



Born on 12th January 1966 in Singapore, Mr. Wee Tian Beng is one of the most famous local manga artist to gain recognition from the international and local community. His widely acclaimed bestselling martial-art series *Return of the Condor Heroes* won the Prestigious Award in the 1997 Asian Comics Conference held in Korea. It has since been translated into various languages penetrated into Thailand, Korea, European and USA.

To find out more about him, we dropped in at the new, spacious office of TCZ Studios. Dressed comfortably in a polo t-shirt, pants and fuzzy socks in slippers, Mr. Wee's appearance gave the impression of a laid back, fun and relaxed artist, instead of the harassed and stressed person we had in our minds. And perhaps in our interview, we would find out why, along with the other burning questions we all had.

The Life of a Mangaka in Singapore

Wee Tian Beng



Nothing like having a workspace that stares right back at you!



Those are highly prized shoes - valuable sources of inspiration!... not really.

WIN!

To our readers who like Mr Wee Tian Beng's works, guess what we have for you? Submit your artwork to the gallery and you stand to win an autographed poster! For those who prefer the lucky draw, submit your lucky draw and stand to win an autographed copy of book 25 of Celestial Zone!



When did you start drawing comics?

WTB: I started from Primary school, around P5 or P6. It was during the time of the exams that I would draw comics and my classmates would pass them around because they all wanted to read them. It happened as well during my O'levels where I drew a longer series for them to read.

Was it always the case that the class you're in loves comics?

WTB: Usually yes. It might be because I would always lend my own comics out to my classmates and thus affect them with my passion as well.

What influenced your comics?

WTB: Different artists influenced me at different stages of my life. When I was in Primary and Secondary school, I read both Japanese and Hong Kong comics. At that time, if I really liked a character, I would follow the whole series like any other avid fan. When Japanese comics became more popular and widely available in Singapore, I then read more Japanese comics. Now, I only read Japanese comics.

How did you become a manga artist? What kind of training did you go through?

WTB: I first studied Graphics Art and then Advertising Art. And I was only drawing comics on a part time basis then and I realized that being able to draw just characters does not make automatically make you a manga artist. You have to be able to develop characters as

well. So at that time, I had to force myself to be disciplined to publish one book a year.

It wasn't easy as well. There weren't many comic shops in Singapore a few years back. Thus I had to go to little bookshops to ask them one by one whether they would be able to give me a little corner to sell my comics. And I had to ask permission one by one whether I could or could not stick up my posters. Things got slightly better after that, a publishing company noticed my works and after that, they helped from my 2nd and 3rd book on.

Then after that, I helped to draw for the Taiwanese for their publication in Taiwan. After that, I was with AsiaPac. And now, I'm drawing Celestial Zone. I started publishing my own comics after I set up TCZ Studios.

What is a typical work schedule like for you?

WTB: I usually start out at 8am in the office and work all the way until 8pm at night. I'm usually just drawing sketches, if I don't produce anything, then my assistants would have nothing to do. I have a schedule that is fixed, I have to produce a certain number of pages if not, I will not be able to make it for the deadline for printing. For instance, the storyline has to be there before you begin. You have to think about how many strong points, which details you're drawing belong to which points, how many things to draw to bring out our points and then you have to think about the possible dialogue as well.

The most important thing is that your storyline has to be much faster than my drawings. I

have to keep thinking of ideas, and I usually brainstorm one to two weeks in advance so that I can keep drawing while at work. I seldom jump my schedule as well.

What do you usually use to draw?

WTB: I usually work with a G-pen! But they are very expensive to buy from Singapore so I usually pick mine up when I'm in Japan or I'd ask my friend who's going to Japan to help me buy some.

Celestial Zone is your first work you're publishing with our own company TCZ Studios. Where do you get your inspiration from?

WTB: My inspiration comes from everywhere! It can be anything, let me give you an example. One of my female characters was inspired by the red Gundam driven by Char from Char's counter attack! You would not be able to see any direct link between them, however, you never copy fully from the thing that inspired you. Rather, you take the feeling from the inspiration given to create your character, you don't have to take the whole design.

So, what would you be doing if you weren't in this line? Did you think you would be in this line?

WTB: I would be in advertising line. I knew I would be a manga artist from very young. It was the only thing I wanted to do.

Do you get a lot of mails from your readers about your works?

WTB: Yes, I get a lot of letters and some of them are fan art submissions as well. I try to answer all of my letters because they're all important to me. Many of my readers also submit fanfiction to me. (Interesting fact, 95% of the fiction is in English, and 5% in Chinese) Sometimes, these letters also have some influence on the way my stories develop. For example, a reader asked how one of my characters got his news about the outside world, and I realized it was something that I never really thought about. And from that letter, a new character and another part of the story was developed.

Do you have any words of advice for aspiring manga artists/mangaka in Singapore?

WTB: I think that many Singaporean artists don't understand manga. They don't practice enough and they don't know that it does not stop at being able to draw one character. You need to know a lot more to become a mangaka. No matter what, you can't tell whether someone is a good comic artist immediately. It takes time, because it takes time to see how the artist will develop a storyline. And this is something that Singaporean artists lack.

Singapore artists need to learn more about page planning as well. For example, drawing a manga is not just about drawing a story, you are limited by practical things like how much money you have to print. And this in turn will affect the way your story develops. As a mangaka, you need to be more than just how to draw a static figure, you need to know fashion, you need to be the cameraman, the director, lighting designer and so on as well. Drawing is just the basic skill you need to

know, it is but 10 percent of what it takes to be a mangaka.

Some people say, you don't need to know all these things as you can get assistants and specialized people to help you later on. However, they never really think you have also know enough to be able to guide your assistants through. For example, if they were to ink in the background, which perspective would you use?

Becoming a mangaka is like a long distance marathon. You have to build out your readership and it takes a few years. It is not a 100 meter dash!

Many people also like to gripe that Singapore's market is too small when their product does not sell well. However, I feel that it isn't that the market is small, because how then do you explain the presence of MacDonalds everywhere? It is a matter of how you manage and control your own product. Every market has its different difficulties; it is just a matter of how you meet the challenge that's all.

There is no basic guide to being a mangaka in Singapore. You need to know a lot, no matter how wonderful or talented an artist you are. It is not an easy road, however, it is a fun road to travel. If you like manga, you won't think about how much money or returns you will get from what you do. It cannot be treated like a profitable business and you need to really love manga in order to be in this line.

M.A.G.E: Thank you Mr Wee Tian Beng for that insightful interview! We wish you all the best!