

Tin Hong : Back to the Starting Point

by Oneal Li



Twenty-eight-year-old writer Wong Lai-kim, who is better known as his pen name “Tin Hong”, holds out new hope for his career after several setbacks which have nearly drained away his fortune and determination of writing.

Mr Wong became famous for his first romantic novel, *When Sagittarius Meets Aries*, published in 2000 when he was a student at the University of Hong Kong.

The good times did not last long and three years later he found himself going through “the darkest period.” First he was in conflict with SCMP Book Publishing, which published his books, with restriction of the type of books he was writing.

“The publisher asked me to write love stories because they are more

“2003 was the darkest period in my life.”

profitable, but I insisted on penning what I want, like science fiction,” Mr Wong said.

“2003 was the darkest period in my life,” he said.

“Because of this conflict, my new works were nowhere to be seen on the shelves of the bookstores for nearly a year. I actually thought of giving up writing at that time, even though I was fond of it,” he continued.

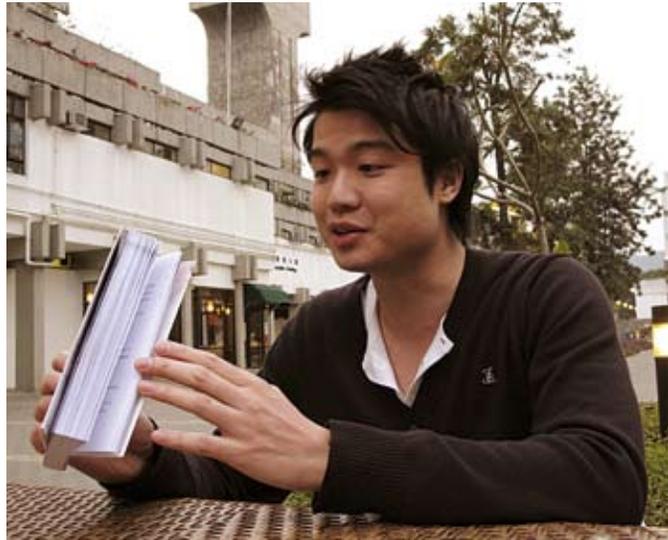
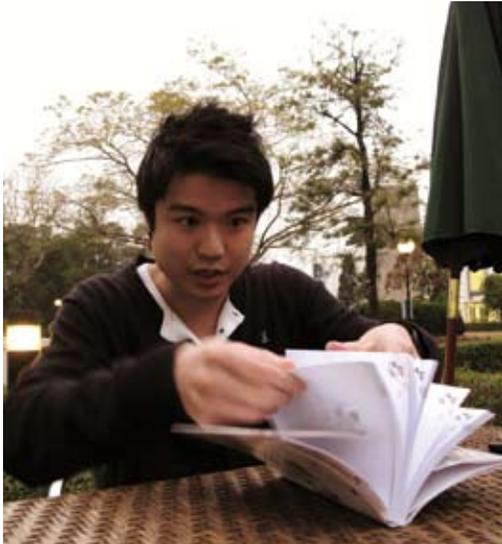
The support from readers changed his thought of giving up his career as a writer.

“I was deeply touched by the endless support from readers. They

kept on buying and commenting on my books. Some of them even told me that they had bought more than one copy of the same book to support me,” Mr Wong said with a smile.

He then planned to set up his own publishing house in order to fully control the types of books he wrote. “I hope I could change Hong Kong people’s attitude towards reading books. They should read different types of books, not just love stories,” he said.

It was not easy for him to set up his business as the budget was tight. He had to repay the government loan for his undergraduate studies which ended in 2003. At the same time, he also had to pay off a \$100,000 debt his mother had run up. He only had \$50,000 to set up his own company, Tin Hong Publishing, in 2004.



MARGARET CHAN

Wong Lai-kim is glad that he has more flexibility in doing his creative work in his own publishing house.

While he enjoyed writing what he wanted and designing the book layouts, he also had a difficult time running the business because of the shortage of cash. He said he mainly relied on the book sales and the small amounts earned from writing columns for newspapers.

The closure of SCMP Book Publishing in early 2008 made his life even grimmer. “I spent all of my savings on redeeming the copyright for some of my books, leaving me only a little amount of money to operate my publishing house,” he said.

He was so desperate that he turned to investing in the stock market.

“I still had a chance, but it’s probably the last chance. Now it’s the best time to invest. I used my knowledge of economics in my undergraduate studies and threw all of my remaining savings into the stock market. Hopefully I can make some money to save my business,” Mr Wong said.

After years of struggle, he found the local book publishing market in dire straits. “This has been coming on for a long time, especially after the introduction of portable electronic games like Nintendo DS (NDS) and PlayStation Portable (PSP).

People no longer read books on the MTR; instead they now play these gadgets throughout the journey,” he said bitterly. “Ironically, I also like playing NDS. So I understand why people read fewer books now.”

“I only earn a few dollars from each copy. I cannot afford to buy food if I continue running the business.”

He added, “It’s actually very hard for a writer to earn a living just by selling books. I only earn a few dollars from each copy. I can’t afford to buy food if I continue to run the business.”

While still struggling with his business, Mr Wong found out a new way to save his writing career. A Taiwan-based publisher published his latest work of science fiction, *Sixty-four Codons* in February, marking his foray into the Taiwanese market.

He was happy with the initial reader response. “I received positive comments only ten days after my book was released there. I was surprised



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Wong Lai-kim said he had a difficult time running his business due to the shortage of cash.



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The new version of *When Sagittarius Meets Aries*, which has additional graphics, is the last book published by his publishing company.



MARGARET CHAN

Wong Lai-kim is thankful to the endless support from readers.

“I have a heaven-sent connection with the publishing industry!”

because I was afraid that the Taiwanese would not understand my story,” Mr Wong said.

He felt that his career has undergone another upswing again. “It’s like going back to the beginning and starting my career all over again,” he said.

Mr Wong said readers in Taiwan have very different attitudes and feedbacks from those in Hong Kong.

“Readers in Hong Kong like criticising the characters and scenes in the novel. They wrote to me and suggested which two characters in the book should fall in love. I think it showed their lack of respect for authors and their creative work. Readers in Taiwan tend to give me encouragement,” Mr Wong said.

Another reason he likes the Taiwan market is that he finds more people read books than elsewhere. He said it was a surprise for him to receive feedbacks

middle-aged readers in Taiwan, while he finds adults in Hong Kong seldom read books.

Reviewing his still-struggling business in Hong Kong, Mr Wong had no regrets as it enabled him to do what he wanted.

“I don’t need to write the mainstream romantic stories in my publishing company and I’m proud of it. My book (*3-point Shooter VI*) even became the fifth best-selling book in 2006 and I’m so happy with it,” he said.

The satisfaction to have others’ recognition for my books is an intangible reward, he added.

Mr Wong is also thankful to his family, and more importantly his girlfriend, for their support during his ups and downs.

“I was down-and-out and didn’t even have enough lunch money during my darkest period. I even went to my

girlfriend’s home to get food when her parents were not around,” Mr Wong said.

Mr Wong described how it was fated that he met his girlfriend. His friend introduced her to him six years ago. “She was a reader of mine and she recognised me (when we met). We fell in love at the first sight.” Mr Wong continued, “Our encounter must be fate because I hadn’t met any suitable girls for a long time!”

He also regarded writing as the career he had to have. “I’ve a heaven-sent connection with the publishing industry,” he said. Being asked if he would give up writing and publishing if his publishing house closes down, Mr Wong said, “No, I really love writing.”

“I think my life is fated to be like this, which is equivalent to the meaning of my pen-name ‘Tin Hong’, which means my life is led by destiny,” Mr Wong said. ▽