

Boh Chit Hee (莫泽熙): From Music to Bonsaiby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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Although Boh Chit Hee was more associated with bonsai art in the later years of his life, few knew of his close involvement with the local Chinese instrumental music scene in the 1950s and 1960s.

Most people would probably remember Boh Chit Hee for the controversy he stirred up in 2002 after he donated his entire collection of 51 pots of bonsai to the Shanghai Botanic Gardens. This was after the Singapore Botanic Gardens had turned down his bequest which Boh had spent 50 years cultivating.

But few would know his contributions as a musician. Perhaps only those who had worked with him closely in the 1950s and 1960s could testify to the man's talent and commitment to the development of the local Chinese music scene.

Liu Cheng Zhong (刘晨钟), an active member in the Chinese orchestra music scene, disclosed that Boh Chit Hee was someone he looked up to in his youth.

“We considered him the Xian Xinghai (冼星海)(Chinese composer who wrote the *Yellow River Cantata* 《黄河大合唱》) of Singapore. I would often cycle to his home in a fishing village in Siglap and listen to him analyse music pieces or the political issues of the day.”

However, this man, widely credited as one of those who had helped lay the strong foundations in the local Chinese orchestra music scene, came from a very humble family background. He had no formal music training. His achievements were all won through sheer hard work and perseverance.

In 1939, when he was four years old, Boh travelled with his mother to Singapore from a village in Hainan Province. Barely three years later, the island would fall into the hands of the Japanese army. Life for the Bohs became a hand-to-mouth existence.

The young Boh would take on jobs meant for adults to help out with the family finances. He was a street hawker at times, selling pineapples balanced on his head. As a teenager, he would work as a fisherman. He had to stand in the sea for a few hours every day. His health would suffer as a result.

Retired journalist Han Tan Juan (韩山元), who had stayed with the Bohs for two weeks in 1963, had a short stint as a fisherman. “I was new, so I got the smallest share of the earnings - \$1.40 for the first day. Back then, a cup of coffee at the village coffee shop was ten cents. You pay five cents more for milk. A meal could be had for about forty cents. Yet the pay was barely enough for three meals a day.”

Life was simpler in those days. There was hardly any entertainment. Even if there was, most people could not afford it. Villagers would gather under the trees in the evening and play

together on their Chinese musical instruments. It was here that Boh had his initial exposure to music.

In 1949, he watched a concert at the Gay World Amusement Park where students performed a musical piece *The Arrival of the Spring Ox* (《唱春牛》). Boh fell in love with the Chinese orchestra music, then known as folk music (民乐). He felt that “the music was filled with the emotions of the times and aptly reflected the spirit of the people.” This would remain the mainstay of his philosophy of the meaning and purpose of music – that it should serve the people and their needs of the day.

He scraped together some money and bought two musical instruments, a *qin* (秦琴) and a *yehu* (椰胡). Back then, musical instruments, hung in bunches, were sold in sundry shops and bookstores. Boh then begged one of the village musicians to teach him how to play. He poured himself into learning everything he could lay his hands on about music, including music theory and conducting.

Liu Cheng Zhong said, “When Boh Chit Hee was conducting, he was very detailed and placed great emphasis on putting across the emotions of the music piece. So watching him conduct was a pleasure in itself.”

Boh’s wife, Du Qing (杜青), a pianist, remembered observing him at practice back then, conducting an orchestra. She noticed that he hardly looked at the music score, yet he was familiar with every part of the music. Not a single note escaped his critical ear. She would later find out that Boh was deaf in his right ear through long-term consumption of a medicine for his lung disease.

Boh was invited in 1958 to help lead and conduct the Chinese music orchestra group under Thau Yong Amateur Musical Association (陶融儒乐社). It was the early stages in the development of Chinese orchestra music. The members of the newly formed group, one of the first in Singapore, had little musical knowledge. Their musical instruments were also simple and crude. There were no individual rooms available at the Association for the different sections to practise separately. They would all be cramped in the same room with no air-conditioning or sound insulation.

Yet, the group would make vast improvements with Boh’s help. Within three years, the group would become one of the most well-known Chinese music orchestras here, performing complex music pieces that require sophisticated techniques. Many from the group, like conductor Ye Yao Ji (叶耀基), *erhu* musician Zhang Bing Zhao (张炳照), composer of the first large scale Chinese orchestra music work *Epic of Malaya* (《马来亚史诗》) Lian Rongshi (连荣史), etc would continue to play a vital role in the development of Chinese orchestra music.

Ye Yao Ji recalled, “We were a bunch of Chinese orchestra music lovers. We respected Boh and admired his achievements. He is well-versed in music and is willing to share his knowledge. He also had great leadership skills, being the conductor of both the orchestra and choir.”

Boh was also a celebrated composer. But he did not think that composing is only about technique or theory. He believed that life experiences matter. So is exposure to all kinds of different art forms.

One of his work, *Rubber Plantation, Our Mother* (《胶林，我们的母亲》) was composed in 1956, when he broke up with his first love. She had left for further studies in England. The song demonstrated the switch in mentality of the Chinese in Singapore then, from temporary migrants to fighting as stakeholders of their own destiny. It became a kind of anti-colonial anthem. “I wanted the song to remind the people to love their country and fight against the colonial powers,” Boh said. It was widely circulated and sung by the people. Another song that became a staple for choirs associated with the unions was *Unifying the Labour Movement* (《统一工运》), written in 1959 in support of the call by the PAP for a more organised workers’ movement.

His experiences as a fisherman provided inspiration for the creation of a musical, *The Fisherman’s Song* (《渔家之歌》) in 1962. According to Boh, the character of Uncle Lim, his wife and daughter in the composition were based on Boh’s parents and himself. Most of his other works have not been collated and thus lost over the years.

Han Tan Juan said, “Boh Chit Hee was one of the first to showcase compositions of a ‘Nanyang’ flavour that reflected the life and times of the people in Singapore and Malaysia.”

Being well read in the Chinese classics, prose and verses helped Boh achieve in depth analysis and interpretation of music pieces. Du Qing recalled her first experience singing in a choir conducted by Boh, “I was not able to put across the emotions of the piece. He told me about the background of the piece and analysed its meaning and emotions. He told me to try again and again, even after I felt I had got it. It was my first hand experience of how exacting he was.”

Yet this same uncompromising personality would also contribute to Boh severing his ties with the music circle in 1970. The government had shut down musical and arts groups then which were involved in politicised “revolutionary” performances without licenses. Many of the Chinese orchestra members, including those from Boh’s group, were left jobless. Driven by desperation, some took up an offer to perform for a Chinese restaurant. Boh was devastated by the news. It was unacceptable to him for the group had once harboured such lofty musical aspirations.

He decided to leave the group and end his 20-year involvement with the local music scene. The next 20 years of his life was devoted to the cultivation of his bonsai art. He continued to give private lessons in *guqin* (古琴 seven stringed plucked instrument) till the year 2000 when he was forced to stop due to health problems. The general public would not hear about him again till the bonsai controversy and then his death in January 2009.

Talking about Boh’s eternal regret of leaving the music scene, Du Qing said, “Music was still his greatest love. But the whole music scene changed so much after that, there just wasn’t any opportunity for him to be as involved as he was in the early days. Life simply moved on.”

Quote

“No doubt technique is important. However, technique must go hand in hand with knowledge of the social issues of the day. If musicians think they can solve all kinds of problems regarding their creative and music work with technique alone, they couldn't have been more mistaken.”

Discography

《莫泽熙创作歌曲 – 胶林，我们的母亲》

List of Works

1956: *Rubber Plantation, Our Mother* 《胶林，我们的母亲》

1959: *Unifying the Labour Movement* 《统一工运》

1962: *The Fisherman's Song* 《渔家之歌》

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