

cosmetic spotlight

STITCHING FROM THE HEART

**DR. WOFFLES WU WEAVES VIRTUES INTO
AESTHETIC MEDICINE**

by Wong Kee Soon // Photos courtesy of David Tan & Mathew Lee

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“When I’m travelling, sitting in first-class and 30,000 miles away from home to some exotic location to talk about my work, I sometimes wish I were the hawker at Maxwell Market, who has a simple grip on life, and is satisfied in a simple way,” exclaims Dr. Woffles Wu. From the complexities of the operating table to the comforts of his family home, Singapore’s top plastic surgeon addresses his maverick status and why he’s still a worrier when it comes to surgery.

As he opens the front gate, he greets you with a warm smile. A kind of smile you won’t expect someone to give you on an early Sunday morning “intrusion” to his family’s four-bedroom bungalow in Bishan. His 1,800 sq ft bungalow is an intricate display of antique furniture, Asian artworks, and long-standing fixtures that seems to be lifted off an old Polaroid.

And it isn’t a surprise that four generations of the Wu family have lived in this house, which is currently occupied by his mother, his 7-year-old son, Wellington, and their maid. Due to space constraints, Dr. Woffles Wu lives just a couple of doors away in a rented house with his wife Juay Yong, who works as a health policy administrator, and Waverly, his three-year-old daughter.

Constantly obliging his kids’ clamouring for attention, Dr. Wu cuts the figure of a devoted father. From participating in mock “superhero” battles with his son, entertaining his daughter’s curiosity about her toy treasure chest to thinking of answers to the questions posed, you began to understand how Dr. Wu has come to juggle between his family, his practice at Camden Medical Centre, innovating new techniques, travelling, writing for medical journals and his constant input into the art scene.

You notice his hair is gelled and combed neatly into his signature side-parting – one that strikes an immediate sense of familiarity garnered from his regular appearances in the mass media for his work. The serious rounded, metallic frames of his spectacles rest firmly on his nose – he admittedly fixed it 20 years ago for a breathing problem – but it’s those pair of eyes that has seen him through countless operations. His bright orange striped shirt is tucked smartly into his white pair of bermes.

After 20 years of unwavering hard work and sacrifice to get to where he is today: one of the top aesthetic surgeons in the world, he projects a self-assured and confident demeanour that is a comfort to any of his patients.

He doesn’t seem to be excited nor jaded about the mention of the big two-zero. Perhaps he hasn’t thought about it or maybe he’s all too familiar with the numbers game since celebrating his 47 years a couple of days before this interview.

This Saint Andrew’s Secondary School alumni was already an accomplished sportsman in his teens. As a national level ten pin bowler who later switched to billiards and snooker, he represented Singapore on the international stage against World Champions like Alex Higgins, Steve Davis, and Jeff Marsh. In his free time, he enjoys the arts, both as audience and practitioner, a recent indulgence being his series of erotic paintings depicting a love story between a Chinese warrior and his mistresses. Even more recently, this film buff made his move into the movie arena by producing Singapore Dreaming, which became the first local film to receive an International Federation of Film Producers Associations (IFFPA)-recognised international feature film award at the San Sebastian International Film Festival. This is a recognition that even film veterans like Eric Khoo and Royston Tan have not received.

For someone who at some point in his life has assumed the role of a writer, painter, sculptor, film producer, public speaker, panelist, consultant, entrepreneur, medical researcher, photographer, sportsman, architecture and interior design connoisseur, it comes as a surprise to learn that he had known since his teens that he would become a plastic surgeon. Midway through his career, he could tell the disproportions of the human face in an instant – a talent that few in his field possess let alone acquire.

But it’s his knowledge, creativity and courage to push the envelope in the field of plastic surgery that has made him much sought after by his peers and his celebrity clientele, who are a well-kept secret.

When under the tutelage of Prof ST Lee during his Plastic Surgical training in 1987, Dr. Wu was already a rebel in the making. “When I first started in this business two decades ago, and when I was in training, I seldom accepted what people thought or what the books said. I always knew that beauty is something that you must go with instinctively. You have to listen to your inner voice to know what’s beautiful and what’s not.

“We go to medical school to learn the basic techniques like cutting bones, sewing skin, and sculpting. But after that, it’s up to my own creativity to see how I use those techniques to modify things to the patient’s benefit. I knew at an early age that I would have to redefine things for myself.”

Modifying and redefining he did.

He was awarded the Young Surgeon’s Award in 1990 on his medical research on Oriental Nasal Anatomy. And in 2002 and 2003 respectively, he pioneered a near scar-less breast augmentation technique named “the WW-Stealth Technique” and more famously, his non-surgical face-lift, the “Woffles Lift”. It uses a self-retaining patented “Woffles Thread” to lift areas of the face, obtaining results similar to what surgery offers and with almost no recovery time. These are just two of the numerous techniques he continues to innovate, bringing the surgical world closer to a surgery-free experience.

He counts Dr. Martin Huang from The Cosmetic Surgery Clinic at Paragon as his best friend of 30 years, one that stretches back to their medical school days at National University of Singapore and early stints at Singapore General Hospital’s plastic surgery unit. But Dr. Wu confesses that when he was younger, things were not so rosy as what many would presume.

“I was always considered a maverick and that made me an outcast in a way because I did things differently so people thought I just wanted to be different, which is not true. I just didn’t think what they did was correct in the first place.

“They were just following the textbooks and each other. They were also following their seniors, taking what they did as gospel and that’s not progress. Progress has to be about analysing results. If the patient doesn’t look natural then what you’re doing is wrong.”

Seeing people in the industry limiting new possibilities and breakthroughs continue to puzzle him even as the industry is changing rapidly to suit patients’ demands.

“A lot of my seniors don’t like to be challenged. If I ask him, ‘Why are you doing it like that? Why can’t we do it in a different way?’ they will say, ‘No, you have to do it this way because I said so and I’m senior, and I know more than you, and in any case, the book says so.’ And I can’t follow this logic.

“And sometimes when I teach around the world even surgeons say, ‘I’m not going to try your ideas. It looks good and you can do it but I don’t think I can do it.’ And I tell them, ‘Maybe you’re not willing to open your mind.’ Everybody wants to be in their comfort zone, so many of the older plastic surgeons all around the world are still doing the same kind of methods for at least 10 years or more because it works for them, patients don’t complain that much, and it doesn’t bother them whether it looks unnatural or not,” asserts Dr. Wu, on his experiences with some his peers.

Eloquent and clear in the points he makes, thanks to his countless participation as a speaker at international conferences and forums since early school days, he comes across more of a philosopher and theorist, applying his visions through the eyes of a plastic surgeon.

When it comes to plastic surgery, he doesn't believe that only Singaporean women are unsatisfied with their physical appearances but women all over the world. And it's all because of our genetic makeup and pre-conditions to want to look good and healthy.

Though the media is commonly to blame for the portrayal of unrealistic-looking facial and body types, Dr. Wu thinks that the media only helps to inform us of the choices that are available to improve upon our desired appearance and it's simply genetics to want to look good, "If we see somebody that's tall, looks good and athletic we instantly think that he has good genes and that in a way indicates to us that he's very good at producing children.

"If you think about it, nobody wants to look bad and everyone wants to look good. People do their hair, buy makeup and clothes in a way of being more attractive and of course this attractiveness leads to meeting people, and setting up a family. It's part of that life cycle if you think about it in a very deep way and not in a superficial way. I think there must be an in-built chip somewhere in each of us that we want to look better."

He acknowledges that times are changing and that plastic surgery is now seen as a positive way to attain social status, even in Singapore. As we pick up the pace from countries like the United States, Japan, Korea and Thailand, he feels that Singapore is "just a couple of years away" from being in that same category.

Though one can think it's a lack of confidence that his patients want plastic surgery, Dr. Wu begs to differ. Instead, it's the other way round.

"People that come in know what they want. It's because they are confident and are willing to undergo procedures. It's not insecurity. It's through their own appreciation of their own body and face and the fact that they can look nicer and better."

However, there were cases of the odd request that he turned down: the girl that wanted alien-like facial features consisting of square eyes, an enlarged head and pointy ears, a short and overweight Indian man who wanted to look identically like Brad Pitt, and a man that wanted to have his penis stitched up unevenly with a lumpy look after getting his circumcision done.

Beauty to him lies in balance and proportion. And good aesthetic surgery is about restoring these proportions to get a certain balance and harmony in the features. One thing he noticed between his Eastern and Western clients is that they want features that belong to the opposite ethnicity, albeit unknowingly. But according to him, the composite face or the Pan-Asian face seems to be the aesthetic ideal.

"Asians want their noses to be smaller and higher whereas Caucasian noses are a little too high and you got to bring it down. Caucasians have very strong chins and they would seldom do a chin implant but Asians have very small chins. Most Asians have nice big lips and they never think about lip enhancements but Caucasians have very thin lips and they want it to be bigger.

"If you think about it, in getting thicker lips we're 'easternizing' the Western face," theorises Dr. Wu who rates actor Takeshi Kaneshiro and Japanese pop star Ayumi Hamasaki as good lookers.

Though having spent the last two decades performing countless treatments (he professes to having done a whopping 700-800 "Waffles Lifts" alone in the last five years), Dr. Wu admits that being complacent is a mistake, "For every surgery, I'm a worrier. I believe that if you think nothing will go wrong, something will go wrong. I'm a perfectionist and an idealist and the result is final. Even if I'm taking a simple mole out, I'll be cutting and stitching it because I want no scar."

While the aesthetics industry is continuously growing along with the popularity of medispas, Dr. Wu has a strong stand on General Practitioners (GP) hopping on to a misperceived gravy train, "I'm one of those who is really against the excessive opening up of this market because I believe that for many of these procedures to be successful, you have to have a surgical perspective and proper surgical training.

"What I hear nowadays is that GPs are going beyond giving Botox and fillers. They're now giving liposuction, breast augmentation, double eyelids, and I think it's just not right. I think the situation is just going crazy in Singapore. Nothing is being done and it's totally unregulated. It's really sad."

With a lack of a stringent watchdog setting up a standard to weed out these malpractices, it might only be a matter of time before the aesthetics industry in Singapore is hit hard.

As a member of the Singapore Association of Plastic Surgeons (SAPS), the Cosmetic Society of Singapore (CSS) and International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS), he explains with a look of growing concern, "Now we not only have GPs but pediatricians and psychiatrists in Singapore that are performing cosmetic surgery. What on earth gave these people the idea that cosmetic surgery is so easy that they can also do it? There isn't a board of standards that keeps all these in track and the government needs to address this problem.

"Medicine is no longer staying within its boundaries and I think that's going to set plastic surgery back because soon accidents are going to happen. We're going to get a lot of botched jobs and hopefully there won't be a death. Once there's a death there will be a clamp down on the whole industry and we're going to go backwards rather than moving forward."

With that in mind, an endless hunt for basement prices and bargains could be a possible reason that the aesthetics industry is inviting the inexperienced to try their hands on it.

Dr. Wu knows that acquiring his services don't come cheap, as he believes that the quality of his results is a testament to what you're paying for. However, it's the "made-in-Singapore-so-it-must-not-be-good" mentality that irks him more than anything else.

"I still get patients that say, 'How come your prices are so expensive? You're only a Singaporean!' But I ask them, 'You don't mind going to the States and pay \$15,000 for procedures?' They'll say that's a US surgeon, whereas I'm just a local surgeon.

"It's a strange thing but these plastic surgeons in the United States are attending my lectures! It's kind of a weird cycle," he muses. He finds it an irony that Singaporeans only recognise him as a famous plastic surgeon but not realising the international impact he has made with his techniques, which he continues to impart to the others in the industry.

Having the kind of demand that's only reserved for pop stars, Dr. Wu has patients around the world willing to fly into Singapore to receive treatments. And it's because of this demand that he has fleeting thoughts of moving his base to a centralized location like London or New York. However, his love for Singapore is keeping him here and his passion to revolutionise the local plastic surgery industry is telling through his ideas.

As the conversation ends, you can't help but feel guilty for taking up more time than you should. However, he reaches out a sincere handshake and a look of appreciation for your time as he rejoins his family.

Honest but sincere, Dr. Waffles Wu is one evidence that there's at least something real in the world of plastic surgery.

WOFFLES WU AESTHETIC SURGERY AND LASER CENTRE IS LOCATED AT SUITE 09-02, CAMDEN MEDICAL CENTRE, 1 ORCHARD BOULEVARD #09-02. FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL 6733 9771.