

CHEN Ko Hua

The Marketing of my Poetry: A Sharing

I started writing poetry way back in the '70s, when I was in high school. At university, I went on to win several national poetry and literary awards, and even became a published author. However, I realized that despite winning all those prestigious awards at the international level, very few people knew of me or my poetry. This was because my work was regarded as “hipster” literature. It was not glamorous to be associated with that stereotype; back in the day, hipsters were pale, overly sentimental, unrealistic, “good-for-nothing” youth.

Later, I got to know some film and music producers. One of them was a director, who was rather famous at the time. When he found out that I wrote poems, he invited me to write the lyrics for the theme song of his new film. Thus I took on a new identity: lyricist. Within the next three years, I composed lyrics for nearly one hundred pop songs; one of which was “Taipei’s Sky” (1983). It was the theme song of a primetime television show—my first taste of fame. A while later, the song topped Karaoke Television (KTV) charts, and was one of the most-sung songs at KTVs around Taiwan. Even now, “Taipei’s Sky” is still one of the must-sing KTV tunes for Taiwanese abroad, especially when they are homesick.

The Chinese characters for “poem,” shi 詩 and “song,” ge 歌 are often combined to form *shige*, meaning “poetry.” This shows that since ancient times, poetry and music have been so closely linked that they are almost the same thing. Words, when enhanced with music, take on new potential. Therefore, in addition to writing poetry, I have experimented with combining poetry with other art forms. Many musicians have since requested to collaborate with me; the result was a series of small-scale concerts called “Dialogues between Poetry and Music.” The poems, especially the more sentimental or balladic ones, became catchier when recited with the accompaniment of cello and piano tunes; such events allowed both poets and musicians to be recognized. Some years later, I had the opportunity to turn my poetry into songs. The composers made the tunes for my poems, and I performed and recorded the songs, which were released as albums. Two poetry-music albums have been released to date: *Gaze* (2006) and *Sunrise* (2016). These albums contain poems that can be performed as songs, as well as poems that can be recited with musical accompaniment.

In today’s digital world, literary publishing is on the decline, and poetry anthologies are becoming increasingly hard to sell. As such, I thought of making my poetry into music videos. To my delight, a director friend who worked at the Taiwan Public Television Service proposed to collaborate on a project called “The Face and Book of Literature” that made two-minute-long short films out of poems, to be performed by the poet. The short films were broadcast on national television, and later uploaded to YouTube. A few dozen Taiwanese poets and I participated in this project; you can readily find all the short films on YouTube.

I pay meticulous attention to the jacket designs of my print anthologies. In every stage of the process, from picking out the paper for printing, to deciding on layouts and fonts, I make a rich experience for my readers. *I and I’s Synonym*, for example, is bound in the style of ancient sutras. The Chinese text inside is arranged in a layout like those found in sacred sutra volumes, while the English text is arranged like the text in the Bible. I also included my own illustrations in the anthology. *I and I’s Synonym* went on to win the award for Best Design at the Taipei International Book Festival, and quickly sold out in bookstores.

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Many readers tell me it was the aesthetics of the book that compelled them to own it; clearly, print, corporeal copies still have value in this paperless era, and there are definitely ways to sell them. For these reasons, I still pursue painting and photography. Every year, I organize an exhibition that combines ideas from my paintings, music, and poetry (the most recent exhibition is on mandala paintings). Using simple, readily available software, I made short clips of my work and uploaded them to YouTube and my personal Facebook profile. This was a surprisingly effective way to quickly reach a wide audience. Usually the poems I post on Facebook only receive a couple dozen likes; however, a short video clip can garner more than one hundred likes. I made a comic strip for my poem “The Insomniac” last year—I wonder how that will fare! Next, I hope to experiment with using my poetry and music with 3D or virtual reality technology. What an adventure of endless potential it will be!

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