

## COMICS ARTIST

# Soaring success for Condor books

**Working day and night, a Singapore artist produces the martial arts comics that sold over 1 million copies**

By **LEE SHU HUI**

MOST people would give their right arm to be able to make a career out of something they love doing.

Wee Tian Beng gives it every day — actually, his

right hand, to be more precise.

He is the cartoonist behind the phenomenally popular Return Of The Condor Heroes comic books series.

"I simply love coming to work in the morning," he

says. "You see, to me, it's not work at all. Drawing comic books is fun and indescribably enjoyable."

Wee, 32, launched his series two years ago, based on the martial-arts saga written by novelist Louis Cha — better known as Jin Yong.

The cartoonist intends to wind up the series with the release of the 18th and final volume on Friday.

More than 360,000 copies of the Chinese edition have been snapped up in Singapore alone since the first volume hit the shelves in February 1996. And it has sold more than 720,000 copies in Taiwan and Hongkong.

"Not bad but still far from the best," he says. "The Japanese comic series, Dragonball, hit sales of one billion. So why should I be happy with my own results?"

Asiapac Books, where Wee works as creative director, also published an English edition last June which has sold 150,000 copies. That version made its way to Previews, America's No. 1 monthly comic books catalogue.

He will also be coming up with a new comic book series, The Celestial Zone, in March.

Indeed, Wee lives and breathes comics.

"Sometimes, I forget to eat my lunch because I am just totally absorbed in drawing," he says.

It all started when he was 10. At an age at which most boys talk of wanting to be doctors, lawyers and policemen, he resolved to be a comic book artist because "I simply loved reading comics".

The son of a businessman-father and housewife-mother, he grabbed all the comics he could get his hands on and started copying the drawings, so he could learn all the different styles before he developed his own.

He also studied graphic design at the former Baharuddin Vocational Institute.

"I told myself that when I turned 22 after my National Service, I was going to publish my first comic strip."

At that age, he forked out \$4,000 from his pocket to publish his first comic book, The New Frontier. It flopped. Still, he persevered. Although he worked full-time as a graphic designer in an advertising agency, he would draw into the wee hours, sleeping only four hours every day.

That took its toll, though, and eventually he decided to quit his job and draw comics full-time.

In 1994, Asiapac Books offered him a project. The Adventures Of Wisely series was born. That impressed Cha's company, Minghe Publishing, which let him turn Return Of The Condor Heroes into a comic book series in 1995.

With three other artists, Wee would draw four pages of the period drama Condor series in the day, then rush two pages of the futuristic Wisely series at night.

The man works virtually round the clock, sketching, inking as well as colouring all the characters. His team helps with the drawing and toning of the background and inking the characters' clothes.

But the gruelling workload took its toll.

Five years ago, he woke up to find his hand shaking so uncontrollably that he was unable to grasp his pen. The doctor ordered him to rest. But after three days in bed, he was behind his desk again.

Now, he draws no fewer than 12 hours a day, even though he is on long-term medication for a thyroid problem.

His mind remains busy conjuring images while he goes about his other daily routines.

"I think of ideas when I walk and eat," he says. "And I stick very closely to my schedule so that I accomplish a certain amount of work a day."

"You have to be very disciplined in this trade."

Still, Wee feels no sense of achievement. Yet. He says that will come "only when I reach world standards like Tori Yama Akira has". Akira is a well-known Japanese comics artist.



TAN SUAN ANN

**Storybook success** at last for comics artist Wee Tian Beng with his Return Of The Condor Heroes series.