

"A heartfelt and multifaceted picture of a performance art icon."

—CYRIL WONG, POET AND FICTIONIST

SEARCHING



FOR

CHAN

Author of
*A Philosopher's
Madness*

LI

SHAN

LEE WEN

A LIFE IN 135 PARTS

“Flickering with exacting yet poignant insights while balancing anecdote, lyricism, curated imagery, laudatory response and verbatim record, this biography delicately deconstructs linearity without compromising on a heartfelt and multifaceted picture of a performance art icon.”

–CYRIL WONG, POET AND FICTIONIST

“I congratulate Chan Li Shan for having written this beautiful biography of Lee Wen, who died too soon from Parkinson’s disease. At the age of 30, Lee Wen gave up a secure and stable career in a bank to study art. He would devote the rest of his life to the practice of art in its many forms: drawing, painting, poetry, songs, installation and performance. George Bernard Shaw once said that the world consists of two kinds of people: reasonable people and unreasonable people. The reasonable people are those who conform to the world. The unreasonable people are those who seek to change the world. Lee Wen was an “unreasonable” man and artist. Lee Wen once described himself as a soldier of culture. He fought many battles for culture and art. His victories were not unnoticed. He was awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2005. We will never forget him as the Yellow Man and The Sun Boy.”

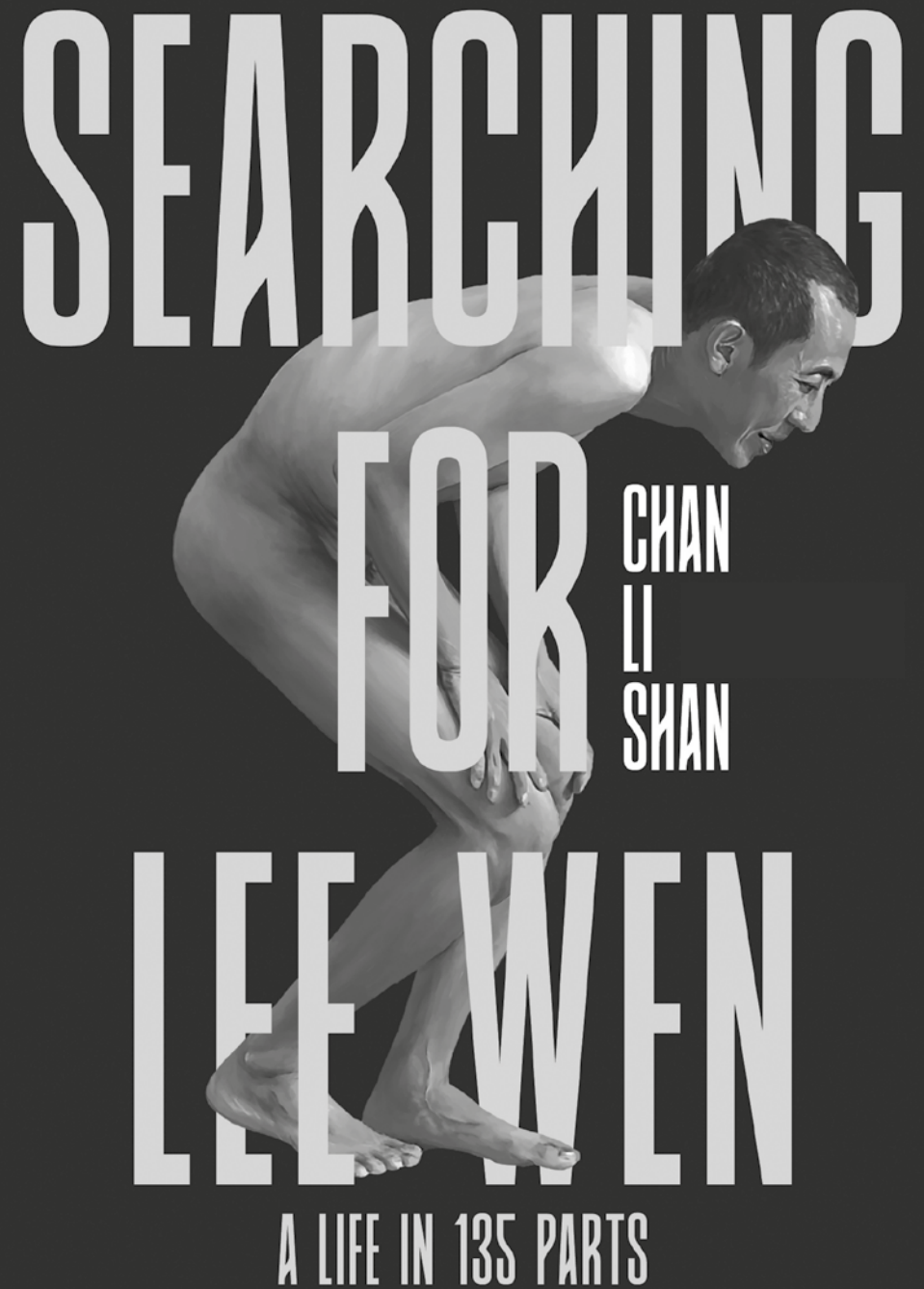
**–PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH, FOUNDING CHAIRMAN
NATIONAL ARTS COUNCIL**

“We like to pretend that biographies are ‘objective’. That the truth they bear is untainted by bias or partiality or opinion. That they are pristine. Nothing is further from the truth. Biographies are fiercely subjective and born of one person’s obsession with someone else’s life. The obsessiveness is not only for the storyline or narrative, but the telling of it. And the telling of the life story of an artist like Lee Wen—significant, protean, impulsive, explosive, brutally honest—demands an obsessive storyteller. Li Shan dives headlong into the minutiae of Lee Wen’s life, disregarding guardrails of convention and is sometimes eccentrically selective. She is desperately seeking line and colour, and motif and sfumato; yearning for composition that is him. The result is bricolage, cracked, disrupted, dismembered. But beyond the veil of the tale, as the clouds of dissonance disperse, something of a shape emerges; distinct and hewn by instinct, intimacy and understanding. A Lee Wen shape.”

–**T. SASITHARAN, DIRECTOR**
INTERCULTURAL THEATRE INSTITUTE

“In *Searching for Lee Wen*, Chan Li Shan offers readers a biography of a fascinating and important performance artist; a memoir of her own experience as his biographer, collaborator, and friend; and an innovative, nuanced, often moving mosaic of interview excerpts, testimonials from friends and admirers, timelines linking Singapore’s history to Lee Wen’s own, striking photographs, and meditations on the act of representing a life. The result is a memorable book, in which both Lee Wen and Chan Li Shan are ‘interfused, liminally, between being a sign, a signal and a person, enigmatically within, yet beyond each’—truly ‘an elusive joy to watch.’”

–**CRAIG HOWES, DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH**
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI’I AT MĀNOA



**SEARCHING
FOR
LEE WEN**

**CHAN
LI
SHAN**

A LIFE IN 135 PARTS

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EPIGRAM

*For my parents,
for KC
and Ced Chew.
To be fearless, to imagine, to live.*

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A Note on Form

IN THIS BOOK, you will find eight chapters or section headings that use actual titles from Lee Wen's body of songs. The book's structure is fragmented—it is a life in many parts. Each part is essential in its adding to the whole, and the whole is itself a window unto a world. Through this, I hope you will get a glimpse of the world of the artist Lee Wen. This book does not aim to be comprehensive but rather to outline the general contours of the landscape of his life. While this book is loosely chronological and can be read from beginning to end, you are invited to start and stop at any point, dipping in and out as you wish.

HEY NOW!

JUST GO AWAY AND DO YOUR THING

IT'S NOT A DREAM

IT'S A REALITY

ONE BY ONE

TAKE IT STRAIGHT FROM YOUR HEART

DON'T WORRY IF IT'S RIGHT OR WRONG

AS LONG AS YOU KNOW

YOU FEEL IT STRONG

HEY NOW

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

BE COOL ABOUT IT

ONE STEP AT A TIME

ONE DAY AT A DAY

DON'T GO AWAY

1. Kena Scolded

IN SEPTEMBER 2017, six months into my serious writing phase of Lee Wen's life, I foolishly showed him parts of what I had written. Lee Wen managed to read the first ten pages. It was difficult for him to flip the pages. Bent over in his chair, his Parkinson's seemed to be getting worse.

He smiled widely; his mischievous eyes were lit.

"It's good!" he declared. "I am very happy with it."

I was relieved. I was worried he would hate it, that my efforts had been inadequate. I went home. I had a restful night for the first time in months.

On waking up the next morning, I looked at my phone through blurry eyes. I saw the following message from Lee Wen: "Hi, I started to read your text more seriously and found errors and misunderstanding on every other paragraph."

That jolted me like an electric shock going through my body. I immediately touched my phone screen to read the rest of his message:

I believe you wrote from memory and although the 90 per cent memory is alright the errors unfortunately veered the

truth away at crucial tangents that may seem unimportant details to you and your readers but ouch it pains me to find them taken as facts. What in fact errors of carelessness nearing insensitive variables though unintentional I find it damaging to the real me I'm trying to be.

Shaken to the bone, I wrote back: “Dear Lee Wen, if I have gravely misrepresented your life, please forgive me. It is in the nature of biography that one is constantly chasing and trying to grasp an elusive character.”

His reply flashed across my screen:

- > Hence if it is fiction then let's do fiction. But it seems you are doing a biographical narrative based on facts stop then what I recommend would be more thorough check on your note taking and comparing two dues in the news media such as such as the drowning of teacher Captain Tan it was in the newspapers
- > The Record library was in the shop of such a name in UIC Building in Shenton Way
- > Not in RI
- > My apologies if you are upset by the above comments but they are meant to help you write better I believe you can do it.

A wave of relief came over me. These were tiny details that could be clarified with thorough research and fact-checking. I had a tendency to overreact, especially when I felt like I was being criticised.

As time went on, however, Lee Wen seemed discouraged—he didn't like my book. The more time and effort went into it, the more

it seemed pointless to hope that I would do a reasonably decent job of this biography that would satisfy Lee Wen. I was so discouraged, my enthusiasm began to dry up. Finally, sometime in 2018, he sent me these messages:

- > Are you still coming back to work?
- > I mean don't you want to?
- > Or need to?

“I think I might be done for now with the project,” I replied. I really did not feel like talking to him.

It would take another year before I would return to the manuscript. I put the draft aside, travelled to Bangladesh to work with marginalised young women from the region, took down their stories and stopped thinking about Lee Wen. Then in March 2019, I decided to start working on it again. Lee Wen had died of a lung infection. He would never see this book to its completion. I had to carry on. And I had to do so in a way that would do right by Lee Wen. I had to become more systematic—in the organisation of what data I had. I trawled through our conversations on Messenger and WhatsApp, scanned through my photos folder, categorised recorded interviews and worked further on my fact-checking.

I wish he'd been alive to see this happen.

2. First Meeting

I'VE ALWAYS SAID that my first meeting with Lee Wen was in 2012 at his residence in Aliwal, 67 Aliwal, before he shifted to 71 Aliwal to make use of the larger space because it was difficult to move around in his motorised wheelchair. But really, it began before that, in 2004 at Perumal Road, along the stretch of artist studios where the art gallery Plastique Kinetic Worms resided. At the time, my sister was a practising artist, and she shared a studio space with Juliana Yasin, the performance artist who has since died of cancer. I was a student in Philosophy at the University of York, and my mind was preoccupied with logic.

It was the sort of logic that could be done by a simple computer program—formal logical proofs that showed if and whether a statement was true. I enjoyed doing those proofs, even though I knew a computer could do them faster and more accurately—perhaps I wanted to become a computer. My philosophical thoughts about minds and machines were half-formed, but I've always thought that it would be a good thing if humans could think more like machines—rationally, logically and objectively.

At Perumal Road, I met Ranger Mills, a talkative guy with an impulsive streak. Once, he was so frustrated by the performance

art festival called *Future of Imagination* that he went out and got a tattoo that said “Figment of Imagination” or perhaps “Future of Imitation”—I can't remember now. It was a large tattoo on his bicep, and I remember thinking that it was too permanent a statement, too rash an action. But that was his temperament.

Later, Ranger would have a couple of ideas for performance art collaborations. He worked with steel. He'd been making a long steel table. It was six metres long, and his idea was that we'd sit each at one end of the table and have a conversation. I guessed that he would be doing most of the talking since I'm fairly quiet. We sent the proposal to the *Future of Imagination* team headed by Lee Wen. It was quickly rejected. But that was how I got to know of Lee Wen.

His name didn't mean much to me at the time. I got on with my life, completed my undergrad studies and Master's in Philosophy, and came back to Singapore. After that, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia and became a mental health advocate. I was broken, searching. Gerald Leow, an artist I had not heard of, wrote to me. He wanted to work together on a project about schizophrenia and the self. I was intrigued and wanted to know more. And so we met up at 67 Aliwal, where he lived. It turned out that he was a flatmate of Lee Wen's. I didn't recall who Lee Wen was.

On Aliwal Street is a row of somewhat dilapidated two-storey shophouses. 67 Aliwal Street used to be recognisable from its Balinese-style front garden. There was a palm tree, a frangipani tree with white fragrant flowers, a ficus with grappling roots, and an unused bathtub that had been plugged up and turned into a sort of pond—a water feature with fish to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Just outside, there were a couple of rattan chairs with no cushions and a white metal two-seater with the paint peeling off. Next to the gate and door was a noticeboard, usually updated with details

of upcoming art or music events. Just next to the entrance was an empty space, except for the rubbish bins at the side of the road and the one or two cats that found their way there. One of the cats had a strange song. When it liked you and wanted you to know, it yelled with a terrible squealing sound.

That was where and how I met Lee Wen for the first time, hanging his clothes to dry on that ancient metal rack; he looked as ancient as the rack. Insufficiently schooled in the who's who of the Singapore arts scene, I did not know who he was or what his achievements were. So my first encounter with Lee Wen was not an engagement with his intellect or artistic work. What I got was a friendly handshake with a diminutive figure who had come out of his room to hang his laundry on a wire clothes rack. Gerald mentioned that I was a mental health advocate with first-hand experience of psychosis. That seemed to intrigue Lee Wen. "You were diagnosed with schizophrenia," he later said. "So I am the opposite of you. With Parkinson's, I have a dopamine deficiency. With schizophrenia, you have an excess of dopamine." He was the sort of person who immediately engaged you, and five minutes later, I felt like I wanted to work with him, more so than with Gerald.

In the coming months, I came to know him better. Lee Wen was a man to whom the making of art was so important that he neglected himself and his sleep. With a single-minded focus on his art-making, he chose to live in Singapore, the place of his birth, away from his Japanese wife and son in Tokyo. The chalky blue rubber of his soles were so worn, it was hard for him to avoid falling on a rainy day. This somewhat purist approach appealed to me, and eventually, I sought him out to work together for a while. After a couple of meetings, we collaborated at an event, *The International Conference of Leaves* at the Singapore Art Museum. There, I read an

essay aloud while Lee Wen strummed a guitar with a leaf. It was an essay on art and philosophy inspired by Ranger, who had inducted me into the arts in Singapore. The rhythms and sounds of guitar strings and the intensity of Lee Wen's focus in the performance gripped me. In a way, it was, to me, a version of the music album *Pretty Hate Machine*. It had a certain regularity and attitude that reminded me of Trent Reznor. Lots of guitar plucking. His wiry whisper interspersed with short bursts of his raspy voice, climaxing in jangly guitar noises.

3. Taking His Sunflowers for a Walk

When I posted the photograph on Facebook and tagged Lee Wen, he immediately told me not to do that again. He would say things to me, like how he was faithful to his wife and that he needed to manage his image. He didn't publicly acknowledge our friendship till 2014, two years after we met. He couldn't seem to take our friendship for what it was. He was unsure how I fitted into his life.

ONCE, I TOOK a photograph of Lee Wen holding two sunflowers in one hand, wearing his shirt over his mother's red silk dress, moving solemnly in a circle, in the late afternoon. "I'm taking my sunflowers for a walk," he said.



Source: LS Chan

4. Lee Wen and I

WHEN I LOOK back on our correspondence, on our WhatsApp and Facebook messages, the bulk of it is sheer ordinariness. My friend Olaf found a pair of glasses in the backseat of his car after Lee Wen had a ride in it. I don't quite remember, but I think we were going somewhere to eat together. I sent a picture of the glasses, asking if they belonged to him. He said, "No but they look good!" Puzzled, I sent a different picture of the glasses against another background, and this time, he replied, "Oh I do believe they are! I seldom use them but they belong to me... No hurry to return it, that's a spare pair I got in Hong Kong."

But there were also more seemingly significant messages like the time he said,

hey thanks for coming around to cheer me up yesterday. I'm not too sure what our relationship is now but I enjoy spending time with you. Maybe we are just good friends. I guess I became too serious about me being an artist, I forgot how to take it easy doing nothing important and kind of take things as it comes without desire for advantage or gain. It's this society always demanding progress... too much for the soul.

What did he mean by this? The status of our relationship was not blur to me; I always did think we were good friends and nothing more or less. It was this sort of comment that made me keep a distance because I didn't want any misunderstanding to happen. All the same, I was drawn to Lee Wen, and it would be accurate to say that he filled a void in my life. I was lost, looking for a mentor. Quite honestly, Lee Wen was not exactly what I was looking for, but he was close. He was someone who cared less about money and more about making something beautiful, about being true to one's instincts.

5. Motivations

WHEN I FIRST started to write Lee Wen's biography, it was not because he was my role model or because I admired him greatly. It was only because he was so human. He made himself known. He was sometimes unlikeable—he once told a fellow artist that he liked her breasts. He had impregnated his then Japanese girlfriend with her consent so that they could get married without delay, notwithstanding objections from her parents.

He could be really tactless too. He told me one time, when we were at a food court that he would rather speak to the guy at the next table. And when I visited him in his last days at the hospital, he complained that the nurses were uncaring, looking out for all the wrong things and that I was just like them.

Yet Lee Wen was kind, so kind. I took his kindness for granted when he was alive. He came to my home when my father had lost control over his motor functions. Dad could no longer play the guitar, something he enjoyed. When Lee Wen came over, he played songs just for Dad. On that day when he visited my home, there was a painting of mine stuck behind a large armchair. Lee Wen remarked that his parents, too, had hidden his paintings behind the furniture, and we all laughed. The purpose of his remark was

to encourage me to keep painting and not to feel discouraged at my family's response. So I wrote to Lee Wen, "I would like to give you one of my paintings. May I visit you one of these days and do so?" But it was Lee Wen who was so much more giving. He gave me one of his guitars so that I could learn to play, too. "It's yours to keep," he said.

After being diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2009, Lee Wen continued his art-making, sometimes by making colour pencil drawings. But of course, he had been making them before, even before he decided to become an artist. One of the new drawings he made later in life was *This Blue Again*. It is a small, pale blue, abstract iceberg-like shape with a vivid blue background. From different angles, light hits the drawing to give it depth. Lee Wen knew how much I liked *This Blue Again*, so he asked his gallery manager to refrain from exhibiting this particular drawing and putting it up for sale. "Just give me anything for it," he said. He was selling the other works in the collection for thousands of dollars each. That was how he was so generous with his friends.

I bought the drawing from Lee Wen and hung it up at a place where I could easily look at it, in a corner of the dining room. Adjacent to it is a blown-up photograph of the hull of a ship, a present from the artist and writer Stephen Black, whom I got to know through Lee Wen. Lee Wen later said, "Thank you for collecting my work. It is an encouraging sign that means a lot to me." I was surprised that such a significant artist as Lee Wen would say that. But this was nevertheless the situation in Singapore. No matter how successful, artists faced the constraints of having to make a living.

6. Press Statement

NEWS OF LEE Wen's death arrived in a startling manner. In the weeks leading up to it, I was occupied. My partner had broken an ankle. We were celebrating my mother's birthday. My brother ordered food via Deliveroo, and my sister brought flowers for my mum. She bought heaps of pink and red flowers. Mum was secretly pleased. I didn't look at my phone till everyone had gone home. It was about 5.30pm maybe.

A message from my friend Caryn was unexpected. "Heard lee wen passed on leh," she said with a sad emoticon face. There were a couple of other messages about the same thing. It didn't register. I was thinking, what the hell happened? I went to Facebook. It was flooded with posts on Lee Wen. I was asked to prepare a press statement for *The Straits Times* on Lee Wen's life. And that was how I got to know about his death.

7. A Worthy Failure

A GALLERY SPACE is conventionally understood to be a space for exhibition, the showcasing of aesthetic works such as paintings or sculptures. This was the gallery space of The Substation—an experimental art space where boundaries were blurred, and limits of the body and mind were pushed till black and blue and bruised. Where minds were tormented in confrontation with the self, allowing for no easy answers, only self-flagellation, directly lashing the whip on the body till the red marks became a sheen of blood that was purity of the mind, in that searching and seeking, asking the questions that no one could explain or fathom.

The Substation was founded by Kuo Pao Kun, that legendary playwright and theatre practitioner who once said, "A worthy failure is more valuable than a mediocre success." These words were printed black and large on the wall next to the doors of the gallery space in a simple font. Thus, in the spirit of experimentation, notes and sketches were tacked onto the walls instead of finished paintings or sculptures—photocopies of body parts that looked like bones and faces in shadows. Objects were placed carefully on stands like sculptures. There was a stack of old newspapers chained and locked and a dustpan with the word "delusion" painted on it

and positioned within a transparent ballot box.

Amongst these items, there was something that looked like a painting, an acrylic piece on a rectangular canvas, tightly framed. On this, a playful juxtaposition of images—a figure riding an orange horse, an arrow directly heading for bullseye, an outline of a golden tooth, a large unblinking eye atop a foot, which was raw and red, whilst the “ground” on which these images floated above was covered with embers flashing gold and red and warmth like the glowing remnants of paper money burnt in order to reach one’s ancestors. What was interesting about this painting, however, was not the painting itself. For underneath the painting was fixed a smaller painting. The smaller painting was meant to be an “explanatory note” to the larger one, calling the viewer’s attention to the way in which many postmodern works of art had to be explained or commented on in order to be made comprehensible to its audience or viewer of art. As such, it was a kind of joke that Lee Wen made, in his decision to create a painting that would explain a painting. He took it almost too far and was, in fact, so engrossed in his weird joke that he proceeded to make two further paintings, where each was meant to explain the next. Thus, the painting that served to explain the painting that served to explain the painting that served to explain the painting was gesturing at recursiveness and the levels of meta-cognition and discussion that were possible, to highlight the layers of abstraction within the mind, art-making and in the exhibition of works to the public.

8. Art as Balance

IT WAS JULY 1993. Heavy red chains, long and thick, strung across his shoulders and hanging down his body, dragged along the floor as he walked. His walk was slow, deliberate and contemplative. He took his time, unhurried, one step at a time. I imagine that it sometimes took more than a minute before his next step. In this way, it was like watching a Japanese Noh performer, where a performer could take minutes just to stretch out a hand—it was simultaneously excruciating and liberating to watch.

The chains are reminiscent of Wen’s lyrics:

Everywhere I look
 People walk around in chains
 It’s not in their legs
 It’s all in their brains
 —*The Time Show*, 1989

Thus, his great red chains functioned to reify the intangible chains that weigh us all down—our anxieties, insecurities, perfectionism, self-doubt and other psychological burdens.

With his two hands, he held six lotus buds, their long stalks

were left uncut. The buds were pink, rosy as ripe peaches—they symbolised emerging knowledge and wisdom. He walked with a solemn expression that was neither smiling nor frowning but with a certain neutrality. Although the yellow paint on his skin was screaming, his manner appeared, in contrast, to be serene, a picture of peace. In a way, they balanced each other out. He put the lotus buds into an orange pail. They drew on the water in the pail, drinking from it, revived. Balance was paramount to his performance. Using fifteen kilogrammes of uncooked white rice, he formed soft mounds on the gallery floor space. It was unusual to have this kind of messiness in a gallery—it turned the gallery into a site of construction and creative contestation. There was a sense of unfinished business and complexity involved in this silent performance. The mounds of rice invited one to touch them, to have the grains of rice fall through one's hands like sand on a day at the beach.

For eight hours a day, for five days in a row, the artist used the uncooked rice to make meaning. He drew a divination from the I Ching. The hexagram corresponded to no. 11—Peace, reflecting the idea of the creative in harmony with the receptive. The yin and yang were balanced and synchronous. He created words from the rice, speaking of

Death and spirit
Heaven and hell
Greed and good

All perfectly balanced, in neat capital letters, in clean curved lines.

He was focused on his task, but there were times when he'd do something else, like take a rest, by lying on the floor. He was neither

curled nor sideways but had his back to the floor, facing upwards, with his eyes closed. It must have been cold—the concrete floor against his naked body, but he didn't seem to feel it.

Around the gallery space were other props that stimulated the imagination—a cardboard cut-out of a guitar, a glass jar half-filled with silver coins, a birdcage full of books. The cage of books made me think of how we are sometimes trapped in reading for knowledge, reading book after book, thirsting for more, feeling that it is never enough. The only way out is to let go of our compulsion for reading, to allow ourselves to think. The state of being in perfect balance and harmony, within and without, is a value prized in Chinese philosophy. Lee Wen wondered if it were valued even more than the idea of freedom. If one is completely free, one is susceptible to Icarian ambition, hubris, or else despair and desolation. When things are in balance and neutral, the body is centred. Life goes on. Without explosive emotion or intensity of thought. Clouds float across the sky as they must.

9. Identity in Art

*in the western sense
 freedom is a self-evident good. but.
 but the Chinese consider freedom as “licentiousness” and
 “valorisation of personal liberty”.
 what is considered freedom may not have self-evident values in some
 cultures.
 harmony and conformity is prized higher than freedom sometimes.
 sometimes.*

–Lee Wen, *JYM5*, 1994

A MAN, NOT very tall, with thin legs, ribcage visible, with strong hands and long fingers, no cellulite, was small in stature but large in how he portrayed himself to the world. He stripped himself naked and then painted himself with poster paint. The brushmarks were visible on his calves, where the dried paint still swirled on the body as canvas, thick paint plastered, a mask, a kind of wall that separated the man from the persona that was the Yellow Man.

The Yellow Man was an image, not a person. He wore a pair of yellow briefs to avoid the charge of obscenity in what was a public display of his body—a body frail with humanity, that was

susceptible to illness or addiction, that survived the ravages of years drinking and smoking, that still contained the strength and splendour of youth. He had no wrinkles then; his eyes betrayed no lines of age, his ears pointed upwards like an elf, his head was shorn, devoid of hair. The baldness of his head made the figure seem even more stylised, like a cartoon figure. It was the opposite of realism, in a way. His body had become a work of the imagination, the stuff of dreams or daydreams, the chance at living a life differently, an alternative life, which he grabbed and ran with. His name was Lee Wen.

Journey of a Yellow Man was a series of performances that first began in Singapore as a question. It was first answered when Lee Wen was a student in England. The question was the title of a painting inspired by German Expressionism. The title was created in a moment of rage, when an art critic commented that the painting was a simple mimicking of the West. He called the painting, “*Yellow Man, Where Are You Going?*” There would be many further steps taken before he would attempt to answer the question, such as a study of Chinese self-portraiture and an attempt to perform naked in a confrontation with himself and his vulnerabilities, and all our vulnerabilities, when a fellow artist was unjustly evicted from his studio.

The paint on his body was yellow, the colour of sunflowers, earthy and rich, neither glaring as the sun itself nor putrid as the gunk that one coughs out when one has caught an infection, but it was uniformly just there, without gradations or shades of yellow. It was that absence of variation and uniformity of tone with no contrast that made it loud, loud and unavoidable, like shouting at the world, puncturing one’s sense of placidity. It could not be boring as it served like a light punch in one’s gut,

unexpected but stimulating, the beginnings of a conversation that promised to be playful.

“Look at me!”

The gaze of the viewer of art would find in the spectacle that was the Yellow Man a startling explosion of colour and life and in this a realisation that life was coloured too and in the way that people were coloured, dynamic and changing like what you see in a kaleidoscope, with its shimmering and vibrant parts, intersecting and separating in an endless chain of movement, each with its own assured independence and agency to go in the direction of their desires.

“I am yellow.”

The “I” indicates the self, which is neither the summation of one’s properties nor the totality of one’s memories of events, people and places. Aspects of the self will change over time, while memories can be falsified or forgotten. To say that “I am...” is to claim one’s existence, that one is not nothing, not thick black velvety nothingness or when the mind blanks and dullness creeps in to envelope thoughts, solidifying into lead. Not nothing is a double negation that is logically equivalent to the assertion that there is something. It is something yellow that has the property of belonging.

“I am more Chinese than Chinese.”

To be Chinese is not: to eat only rice and chicken feet stewed in dark soy sauce, or to respect one’s elders for their experience and wisdom, or to have stereotypical eyes that slant, or to never speak of love because there are myriad other ways to show it. To declare that one is more Chinese than Chinese is a way of showing

one’s competitiveness, like a male peacock who fans his feathers or male lizard that bloats its throat vermillion. That competitiveness reflected a society that gave no second chances, where one’s lot in life was established by the time you were twelve years old.

To be more Chinese than Chinese is the peculiar syndrome that plagues the Chinese who go abroad, desperately grasping at their identity in order to retrieve a sense of stability.

The artifice inherent in a man so yellow, that impossible colour of skin on sight that we use as a name to label all Chinese persons, clearly seeks to parody the notion of yellow as an accurate or appropriate racial term. In this parody, he invites us to mock him by first mocking himself. His confidence is quiet, and he does not need to say a word to express the thought.

“I do not care what you think.”

The work of art is usually understood as the result of a relationship of sorts, or at least in the first instance, a dialogue between the artist and the audience. Without an audience to react or to respond, can there still be art? That the Yellow Man persists and is not shaken by the gawping of his audience that he calmly walks in his own time, lost in reverie or introspection, that he is his own free agent who determines his next step or action, whether to raise his arms or drop them—that his performance is determined by his volition, whether conscious or unconscious, is somehow to deny the imperative or need for an audience. In fact, all the audience he requires may simply exist in his mind alone.

Art critics and commentators on Lee Wen often associate his Yellow Man work with the concept of identity. A well-known actress, Nancy Kwan once gave a talk at a conference of British-born Chinese. Having starred in the film *The World of Suzie Wong*, she

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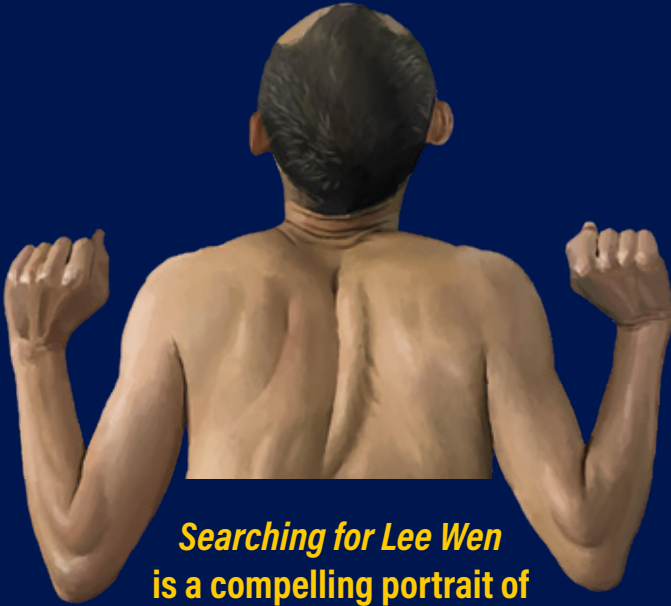
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Searching for Lee Wen
is a compelling portrait of
the elusive artist who was central
to performance art in Singapore. Chan
Li Shan writes of her encounters with
Lee Wen—spontaneous, relentlessly
honest and sometimes provocative—
creating an experience much like his
performances. The obsessive search for
the artist leads Chan to discover what art
and friendship mean.



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