

THE SCI-FI GUY

WEE TIAN BENG, 41

Founder of TCZ Studio

Famous for: His hit manga series *The Celestial Zone*, and his set-in-Singapore sci-fi series *Celestial 21*

Favourite manga: *Doraemon* by Fujio F. Fujiko and titles such as *Rough*, *H2* and *Slow Step* by Atachi Mitsuru

IN MARCH, you will be able to get manga artist Wee Tian Beng's comics on your mobile phone by downloading each volume of his manga and reading it frame by frame.

The manga in question is *Celestial 21*, his set-in-Singapore manga-meets-wuxia series, which is available in Chinese and English. Wuxia is Mandarin for swordfight epic.

He is selling the copyright and providing the content to mobile phone content provider Comiasia to do so, with the Media Development Authority investing in the groundbreaking project too.

He declines to give price details for now, but says that this original manga entertainment service will be rolled out here and in Guangzhou, China, before it is introduced in Malaysia and Indonesia a few months later.

Europe and even the United States are on the cards, if all goes well, he says.

He's banking on digital media such as mobile phone technology to break into overseas markets in a bigger way, especially in China because, as he puts it: "China does not concentrate so much on copyright for books." (Read: Piracy is rampant, and his copyright may be infringed easily.)

So, digital is the way to go because it will be considerably harder for anyone to get a master copy of his animated series and duplicate it en masse.

He is far and away the most successful Singaporean manga artist to date, having sold more than a million copies of his comics globally. He declines to give figures, though, but says that he is not yet a millionaire.

Besides English, his Chinese comics have been translated into French, Spanish and the dialect of Brittany, a French province.

Since founding his own publishing house TCZ Studio in 2001, he has sold more than 10,000 copies of his manga in the US, Canada and Europe within the past three years.

He's sold the rest in China, Taiwan, South-east Asia, France and Spain.

He and his full-time staff of five publish his manga and distribute them worldwide. Occasionally, he publishes works by local comics artists, too.

Wee, the son of a Yomeishu tonic wine salesman and a housewife, drew his first



CELESTIAL BEING: Wee's manga series is read far and wide in countries such as the US, France and Canada.

manga, *Dream Allegory*, in 1990, right after national service. He got a local publisher, Pioneer Publishing, to get it out into the market, and his fan base grew.

By 1993, his *Astronotics* manga was the first Singaporean work to break into the famously comics-saturated Hong Kong and Taiwan markets. It was another bestseller.

He was then drawing comics only part-time, as his day job was as an art director in various advertising agencies.

By 1996, he had caught the eye of best-selling Hong Kong novelists Ni Kuang and Louis Cha, whose respective masterpieces are the *Wisely* series and the *Return Of The Condor Heroes* series.

Wee helped illustrate their stories as manga to reach younger audiences, under a three-year contract with local publisher Asiapac.

Convinced that the future of comics lay in digital media, he left Asiapac when his contract ended in 1999 to explore that media.

That same year, he created his runaway hit, *The Celestial Zone* wuxia manga series,

and by 2001, had amassed enough capital to start his publishing house.

Not one to rest on his laurels, he says he pushes himself to draw at least 24 frames a day for his current monthly comic book series *Celestial 21*, which needs 350 frames per volume.

Today, he has put out more than 150 volumes of manga and can't wait to see what his forays into digital media manga will yield.

"I'm thinking of making a movie next," says Wee, who is married but has no children.

You wonder how many manga artists here can beat him at sales, and he says he's optimistic.

"While we need to work very hard because Japan's manga standards have gone higher and higher, manga artists here definitely have a future.

"That's because with the Internet and mobile phone, you now have more chances to make your artwork known to a wider audience."