

IT  
CHANGED  
MY LIFE

It Changed My Life is a new weekly series about lives that have been

dramatically changed by events, people or circumstances



PHOTOS: BEON KAN, LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Working with his father in Orchard Road (above), Mr Beon Kan learnt that there is no shame in earning an honest living. Today, Mr Kan (right) has found a new purpose and a new joy in life.



# Snapshots boost sense of self-worth



## Songwriter Beon Kan almost gave up but a friend's unique 'gift' turned his life around



**Wong Kim Hoh**  
Senior Writer

Two giant billboards, part of a multimedia exhibition called Ghost, have been making heads turn at Sculpture Square in Middle Road. One shows a gawky, diminutive man locking lips with a statuesque woman. A bigger vinyl print – mounted on the courtyard pavement of the arts centre – shows the same man, in shorts and crouched like a cat in front of a puddle of water.

Both images were shot by celebrated Singapore photographer John Clang 11 years ago and feature his friend, Beon Kan. At the time, Mr Kan was a 29-year-old cobbler and a man in the doldrums. Depression and a massive inferiority complex had paralysed him and stopped him from chasing his dreams of becoming a songwriter.

Clang, then a rising photographer, felt he had to do something to help his best friend. So, when he was approached to put on his first solo exhibition, he knew it had to include Mr Kan. "It was an opportunity to put him on a pedestal, raise his self-esteem and have him face the world in a courageous manner," recalls Clang, now based in New York.

The result was a show at the Esplanade titled Clang: A Self Portrait, a series of provocative photographs featuring his friend.

It changed Mr Kan's life. His starring role, the praise and the media attention gave his sense of self-worth a big boost. Not long after, his first Mandarin song, Ao Tu (Uneven), was picked up by Hong Kong singer-actress Gigi Leung. Others made the cut in albums by Singapore singers such as JJ Lin and Kit Chan and China artiste Kym.

To date, he has written nearly 20 songs, the latest being Love Shakes. Performed by up-and-coming singers Stella Seah and Melvin Sia, it is the theme song of the telemovie of the same name starring Fann Wong and Zheng Geping, broadcast on Channel 8 this May.

"If others could have faith in me, why did I doubt myself? Once I learnt to stop being hard on myself, I felt really happy," he says.

More than a decade later, Mr Kan, now 40, still feels happy, perhaps even more so.

For the past five years, he has been married to Ms Candy Chen, 40, a Taiwanese university graduate he met online. The fact that he had only N levels did not matter to her; she liked his honesty, industry and

sensitivity.

They have settled in Hualien, a picturesque city on the eastern coast of Taiwan, where they run a little business called Leather Prince, crafting charming leather keychains and phone cases. Their workshop is also their home, a modest two-storey house with cheerful murals of animals and trees. Two dogs and a cat add to their domestic bliss.

"We love the quiet and the slower pace of life here. There is also a lot of *ren qing wei*," he says, using the Chinese phrase that literally means "the flavour of human emotions".

Mr Kan appears to have *ren qing wei* in spades himself; he is gracious and hospitable, a warm, self-effacing Ah Beng with the soul of a poet.

He is the youngest of four children born to a second-generation cobbler and a seamstress. "We did not live hand to mouth but my father's income was unstable," he lets on, recalling his early years in a one-room flat at Stirling Road.

He did not do well at Mei Chin Primary and Shu Qun Secondary, taking five years to complete his N levels. The only thing he enjoyed was Chinese composition.

Comics and Chinese pop songs were his passions and he decided early on to be a lyricist.

"Every time I decided on a topic, I would do a lot of research. I borrowed a lot of romance novels from the library," recalls Mr Kan.

He would lock himself in his room to distil stories, emotions and experiences into lyrical verses. Friends laughed at him, and his parents told him to do something more useful, but he was not discouraged. "I was like a cockroach that refused to die," he jokes.

After national service, he became a waiter at a Havelock Road nightclub. There, he had a front-row seat to a lifestyle hitherto alien to him. "What you see in Hong Kong movies really does happen. There were drugs, pretty women and big spenders," he says.

The shenanigans he witnessed were rich fodder for a songwriter,

and the pay – more than \$1,500 with tips – was attractive. "But one day, I woke up and told myself I had to leave and find a proper job," he says.

Stints as a data entry clerk and an accounts assistant followed. While working in a publishing and merchandising company, he met the late music producer Sunkist Ng.

"He knew about my interest in songwriting, and he encouraged me to keep at it. He would give me feedback on what I'd done," he says.

When he found a new job as a data entry clerk at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, he decided to enrol in a graphic design course too. But he quit after a year. "I realised that I really was not cut out for formal studies," he says.

That marked the beginning of his spiral downwards.

"I felt I was a big failure. I had many regrets – I did many things but all so unsuccessfully," he says.

He quit his job, stopped writing songs, locked himself in his room and sometimes thought about suicide. "I didn't dare go to a doctor. I suspected I had depression, but I was really afraid a doctor would confirm it. It was a really horrible period – I never ever want to live through that again," he says of a bleak period that lasted two long years.

"One day, my mother said: 'Son, you really have to look for a job. Why don't you go help your father?'"

It was not a prospect he relished but he knew he had to crawl out of his hole. At first, all he did was watch his father ply his cobbler's trade where Orchard Central now stands. "I was embarrassed. I felt a young person like myself shouldn't have to repair shoes on the street. I thought people were looking at me," he says.

But watching his father work did him good.

"It was the first time I'd watched him at such close range. He has so much dignity; he really puts his heart into what he is doing and he makes do with the tools he has. He



ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

In Taiwan, Mr Kan and wife Candy Chen (above) share their home with two dogs and a cat, and craft leather keychains (like the ones on the left) for sale online.

### Low point

"I was embarrassed. I felt a young person like myself shouldn't have to repair shoes on the street. I thought people were looking at me."

MR BEON KAN, on working with his cobbler father in the streets

showed me there is no shame when you earn an honest living," he says.

He was still stuck in the depths of his funk when Clang, his army buddy, showed up and turned his life around. The photographer's real name, by the way, is Ang Choon Leng and "Clang" comes from the name on his army uniform, CLAng.

Clang persuaded his friend to play the protagonist in a series of conceptual photographs, and the pair worked on three projects.

In Beon Sleeps, Mr Kan was photographed sleeping in several places, including on an escalator, in the middle of a street and outside

an MRT station. In Stray Cats, a half-naked Mr Kan posed as a cat in locales such as a wet market. And in Beauty And The Beast, a fashion spread for women's magazine Nuyou, he was shot romancing top model Jessie Leong.

The photo sessions forced Mr Kan to lose his inhibitions.

"I just did whatever John told me to do. I learnt not to care what people said or how they looked at me," he says.

When the photographs were exhibited at the Esplanade, the acclaim and the media attention did wonders for his morale. "After that, things went really smoothly. I

## TURNING POINT



### Confidence booster

"It was an opportunity to put him on a pedestal, raise his self-esteem and have him face the world in a courageous manner."

MR JOHN CLANG (above), renowned photographer and friend of Mr Kan



PHOTOS: DESMOND LIM, COURTESY OF SCULPTURE SQUARE

This image on a billboard in Sculpture Square (above) was shot 11 years ago when Mr Kan had hit rock bottom. To help him step out of his depression, photographer John Clang featured him in a thought-provoking exhibit at the Esplanade.

grabbed on to the high, and when I was down, I would quickly sort myself out," he says.

Not long after, he sold Gigi Leung his first song, Ao Tu, a chronicle of his battle with depression.

Singer Kit Chan remembers him fondly. "Beon wrote a song for me. It was about letting go of an old love. He was special. He knew my works well, and he worked the titles of my previous songs into the lyrics," she says of the song titled Dong Wan Tu Xing (East Of Saturn), a pun on the English phrase 'Don't want to sing'.

In 2005, Mr Kan went online, looking for someone to help him improve his mastery of the traditional Chinese characters used in Taiwan and Hong Kong. That was how he met Ms Chen, a horticulture graduate from National Pingtung University of Science and Technology.

They soon started having video chats. To assure her he was not dodgy, he sent her Clang's pictures and told her about the songs he had written. They visited each other during a three-year courtship, before tying the knot in 2007.

Ms Chen says: "My family was initially worried that life would be difficult. But I knew we wouldn't starve. He was hardworking and honest, and he had artistic talent. He might not have had much savings, but he also didn't have debts."

In 2009, they moved from Singapore to Hualien, where property prices and the cost of living were lower. "I told him I wanted quality of life. I didn't want to slog too hard. As long as we have enough money, I'm content," says Ms Chen.

They set up Leather Prince, an online business, peddling cute animal keychains that they had begun making and phone cases. Every piece – priced between US\$19 (\$24) and US\$45 – is handcrafted.

Their customers, mostly from the United States and Europe, keep them busy with a constant stream of orders.

Songwriting is something Mr Kan still does. "I have a catalogue of more than 100 songs. I think they are very good. I can't understand why they haven't sold yet," he says with a laugh.

He is chuffed that Clang's pictures of him are winning a new audience at Sculpture Square. "Those pictures changed my life," he says.

The pals still e-mail and call each other regularly.

"He taught me to be open to possibilities and to have confidence in myself. When you are confident, people will trust you. And for that, I will always be grateful to him," he says.

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John Clang's Beon Sleeps pictures can be viewed online at [johnclang.com/artwork/beonsleeps.html](http://johnclang.com/artwork/beonsleeps.html)

## WATCH THE VIDEO

[www.straitstimes.com](http://www.straitstimes.com)

Cobbler's life changed by photographer John Clang



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