

黃仁達作品選

Selected Works of Wong Yankwai

By Wong Yankwai

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Free-range Youth

走地少年

POON INVITED ME to dinner at a *dai pai dong*. The waiter came by to announce: 'We do a beautiful double-boiled soup with shark's fin and chicken!' So we each ordered a bowl. Poon spit the chicken feet bones neatly onto the plastic tablecloth. What are chicken feet doing in shark's fin soup? I thought, when Poon said, 'Teddy and I are going to Qingyuan next week to shoot a documentary about a youth football camp. Do you want to come along?' There were also chicken feet in my bowl, bobbing up and down. Football? What do I know about football? Can we film something other than football, like village children too poor to afford proper footballs, or parents with high hopes for their sons? Hang on a second, isn't Qingyuan a major focus of the government's Anti-poverty Campaign? Surely there aren't many people there who play football simply for fun and exercise ...? 'Suit yourself,' said Poon.

I pictured the following: dust flying along a village dirt road, a handful of kids chasing a battered tin can, free-range chickens clucking and flapping their wings along the roadside ...

Two days before leaving for Qingyuan, everyone got together at Teddy's office. Fong was also there. The guy has organized quite a few documentary projects, and has a real knack for unearthing material—he digs so deep that his interview subjects spill their guts and end up half-dead. For this Qingyuan trip, he and I would be responsible for the camera work, while Teddy would direct. Teddy said, 'The purpose of the project is to search for China's future football stars. Use your own judgment if you see anything else of interest; just get as much footage as you can.' The supposed 'producer' of the team had bailed out at the last minute, so Poon took over all the practical arrangements, including our accommodations.

Sankeng village in Qingxin county is actually some dozen miles away from Qingyuan city. The villagers said, 'Ay, there used to be a few patches of water

Editor's Note: The illustrations accompanying the translations are all by Wong Yankwai.

around here, good cure for sores and boils.’ Then developers came along and turned the whole area into a ‘spa district’. In the village holiday cottages and resorts sprang up, their green glass tiles with nary an unwanted weed among them. An arrow-straight asphalt road bisected the village. No children chasing after tin cans, no free-range chickens. Fong said, ‘Don’t have any preconceptions about what is worth shooting.’

The football camp had already started the day before we arrived. We saw Teddy’s footage of the opening ceremony later: there was music and speeches, and the whole thing ended with hundreds of young football players marching around the grounds; impressive stuff. The twenty-odd grass pitches were all immaculately manicured, and they had even built stands for spectators at the central pitch, near the offices. Only, the scattering of villagers watching the games preferred the tree-shaded spots behind the goal. Later on, we found out that these villagers were not, strictly speaking, spectators—they were all ball boys, on salary.

The sun rose early here, and the grass was fuming hot by 9 a.m. The players for the morning games had it the roughest; sweat poured straight down their jerseys onto the farmland of yesteryear. Underneath the trees a woman said sympathetically, ‘Hard work, this football, harder than farming! Those poor lads!’ Others just snickered. Maybe like me they found football completely baffling.

Fong was running after a boy with the camera on his back, panting like an ox. The boy ignored him and carried on with his laps, slowly and steadily. Later I met Player No. 9 at the snack bar and asked him why he was running laps when everyone else was playing. Someone answered, ‘Because he had a “dizzy spell”!’ Can running laps cure light-headedness? I asked Coach the next day. Coach said, ‘These spoiled brats fake dizzy spells every time they come onto the pitch. Give them a couple of laps, and they won’t dare try that trick again.’ Actually this No. 9 was not really the lazy sort. One time he was looking bored out of his mind on the bench, but when Coach put him on the field, he whizzed around like a man on fire. They ended up losing the match anyway, but No. 9 really did save the team from quite a few tight spots. When I mentioned this to Teddy afterwards, he thought that all coaches knew the abilities of their players like the backs of their hands, and the outcome of matches often depended on how they deployed them. No wonder Poon always said that the match was about ‘the complete picture’—and this ‘picture’ included the coaches who never set foot on the pitch.

The late-night hangout had the *décor* of a beer garden in a fancy suburb of Taipei, but the waitresses were dressed in the floral prints of Tanka fishing girls. Neon lights swung to and fro over the pond, while in the karaoke across the water, someone was singing a Kelly Chan pop song: ‘Boom Boom Boom Boom’. Floral Print

said: 'We do a fine Stuffed Mud-carp, Country Style.' Of course we also had to try the famous Qingyuan free-range chicken. Fong's verdict after one bite: 'Overcooked.'

Teddy said that when he was a kid, his legs were thin as joss sticks, and it was football, all that running around and kicking, that made him strong and healthy. The football pitch where he had played is still there, still completely grass-free; it is called 'Southorn'. Poon was a sickly child, but stopped getting ill when he grew up and became obsessed with football—or maybe it's the other way around, he first fell in love with football and then stopped being sickly ... at any rate, this football business is pretty incredible. Teddy spoke of his idol Pelé with a glint in his eye, 'Not like Maradona, that fat idiot with a drug habit ...' Poon thought Maradona only loved the fame and fortune that football brought him, whereas Pelé loved the game itself. I angled the camera underneath the table to film Teddy's legs, the sturdy ones given him by football, though it bothers him to this day that he never made it to the top league.

What is a football game but two groups of people running back and forth? I left the asphalt road and wandered the lanes among the village houses. People were busy at work, some chopping wood, others preparing rice or mending furniture. They were all women. The men liked sitting alone on their motorbikes, staring into space, or playing cards in small groups beneath the trees. Dragonflies filled the sky and fluttered silently. I asked an old woman, are there any schools nearby? Where do kids play football? The old woman said, 'Ain't no one at school no more during summer holidays, mister. There's a vacant lot behind the village; mister might look there.' But along the way someone else said, 'Football? Surely you should go to the "New World"! That vacant lot is long gone. They're building there, building the "New World".' I only understood later: 'New World' is a generic term for everything built with outside capital, though of course the biggest investor was indeed 'The New World Development Company Limited'. People had different reactions whenever the 'New World' was brought up. One of the motorbike men said with some rancour, 'Working for the 'New World' only gets you 400 yuan a month—what a rip-off!' 400 yuan would only pay for some 30 odd servings of Qingyuan chicken: slim pickings indeed. Yet an old grocer woman with a shop near the pond said, 'Before the "New World", we only made 200 yuan from the land—that was miserable!' No wonder many villagers dreamt of being a part of the 'New World'. Those who found employment too demeaning and farming too undignified sat on their motorbikes all day. Every time an unfamiliar face passed by, they would ask, 'Looking for a young lady, sir?' The girls, in their teens and twenties, waited patiently in Sankeng village. Delivery at any hour took just a few minutes, satisfaction guaranteed ...

But the fields of rice and vegetables did not lie uncultivated despite the men's contempt for them. While the men waited for Lady Luck, the women kept working the land. Planting rice, harvesting vegetables—everything had to be dealt with in a timely fashion. Rain came in the afternoon as usual and freshened the crops to an even brighter green. Whenever there was thunder, though, the umpires would rush around in panic herding the kids onto buses; they waited out the rain, or the match would be rescheduled. 'Matter of life and death!' said the umpires; apparently somebody once really had been struck by lightning. Only the women remained steadfast in the fields: 'How can there be crops without rain and thunder?' Farming and football: different rules.

At football matches both winners and losers had to drink lots of water, so there were always a dozen ragamuffins hanging about the pitch—boys that I thought would be chasing a tin can on their way home from school—staring bug-eyed at the water bottles in the players' hands. Whenever somebody let one fly, the kids scrambled for it. Fong said he caught on film a small boy in the rain, three or four years of age, carrying on his head a bag that was even bigger than him, full of plastic water bottles. There was rain every day, but I did not have Fong's luck; I failed to capture such a poignant moment. The boys I filmed were also unlucky—their bags looked rather empty. The bottle rats caused a slight panic among us city folk: Who did they sell the bottles to? There just happened to be a 'mineral water plant' in the village, the very thought of which turned our stomachs. 'We sell the old bottles to recyclers, of course,' said a brother on a motorbike, 'they melt them down to make new bottles!' There were probably a few bottle rats among his brood. I did not ask him how many bottles can be traded for a serving of Qinguan chicken, or the bottle equivalent of delivering a 'young lady' ...

When we met for a midnight snack, Teddy told us that one of the northern coaches tried to save money by squeezing three players into a single bed and even tried to negotiate meal costs with the organizers, settling for less food: 'We humble folk do not have to dine in such luxury.' People from different parts of the country probably had different ideas on what 'dining in luxury' meant. At the cafeteria a prominent slogan was displayed: 'Good athletes do not waste good food'. Like the 'Highway robbers will be strictly punished' signs that you see along the roads, slogans identify problem areas. So who were the ones who 'wasted good food'? There was a rule here: whoever did not finish their food would be fined five yuan. So everyone cleaned his plate. Fong had some shots of a boy who only liked egg whites. He toyed with an egg yolk on his plate for what seemed like forever before eventually swallowing it with a grimace. So five yuan is no trifling sum. Except that one of the restaurant staff overheard someone from the Hong Kong team

bragging: 'Fine or no fine, I would never finish this dish.' This led to a late night interrogation for the Hong Kong team; no one dared own up to Coach, and that was the end of that. I did run into the Hong Kong team at the snack bar in the village. Their favourite 'Taiwanese style milk tea' cost five yuan: worth a third of a plate of Qingyuan chicken, or fifty plastic water bottles.

The ball bounced around on the grass, everyone put out a good sweat, and the match was over. On the way back we purposely caught a ride with the Hong Kong team, hoping to pick up a few extracurricular tales. The boys returned to their usual high spirits; no one seemed to take their defeat on the pitch to heart. At other matches I saw raging coaches scream and curse in their various dialects at players who had made mistakes. I also interviewed a northern boy at the dorm. When asked about the result, he said, 'We lost!' and walked away in embarrassment. Are football matches battles for grown-ups or battles for youth? I do not know.

Teddy said surely among a population of 1.2 billion it shouldn't be impossible to find one or two 'young Pelés'. I believed him, but our time in Qingyuan was too brief; we weren't even able to get a complete picture of the 600 who were there. As for 'discovering China's future football stars', did Teddy 'lose'? On Sankeng Village's erstwhile farmland all these things sprouted out of nowhere. Some thought of them as signs of loss; others were less pessimistic. For myself, I only feared that the film would not have enough fresh air and sunlight: quite different from what Teddy had imagined. 'Well, we'll see,' said Poon.

When we watched the tapes after getting home, there was the following shot: the ball flying beyond the goal and landing in the bushes behind. A boy running over and disappearing into the foliage. Dragonflies filling the sky, fluttering silently.



行人道上的悼詞

某某，
跟先前的某某和某某一樣，
遠遊去了。
用她的說法，
「出門不帶行李」。
短訊傳來的時候，
我在紅街市邊上一團水氣裏，
等着吃五元一串牛肚。
一街的食客過客，
有站有蹲無人打話。
據說下環那邊，
有家更道地的。

Elegy from the Pavement

Someone,
Like this someone and that someone before her,
Went travelling afar.
As she used to say:
'No need for baggage.'
When the text message came,
I was in a cloud of steam at the edge of the Red Market,
Waiting for a five-dollar order of tripe.
A streetful of patrons and passer-bys
Stood or crouched. No one spoke.
I hear that along São Lourenço
Someone else does a more authentic job.

行人道上的悼詞（澳門篇）

打撈一尾 貢多拉吧
水鄉的三盞燈 水晶閃亮
每年只沉沒 那麼 一點點
漁人網網千斤 碼頭跑了又回來了
罩不住一隻
濕水煙花
燈 燈 燈 竟 不 分 晝 夜
風化了誰說不也是個
里斯本牌坊
三千年開花三百日結果
你有百花魁我有美高梅
士、巴、罇、叻、歌、喇、厘、約、
前地後地上天下地
急急如律令吧老細
風馳電掣一輛二輛
數碼激光浮磁模擬三輪快車 直頭
格蘭披治過格蘭披治
「呼」一聲 飄過去
行人們記住了
縮腳

Elegy from the Pavement (Macao)

Go salvage a gondola
When the Three Lamps in the City of Water sparkle like crystal
Year by year sinking just that little bit more
Fishermen's nets trap a thousand fish their wharf gone and back again
But fail to contain a
Waterlogged Roman candle
Ding dong ding dong day in day out
Weathering
Who's to say it won't turn into yet another

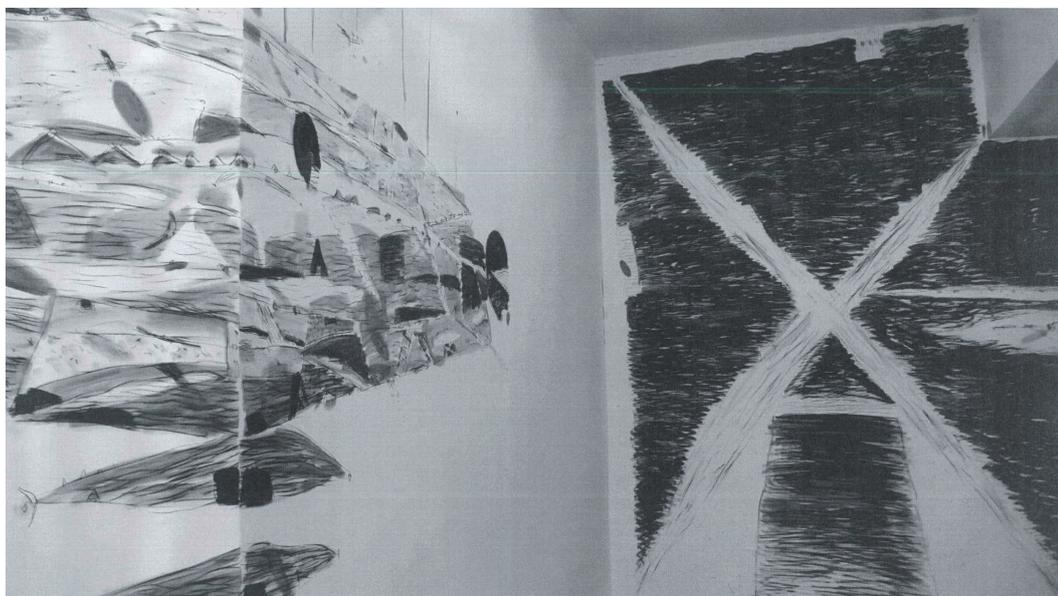
Lisboan facade
Taking three thousand years to bloom and three hundred days to bear fruit
I'll match your preserved peaches with a Wynner's plum
Avenida, estrada, rua, rotunda,
Largo do Doutor, do Almirante, de Saõ,
Hurry up please it's time, boss
Quick as the wind, one after another
Digital laser mag-lev virtual pedicabs
More Formula than Formula One
Whoosh!—flash by
Pedestrians, take heed:
Stand clear!

Falling Asleep

入睡

LIKE CATS in the night, the newspaper trucks come and go silently. It is only when they reverse and unload that we hear their music, a few short electronic notes in sync with neither the temperature nor the humidity in the air. The music is the theme song of a cartoon show from quite a while back. The driver really knows his truck and his route well, and the melody barely has time to unfold before he reaches the unloading spot and turns off the ignition. I recognize the tune. In the village where I used to live there were two dogs. The male was called 'Gatchen', so the female had to be 'Arale'. In human years they would be at least 200 now. The morning papers, bundle by bundle, are thrown onto the concrete pavement in front of the news-stand. Plop. Plop. Plop. Plop—I can hear them clearly even from across the street, five floors up and a window away. The day has reached the point when it is about to come to an end, I say.

I lie down like a starfish (do starfish sleep face up or face down?) and await sleep. Things that I've done or left unfinished for the day float by, one by one, like seaweed. They brush against the starfish's head and body, and are within easy reach of fingers that might, randomly, draw up one or two strands for idle play. My attention wanders, and they drift away. I let them go—they are but gateways to dreams, not worth troubling over. Yet these gateways vary from night to night.



Sometimes they grow wider as the night deepens, and sleep takes a long time to arrive. Then, just as I thought that the night would go to the dogs, I open my eyes to daylight as bright as snow to discover that I have already slept soundly, and awakened later than everyone else.

I gradually come to realize that slumber is still sleep even when lumbered with consciousness. Between sleeping and waking, there is no dividing line so clear that it can be etched in memory. Sometimes, when I thought I was in a deep sleep, the newspaper trucks sound their music and I realise that everything just then was conceived in a state of wakefulness; at other times, when I think I am awake, I seem to hear the sound of my own snoring . . .

What did I do today, and what did I not? The few lines that I added before sunset, charcoal grease pencil meandering on a white plaster wall, gleam with a dark vivacity. They are blacker than charcoal by many decibels; and yet, when you gaze at them for too long, the black and the white become separate. The lines turn unruly, arrogant, and intimidate the whiteness behind them. I put on my rough cotton gloves, moisten the fingertips with a bit of turpentine, and retrace the lines' wandering tracks. The turpentine, along with rubbed-off grains of charcoal, sinks into the plaster, darker near the lines and fainter near the edges. An undertow, neither black nor white, churns slowly atop the shining lines and makes a sound like flowing lava, unceasing.

As I lay thinking of these images, the turpentine has already deposited resin and charcoal particles into the base of the plaster. It has penetrated the depths of the wall and been pulled downward by gravity for a long, long while before slowly, bit by bit, evaporating through the pores of the plaster and returning into the air. Outside the window, bits and pieces of turpentine-evaporation are swimming. Seaweed flows, this way and that, and brushes against my head and body.

Although what is happening in the depths of the wall once made a deafening sound, the person looking at the painting has no way of knowing. Who can hide behind a painting and look the beholder in the eye? As time passes, each finger on the cotton gloves will accumulate different experiences, each with its unique shade of grey; and at that moment, we can command lines of such subtlety that there will be no further need for grease pencils.

During the day, when I crouch before the wall, each moment is one of calculation. This grade of charcoal, plied with that finger, should command this type of line and affect that type of wall. The lava flows slowly past, not stopping for a moment. At night I return alone, bringing back not even a wisp of turpentine. In a room afloat with seaweed and its shadows, I wait quietly,

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my eyes half-closed. It is a long, long while before I get to see that short flash of brilliance. The light comes and goes so fast that it disperses before there is time for reflection. So be it. After all, painting is all about trying, by any means, to rein in the unruly and the elusive.

I stretch my limbs further out, and the seaweed scatters in a 'whoosh' like a school of sardines. I fall asleep, and do not realise that five floors below the newspaper trucks have come and gone.

'Do-do-do-mi-sol-la-sol, sol-la-sol-mi ...'

I should be asleep by now.

