

Teng Mah Seng (丁马成): Addicted to *Nanyin*by **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Although Teng Mah Seng only had a few years of formal education, that had not deterred him from appreciating nanyin, a form of ancient Chinese music. He eventually wrote hundreds of songs and helped stop the art form from becoming extinct in Singapore.

Gaojiayi (高甲戏), *liyuanxi* (梨园戏), hand and string puppetry, which all originate from the Quanzhou province, are sung to the tunes of *nanyin* (南音, the sound of the South). According to research, *nanyin* is the oldest Chinese opera music that has been preserved in its original form since the Tang dynasty in the seventh century. As such, *nanyin* is said to be the root of Chinese music, and is today, paralleled only by the Japanese *gagaku* (雅乐).

Nanyin used to be played on religious occasions, during Chinese New Year celebrations and at grand funerals. In the 1970s, *nanyin* music was close to dying out in Singapore. Today, this ancient art form graces occasions such as opening ceremonies and weddings. Teng Mah Seng was its acclaimed saviour. In 1987, he was awarded the “Cultural Medallion Award (Music)”, the country’s highest honour for artistes, for his untiring efforts to revive and promote the ancient music.

Teng was not a religious man, only a firm believer in the callings of the heart, “I am pleased (with the award), but I have done only what any man should do.”

Teng had only a few years of formal education in China. But that did not deter him from pursuing knowledge. He read voraciously, including the Chinese classics. He spoke with care and his calligraphy flowed with the elegance of a scholar.

Speaking in Hokkien and heavily accented Mandarin, he had drawn this analogy, “A man’s mind is like a fridge. There may be abundant food but this does not guarantee a delicious meal. Only a talented cook can whip up a tasty meal, even if there’s little to work with.”

Teng had come a long way to achieving official recognition. His was a life marked by hardship and hard work, motivated by unswerving commitment to self-set goals. He became an apprentice to a merchant at the age of 14 and was promoted to manager by 18. He was then earning 25 yuan a month, a handsome sum in those days. He had picked up *nanyin* from a master in his hometown in Quanzhou.

He showed pride in his singing, “Yes, I sing very well. As a child, I learnt the songs by watching the opera performances in my village.”

As a good-looking young man then, Teng would often perform for his fellow villagers on festive occasions, almost always playing the female roles.

In 1935, he made his way to Singapore when he realised there was no future in his village. He began from scratch again, earning \$2 a month as an apprentice with a rice merchant. By 1945, he

saved enough to open a shop selling food commodities. “But after more than 20 years,” said Teng, “the business was wrested from my hands by a so-called trusted worker.”

Embittered, he wrote his first song, *Reflections* (《感怀》). In it, he railed at the injustice of the heavens, yet at the same time resigned himself to the hands of fate. That was in 1970. The song turned out to be a winner, clinching the third prize in the Folk Instrumental Solo category at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod held in England in 1983.

Teng then went on to set up a rubber business but retired in 1980 to devote himself to promoting *nanyin* music. It had dawned upon him one day that life was too short to be focused on trivialities.

“I used to play mahjong years ago. Suddenly, at one of the sessions, I realised that I’m just wasting time there. I don’t want to die at the mahjong table.” He never fingered another mahjong tile since that day of reckoning.

When Mr Teng was appointed chairman of the Siong Leng Musical Association (湘灵音乐社) in 1977, it was just a musical group then. He formed the opera troupe to attract new members and to teach them to appreciate the ancient art form in the process of acting and singing *nanyin*. He said the staging of opera excerpts was a way of grooming fresh talents to take up lead roles. He also organised a conference which attracted *nanyin* musicians from all over Southeast Asia.

The going was rough in the beginning. Out of the hundreds who responded to an offer of free lessons on *nanyin* singing, only one or two remained to learn the age-old art of singing and playing the *erhu* and *pipa*. Nevertheless, Teng persisted.

Believing that traditional arts should move with the times, he braved criticism and brought about revolutionary changes by shortening the cadenza and setting contemporary prose to the ancient music. He also wrote the lyrics of the more than 200 songs that the troupe sings. Some of these became award-winners like *The Song of Harmony* (《鸾凤和鸣》), which won the Creative Award at the Wu Yi Spring Competition (武夷之春比赛) in China.

Music critic Quek Yong Siu (郭永秀), who knew Teng personally, commented on his lyrics, “He made *nanyin* more accessible to the new generation. They are also a reflection of his philosophy of life. He included modern issues in the songs and his writing showed an artistic flair and literary grace.”

Social and political changes in Singapore became sources of inspiration for Teng. He produced hundreds of new *nanyin* lyrics, drawing on his vast life experiences for inspiration. Many of these songs expanded the traditional range and introduced contemporary issues as subjects. He wrote poignantly of filial piety, the pitfalls of pride and the cyclical turns of sorrow and joy. Zhuo Sheng Xiang (卓圣翔), a *nanyin* musician from Quanzhou, was engaged to compose the music for these pieces.

It was not all tragedy in his works. He also sang of love and struggles in the contemporary times. In one of his poems written in 1988, he dwelled on patriotism and compared a fine government

to a skilled horseman who knew when to relax or tighten the reins. These songs helped win over many new audiences.

“*Nanyin* is like a living fossil. It has to be reformed and sustained so that it will not die.”

He also faced the perennial problem of recruiting new members. Although the Association had been able to make some significant headway, attracting some young English educated professionals and sending some of them to China for training, the young are generally not interested and those who are keen often do not have the patience to see it through.

He explained, “*Nanyin* is not easy to pick up. One has to have a lot of patience to succeed,” adding that “once they master the art, they will not leave as they will be addicted to it.”

With his wide social network, Teng raised enough funds to buy over a three-storey shophouse in Bukit Pasoh, where Siong Leng Musical Association is currently located, for use as a permanent rehearsal and performance venue. The troupe has since then performed in several parts of Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and even won audiences in England, the United States and China.

Teng’s own love for Chinese theatre and culture grew when he took on the job of chairman of the Association. “Being the chairman, it was inevitable that I would have to polish my skills. I learnt to play the *pipa* and other Chinese musical instruments.”

Teng expressed concern over the declining interest in Chinese classics, music and opera, “It is an irony that people in the West have taken a greater interest in preserving Chinese culture and the opera.”

Although Teng passed away in 1992 at the age of 77, the work of the Siong Leng Musical Association has been carried forth till this day under new leadership helmed by his protégés. His son, Teng Tong Hai (丁宏海) has assumed the chairmanship of the Association and brought its development to new heights. The younger Teng said, “All the members of the Association have this sense of mission, and we would never allow this ancient art form to die in our hands.”

The modernisation of the sound of *nanyin* has also continued with the engagement of an artistic director, Lin Shaoling, and a music director, Cai Yayi, from Quanzhou. For example, other musical instruments were introduced, including the piano, cello, Indian drums, Malay drums, and even the guitar.

The efforts to promote *nanyin* have expanded to arts education programmes in primary and secondary schools. One of Teng’s songs, *Singapore, the Garden of the East* (《东方花园新加坡》), has been selected as part of the repertoire of the course. Such local compositions help make *nanyin* more approachable to young students.

The group has continued to perform well overseas including winning the top prize in the Folk Instrumental Solo category at the 2010 Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod. Cai Yayi

sang one of Teng's compositions, *Different Facets of Life* (《人生百态》). It moved the judges to tears and won her the top honour.

All thanks to Teng Mah Seng and those that follow in his footsteps to promote the music, the beautiful tunes of the *nanyin*, which has been part of the Singapore heritage since the earliest immigrants arrived here in the 19th century, could still continue to mesmerize future generations of Singaporeans as well as people all over the world.

Quote

“Listening to *nanyin* music is like taking opium. Once you have cultivated an interest in it, you will not be able to give it up.”

Awards

1987: National Arts Council, Singapore, *Cultural Medallion (Music)*

Discography

丁马成作品精选集 1

Selected Works

《鸾凤和鸣》

《我的心》

《养生之道》

《身无媚骨》

《何日君再来》

《十二生肖》

《梦》

《上元红》

《乘凉》

《理发》

《裁缝》

《相思曲》

《思潮》

《杨柳枝》

《一粒沙》

《相逢》

《人情》

《人生百态》

《玉管水弦》

《龙不过江》

《柔情如水》

《污化人生》

《思亲曲》

《感怀》

《归里思怀》

《难忘无锡》

《访仙家》

《妾身受禁》

《闺怨》

《望与梦》

《五湖乌江水悠悠》

《菩萨心灰》

《母亲》

《萍莲相逢》

《四季情》

《珠帘》

《番婆》

《东方花园》

《一曲难忘》

《游子知归》

《笙箫和鸣》

《四季相思》

《夫妻情》

《怀元宵》

《番薯粥》

《貌合神离》

《惜别》

《春风一度长相思》

《好春天》

《红颜》

《聚散两依依》

《贺新年》

《唐山阿伯》

《厦门》

《建国银禧》

《观音诞》

《中秋》

《游春》

《重九》

《十面相思》

《郎归晚》

《龙舟竞渡》

《中国中兴》

《夕阳无限好》

《别离恨》

《六月冰》

《老巴杀》

《友竹俱乐部金禧大典》

《郎君流芳》

《芳枫慰劳酒》

《安溪高甲戏》

《玉兔光临》

《郎君托梦》

《西施》

《欢宴厦门歌仔戏剧团》

《画眉仙景》

《月儿明》

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