



Photo: Jonathan Wong

The new old school

Singaporean artist Ming Wong combines Cantonese opera with modern Chinese science fiction for his latest performance project in Hong Kong, writes **Doretta Lau**

Artist Ming Wong's latest preoccupation is Cantonese opera – in relation to contemporary Chinese science fiction.

"I'm doing research that's supported by Para/Site Art Space and Spring Workshop, where I get to look at the history of Cantonese opera cinema," says Wong, who is the artist-in-residence at Spring Workshop until later this month. "Cantonese opera cinema is my starting point."

"Cantonese opera film is a unique genre in Hong Kong cinema," he continues. "There was a period of time in the 1930s and '40s – this is when stage and screen met. Because in the early cinema in the region – in South China, Hong Kong and Shanghai – opera actors were becoming film stars. They were bringing stage to the screen. But at the same time they were coming up with many innovations because of the technological advances of cinema and they were bringing changes from screen to stage."

How did a Singaporean artist settle on this topic? How does Cantonese opera, with its traditions, intersect with science fiction? And what does this have to do with contemporary life in Asia? To find the answer, we have to look back at Wong's career and art practice.

Wong shot to international art world stardom at the 2009 Venice Biennale, where he represented Singapore. His solo exhibition, "Life of Imitation", received a Special Mention from the jury; it marked the first time a Singaporean artist achieved that honour. One of the central works in that show was a reinterpretation of a pivotal scene from the 1959 Douglas Sirk film *Imitation of Life*, which examined race, class and gender. In Wong's recreation, three male actors of Chinese, Malay and Indian descent take turns portraying the black mother and biracial daughter. The result is an empathetic work that comments on Singapore's cultural climate.

Since that triumph, the Berlin-based artist has exhibited widely around the world. Last year alone, he had solo exhibitions in Switzerland, Japan and the United States. Later this year, he will be showing on the mainland. What was it that first spurred him to pursuit a career in art?

"I come from a theatre background in Singapore," Wong says. "When I was a young man I worked as playwright and I wanted to write stories in the vernacular, in Singlish. The way people talk." This thread of interpersonal communication has remained a

central concern his work. In the two-channel video installation *Kontakthof* (2010), he led 22 artists and curators based in Berlin through Pina Bausch dance routines; the non-dancers had to figure out a way to express their artistic concerns through movement.

Wong's personal interest in Cantonese opera began at a young age. "My aunt and uncle in Singapore run an amateur Cantonese opera troupe and used to organise festivals in Singapore. I'd go and watch the performances," he says. "I'd take my grandma, when she was still alive, there. And so visually I grew up with that, but I never really got into the substance of the operas, the language and the music. The music has always been a barrier and today it still is. I'm still trying to decipher that."

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"But beyond that what I want to do with it is not about becoming an expert in Cantonese opera. This wasn't my motivation. I was interested that this was one of the oldest-surviving performing arts in the world. I wanted to see if there was potential for it to be used to explore notions of the future. This is the abstract idea. I wanted to take one of the oldest performing arts forms to explore notions of the future. What's happening to us now and in the future."

This is where the science fiction aspect of his current research comes in. "The connection is notions about time. About time and history ... One quality of Chinese science fiction is that it really looks at its own self – the awareness of the writer of the future in relation to China. Where they stand."

From his research, he sees Chinese science fiction as being tied to the countryside and to an agricultural tradition. The booming economy and influx of technology has caused daily life in China to unfold like a classic sci-fi narrative.

"Actually Singapore is very much like a science fiction story," he notes. "It's a little island with people who are going through this fantastic, unbelievable change in a very, very short time. And having to deal with these changes that are thrust upon them both in the environment and as well as the structured society in which they find themselves."

"I'm sure it's something on everybody's mind," he continues. "How is the world turning? So an arena like Chinese science fiction allows for extrapolation of man's

biggest hopes and fears. It could go either way. You can either head towards a utopia or a dystopia, or at least think about it. That's where I think science fiction has an interesting role. It can help us reimagine what will happen to us."

Wong will be sharing his findings on Cantonese opera and Chinese science fiction in a performance lecture at Spring Workshop on February 15. "I'm going to present a series of videos, words and images I've collected that have some kind of impact on my research. A lot of it is not linearly coherent. A lot of it is about juxtaposing ideas and images that might not have any bearing on each other, but the sheer juxtaposition would offer up some clues, perhaps. I'd like to share this with an audience and start a dialogue because a lot of these things might have resonance beyond my own person. I think some of these issues are quite universal."

After that, he intends to distil this research into performance video work, perhaps even attempt Cantonese opera.

"It's about trying to be somebody completely different," he says. "It's almost like trying to become an alien form. You have to express yourself in a totally different way. Before it was speaking a foreign language. But what happens if the movement is totally alien and what if the time frame, the sense of time, is also kind of unreal, that is not real time, as in historical time? This is something I have yet to explore, so I'm trying to get there."

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