya Chua, Joi Chua, Sandy Lam, SHE, Jacky Cheung, Mavis Hee, and Jolin Tsai.

Making music, making friends

Born Lin Kebang¹ to a fish farmer and housewife, lyricist Xiaohan had a pragmatic reason for learning music: to make friends. The self-described “not very sociable, totally not trendy or fashionable” Cedar Girls’ Secondary School student was studious and shy.² “I didn’t have many friends,” she said. Although she was the leading soprano in the school choir, that still did not make her a popular girl. She thought being able to play an instrument would help her make friends.

While on the bus home one day, the then 16-year old Xiaohan passed by a bus stop where a group of girls had surrounded a couple of boys playing guitars. She figured that if the guys could attract so much attention with their guitar playing, maybe she could do the same.³ With that intention in mind, Xiaohan approached one of her schoolmates to teach her the guitar. Because she could not afford to pay tuition fees, she agreed to take part in a songwriting competition with her friend instead. The deal was that if they won, the schoolmate would take the prize money in lieu of the tuition fees.

Although the pair only won a consolation prize, surprisingly Xiaohan took home the prize for the best lyrics. In addition, she made many friends, and even the man who would become her husband.⁴ The competition was the start of her involvement with writing song lyrics. “I got hooked on to taking part in (songwriting) competitions,” she said.⁵ Xiaohan went on to win many awards, including best lyrics in a songwriting competition organised by Hwa Chong Junior College when she was a student there.⁶

Early career

Even though Xiaohan was good at writing lyrics, she did not enter the music industry upon graduation from Junior College. Instead the Science student went on to major in biology at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she eventually obtained a PhD in virology.^{7 8}

Xiaohan’s first foray into the professional music industry came in the 1990s. Then a PhD candidate at NUS, Xiaohan wrote several songs for the Television Corporation

¹ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

² Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

³ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

⁴ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

⁵ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

⁶ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

⁷ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

⁸ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

of Singapore (now known as MediaCorp) for use in their drama serials. These songs were used as the either beginning or end themes of the dramas *Royal Battle of Wit* (妙師爺三鬥毒太監, 1996), *Rising Expectations* (長河, 1997), *The Defining Moment* (沸騰冰點, 2008), *The Catchers* (未來不是夢, 2009) and *New Beginnings* (紅白喜事, 2010).⁹ ¹⁰ She also wrote the theme song for the Hong Kong TVB drama, *Return of the Condor Heroes* 1995. Titled 義無反顧, it was sung by Taiwanese singer Ruan Dan Qing.¹¹

While she was writing lyrics for these television shows, Xiaohan continued her day job in science.

On science and lyrics

Juggling the creative and the scientific aspects of her life was tedious. “It was a right brainer and left brainer kind of job at the same time,” said Xiaohan.¹² At the same time, there were similarities in both processes.

For Xiaohan, the key to writing lyrics and scientific essays both lay in the words. “When you write lyrics, you have to do research, you have to make sure your facts are right, your expressions are right, you catch the right place in people’s hearts. Scientific papers are also the same, for in a way, you need to sell your methods, you need to sell your conclusions, you need to tell the editors that your paper is worthy of publication,” she said.

The creative process

Research is an important aspect of Xiaohan’s creative process. “Lyricists are like scriptwriters. You need to be possessed by the person. You need to understand what the person is about,” she said.¹³ Thus Xiaohan would read up on the singer she was writing for, to try to understand what they were about. At the same time, she had to familiarise herself with the tune and think about the words. The first few days of receiving a tune was almost always a time of “constantly thinking”.¹⁴

Inspiration for the prolific lyricist comes from everyday life. She aspires to write for and on behalf of those who cannot speak their minds or express themselves.¹⁵ “I do not listen to Chinese songs because I don’t want to get influenced by them,” she said.¹⁶ Neither does Xiaohan – who is also a columnist for several local newspapers and magazines and author of two books – read Chinese books. Instead, Xiaohan draws her inspiration from trawling blogs on the Internet and being a “busybody”.

“I get my inspiration from anywhere. I get inspiration even from subtitles (of television programmes). I channel surf a lot as I read the subtitles. My husband hates

⁹ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹⁰ 小寒寫詞故事 (二) (2013, May 11). Retrieved from <http://blog.omy.sg/xiaohan/2013/05/>

¹¹ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹² Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹³ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹⁴ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹⁵ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹⁶ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

me for that,” she laughed.¹⁷ Xiaohan also candidly admits to eavesdropping on other people’s conversations, when she’s sitting close enough.

The evolution of Xiaohan

In 2008, Xiaohan quit her day job as a lung cancer researcher at the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology and went into writing full time.¹⁸ Prior to that she had suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of leading a “double life” as a researcher and lyricist. She was also then a partner at Funkie Monkeys Music School and production company.¹⁹

With encouragement from her husband, Xiaohan gave her full attention to music. In addition to writing lyrics, Xiaohan also teaches a lyrics writing course at Funkie Monkeys, and continues to contribute articles to the Chinese evening daily *Lianhe Wanbao* and magazine *Nuyou*.^{20 21}

The path Xiaohan took is most poignantly captured in the song *Darwin* (达尔文) written with local singer-songwriter Tanya Chua. “That song means a lot to me. It’s a representation of the person I am trying to be. I’ve been through a lot in my life. It’s not an easy path to be a lyricist or a scientist in Singapore... Sometimes it’s really discouraging,” she said.²²

Playing second fiddle to foreigners who are perceived to be better than Singaporeans is a sore point for Xiaohan. Gaining recognition for her works - through awards and nominations – is a way for her to prove that Singaporeans are just as successful in their own right. “There were a lot, a lot of failures (in my careers). But somehow, I feel like I’ve become a better person. It’s like all the natural selection, the forces of selection has made me a better person. I’m much more optimistic now, much happier now, much more outspoken and much more positive towards life.”²³

Quote

*“I’m not particularly smart, not particularly rich or pretty or talented. The only thing that represents me is words. I have a wacky brain that is translated into words. You take away that and I’ll probably be very depressed.”*²⁴

Awards²⁵

2002 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for Paper Plane (纸飞机)

2004 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for Abyss (无底洞)

¹⁷ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

¹⁸ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

¹⁹ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁰ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²¹ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

²² Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

²³ Phone interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

²⁴ Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁵ Xiaohan’s website. Retrieved from <http://www.xiaohanlyrics.com/2951838917.html>

- 2006 COMPASS Top Local Chinese Pop Song for My Love (我的爱)
- 2007 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for Rainy Day (雨天)
- 2007 COMPASS Top Local Chinese Pop Song for Amphibian (双栖动物)
- 2008 Global Chinese Pop Charts Best Lyrics for Darwin (达尔文)
- 2008 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for Darwin (达尔文)
- 2008 Golden Melody Best Lyrics Nominee for Darwin (达尔文)
- 2009 TV8 Best Lyrics for Mr Lonely(寂寞先生)
- 2009 eMusic Awards Best Lyrics for Royal Flush (同花顺)
- 2009 COMPASS Young Songwriter of the Year
- 2010 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for *Parabola* (抛物线)
- 2010 eMusic Awards Best Lyrics for *Parabola* 抛物线
- 2011 COMPASS Top Local Chinese Pop Song for Mr Lonely (寂寞先生)
- 2012 FreshMusic Best Lyrics for Patient of Loneliness (孤独患者)
- 2012 eMusic Best Lyrics for Patient of Loneliness (孤独患者)
- 2012 Golden Melody Best Lyrics Nominee for Long Lens (长镜头)
- 2013 Singapore Hit Awards Best Local Lyrics for A Million Litres of Tears (十万毫升泪水)

Publications^{26 27}

- 2011 眼淚是膠
- 2013 无指幸福

Plays²⁸

- 2005 Lao Jiu (老九) (Partial lyrics)
- 2010 Liao Zhai Rocks (聊齋Rocks)
- 2012 Lao Jiu (老九) (All lyrics)
- 2012 Day I met the Prince (我要上天那一晚)
- 2013 Three Little Pigs (三隻小豬) (Translation)

Reference

Chan, B. (2013, February 25). The L!Fe Interview With Xiaohan; Waxing lyrical over words. *Straits Times*. Retrieved from Factiva.

²⁶ 推出第一本書《眼淚是膠囊》 小寒在文章裡大哭 (2011, January 16). Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报。 Retrieved from Factiva

²⁷ 小寒 再出书 写‘无指’朋友经历。 (2013 , March 15). Lianhe Zaobao 联合早报。 Retrieved from Factiva

²⁸ Xiaohan’s website. Retrieved from <http://www.xiaohanlyrics.com/3331021488.html>

Interview with Xiaohan, 10 January 2014.

推出第一本書《眼淚是膠囊》 小寒在文章裡大哭 (2011, January 16). Lianhe Zaobao 聯合早報。 Retrieved from Factiva

小寒寫詞故事 (二) (2013, May 11). Retrieved from <http://blog.omy.sg/xiaohan/2013/05/>

小寒再出書 寫‘无指’朋友经历。(2013, March 15). Lianhe Zaobao 聯合早報。 Retrieved from Factiva

寫詞人小寒 <http://www.xiaohanlyrics.com>