



Jerry Huang:

From show business to entrepreneurship and more

■ By Bella Zhang

Jerry Huang was in the midst of planning a move to the US last year to enjoy an early retirement when he got an invitation from VIPABC to join the online education company. The renowned singer/songwriter/producer, popular with China's post-1980s generation, couldn't resist the opportunity to explore a new career path. For most celebrities of his stature, working with a company usually means doing product endorsements or making a financial investment. Huang chose a different path – he actually went to work in the company's crowded office in Shanghai's Lujiazui District, expanding the company's English teaching business into a comprehensive online learning platform.

“Even for those who are younger, it’s an opportunity one should grab.”

“It’s a ground-breaking undertaking. Even for those who are younger, it’s an opportunity one should grab,” he says, when explaining his decision.

When Huang began, he worked in a cubicle alongside his staff, sometimes sharing his own workstation with others when there were not enough seats ready for new hires. He is often the first to arrive and the last to leave the office. Many find it hard to believe they are working alongside the hit singer of “Non-stop Sadness” and a former judge of the popular reality television show “China’s Got Talent”. He recalls with a laugh that one colleague even said to him, “You’re *really* working with us now? I thought you were just here in name”.

Huang, the brainchild behind VIPABC’s new live-streaming platform “VLiveShow” which showcases his knack for entrepreneurial ventures, is still exploring the best ways to apply the skills he developed in the entertainment industry to this new corporate career. “People with creative talent are like-minded,” he says. “If they see the same flower, a musician

will write a song about it, a painter will paint it, a photographer will shoot it, and a director will make a movie about it. Though they use different creative techniques, they have the same object in their mind, the same flower.”

He regards his entrepreneurial journey with VIPABC as a kind of creative activity, just like making music. “The only difference is that making music can be a totally independent career, but entrepreneurship requires a team,” he says.

Now as Group Vice President and Chief Platform Officer he heads a team that has transferred teaching materials for all subjects to the online platform, which has already attracted more than 750,000 users.

With his team now comprising 70 members and expected to grow to 100 by year end, VIPABC has taken over two additional floors of office space. Though he now has his own office, Huang believes an entrepreneur should not be overly concerned with corporate trappings. “Sometimes I think we should rent a garage in the suburbs, so we can have something that is deserving of odes and tears after our success,” he jokes.

Back to b-school

To help him hone his management skills, VIPABC enrolled him in the CEIBS-HBS-TSEM Joint Senior Executive Programme which is taught by faculty from CEIBS, Harvard

Business School and the School of Economics and Management at Tsinghua University. It is not Huang’s first foray into management education. He enrolled in the Taiwan University EMBA Programme in 2003, and said he and his classmates felt CEIBS would be their top choice among b-schools on the Chinese mainland. “I had heard about CEIBS for so many years, but never expected that one day I would really become a participant here.”

VIPABC’s two co-founders have already completed the CEIBS Senior Executive Programme, and decided to enrol all their executives as they found it so useful. Huang finds it invaluable, noting that the internet industry has evolved so rapidly over the last decade that the cases he learned during his EMBA studies in Taiwan are now outdated. “We had learned cases about companies like Nokia, and Motorola. They are no longer useful,” he says. “CEIBS teaches us about the most recent internet company developments, and these cases will be absolutely helpful for my work.”

“It’s important to attend this programme. Corporate executives today really need to go back to





“Maybe one of the reasons I have done well is because I am open to taking big risks.”

school on a regular basis, just like the machines in a factory need regular maintenance from time to time,” says Huang, with the authority of an experienced professional manager. “It’s the only way to obtain the latest knowledge and information.”

CEIBS Professor of Marketing Zhou Dongsheng, who is a Faculty Co-Chair of the programme, describes Huang as a diligent student who is always on-time for class, arrives prepared, and proactively shares his views with fellow participants and professors. He says he is a better student than some executives with many years of management experience. “His performance has changed my attitude towards showbiz celebrities,” says Prof Zhou. “Jerry Huang is a very thoughtful and, in general, just as excellent person.” Huang is humble in responding to the praise. “Maybe because I am famous, people give me more attention,” he says with a smile.

It may surprise many of his fans to learn that a music career had not been Huang’s childhood dream; he went down that path somewhat by happenstance. He had always been

a straight-A student in school. His excellent grades enabled him to easily earn a place at Taiwan University. He showed a talent for literature in high school and his teachers expected that would be his major in college, but he ended up studying atmospheric sciences instead. During his sophomore year he began to get bored with student life and started composing songs, taking photos, and writing poems and novels. Two of his songs won school-wide contests. It was the heyday of the music industry in Taiwan, and soon he was scouted by an entertainment company who wanted to sign him.

“Actually, deciding to make music at that time was more unexpected than me joining a company today, because I had never imagined that,” he says. “That opportunity fell into my lap, and I was willing to begin an adventure.”

During his senior year, as Huang was preparing his first album, his classmates were preparing for postgraduate entrance exams or serving in the army before going to study overseas. If that album had sold badly, he would have had few choices. “I still break out in a cold sweat whenever I think about

it,” Huang says. Fortunately the album turned out to be a hit, and his music career quickly began to thrive.

“Of course, good timing counts for a lot. Our lives are shaped by the trends of the times. If at that time, the music industry was not prosperous, it would not have worked out, even if I were a genius,” he says. “Since I happened to be riding that trend, I was willing to give it a shot.”

“It’s also because of my good luck. If the first album failed to sell, I would have had a totally different kind of life. One has many challenges in life. To overcome them, one needs luck and also grit. Looking back on my life experience, maybe one of the reasons I have done well is because I am open to taking big risks and don’t worry too much about it,” Huang says.

This spirit of adventure has served him well throughout his life. After spending many years on the stage, Huang’s first foray in the executive suite was working for a record company as a music director. When the internet industry began taking off in 2000 he started an internet







“Only those who have worked in the creative industry can understand the value of copyrights.”

television company. As singing talent shows became increasingly popular, Huang was invited to be a judge on the “Singing Voice Warfare” Programme in 2005. The programme became popular overnight, which helped him enter the Chinese mainland market. He has also produced music for many other popular Chinese musicians. With careers in so many different media circles, Huang has dubbed himself “Huang Bajie” – in Chinese bajie means eight circles. The nickname is also a play on the name of the human/pig character Zhu Bajie in the classic Chinese tale Journey to the West.

Though it seems his career has taken him away from the music industry, music remains a part of his life. “Music is the most beautiful career in my life. Everything I have now came from music,” he says. “From the release of my first song and first album until now, I have been and will always be grateful for my life in music. Every step I take today is closely related to music.”

Huang is glad that China’s culture and

creative industries are being recognised for their importance, though he wishes the music copyright system were more stringent. “Only those who have worked in the creative industry can understand the value of copyrights,” he says. “Artists’ earnings depend not only on the artists but also on the whole society’s awareness of copyrights. It’s not a problem that can be solved by one person, it will take time.”

He also believes the creative industry needs to do more to ensure its stature. “It remains to be seen if [its current recognition] is because the industry is really that valuable, or just because the capital market regards it as a new field to make money,” he says. “Some investors entered the industry with the purpose of running a real estate business by building cultural and creative industrial parks. It’s a waste of the real value of this industry.”

“Our ‘VLiveShow’ has invited many teachers and students from the Shanghai Theatre Academy to be lecturers. I hope this platform can

help them enrol more students, to promote the importance of the arts. This is also part of [building] culture and creativity,” Huang says. He hopes that today, when everyone is talking about promoting culture and creative activities, the industry’s real value will be seen. This is bound to give artists more opportunities to showcase and benefit from their talent.

“I will master math and physics and in the future win a Nobel Prize / My English must also be fluent enough to shock you / I will read more about philosophy, history, sociology, economics, politics, law, psychology, medicine, education / Only in this way can I criticise people on the television.” These are lyrics from Jerry Huang’s “A Teenager’s Rhapsody”. The words may be light-hearted, but he has always believed in the meaning behind them. Though the young music prodigy is now middle-aged, his curiosity about the world has never changed. He is still travelling on a journey through life, continuing to be fearless about beginning new adventures.