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The Life of

Tang Da Wu

— Chng Seok Tin
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The Life of Tang Da Wu

Returning Art to the People – Avant-garde Artist Tang Da Wu: Protecting the Earth, Returning to Nature

— Chng Seok Tin

Transcribed by Verztec Consulting

Editor’s note: Chng Seok Tin is a Singaporean artist who also studied in London in the 1970s. She originally wrote this article in Mandarin in 1999 for local magazine Equatorial Wind when Tang Da Wu was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize.

In 1970, a young, free-spirited Tang Da Wu set off for Great Britain with a heart full of hope and aspiration. His exploration of visual arts would begin at the Birmingham Polytechnic School of Fine Arts. This was the start of a journey with no return – art would become his life. After Birmingham, he headed for London where he studied at the Middlesex Polytechnic and Hornsey College of Art, followed by the renowned Goldsmiths College of Art. Tang gained considerable exposure to visual arts through organising seminars and workshops, and obtained his Master’s Degree in 1985.

London, the city of fog known for its misty days, had a profound impact on Tang. Perhaps that is why he changed his name to Da Wu (literally translated as ‘Great Fog’ in Mandarin)! The capital is also an international city for the arts, making it a perfect platform for artists to showcase their talents. Despite that, the mid-sized, pockmarked Tang, with his rich, blooming voice and large, talented hands, decided to head back to his home in Singapore. More familiar lands and voices were calling out to him. In 1988, he returned with his British wife Hazel McIntosh and son Ben Zai, and took up a teaching position in LASALLE College of the Arts. Back then, farm houses still existed in Singapore, so he rented a piece of land with a few zinc-roofed sheds at Lorong Gambas in Ulu Sembawang and settled there. Once he began his fascinating journey in the arts, he attracted many young, enthusiastic artists who would go to his home to make art together. In 1989, they named the space The Artists Village. This new art community, mainly comprising young artists, brought a breath of fresh air to the stale art scene in Singapore. Various art forms such as land art, installation art, performance art, photography and multi-media art started becoming popular in the community, marking a new chapter in the art history of Singapore. At the forefront of this was Tang who, despite nearing his fifties, was full of vigour and drive. He led a group of young and enthusiastic artists such as Amanda Heng, Tang Mun Kit, Wong Shih Yaw, Vincent Leow, Zai Kuning, Lee Wen, and more. They did not hesitate to bring art down from its ‘high altar’ in order to reach out to people and share it with them. Perhaps it would take some time for the masses to be able to accept these new concepts, but the artists sowed the seeds anyway and waited for their efforts to bear fruit. From the development of The Artists Village to Hong Bee Warehouse, and from the Singapore Art Museum to Orchard Road, they turned any site into a stage to showcase their artistic talents and unrelenting vitality. They would hold events every few months. Tang alone put up more than twenty performance art events and workshops between 1989 and 1999.

Some of these, such as the Tapioca Friendship Project, North-East Monsoon, The Story of Rubber and Tin and Under a Banana Leaf, received an overwhelming response locally, and he was also able to present them...
in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Japan. Tang not only combined art with life, he also integrated the educational aspects of art. He felt that art was neither a decoration nor a commodity; it should not be for leisure nor a means to vent one’s emotions. Tang’s distinctive approach got people to re-think art’s position in their lives. He did not consider his performances and activities as art, he simply found them fun and interesting, something that could be enjoyed together with many people. However, it was precisely because he did not intentionally make art that his works had such an influence. This is what Lao Tzu meant by ‘action through inaction’. It is not something that can be achieved by any regular artist. Real art sparks from the depths of one’s soul, and what is forced can only be regarded as fake art. Tang also did not think that what he was doing stemmed from a strong sense of mission for or responsibility to society. Nevertheless, the artist’s genuine care and concern for the community influenced all aspects of his work. Fang Xi Feng, a reporter from the China Women’s News and an outsider to the art world, said of Tang’s work: “He returned art to the people. He knows that sharing brings more joy than to enjoy something by oneself. As such, he wants everyone to share in his joy for art. He has influenced even those who know nothing about art. This is indeed art in its highest form. It may appear low but it is, in fact, high. In his pursuit of art, he has returned to its most basic principles.” The great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said: “To respect those who are mistreated and to love those who are low and despondent are the most important tasks of an artist or anyone with character.” (Taken from Maxims and Reflections.) Tang’s improvised performances and silent protests achieved this.

Performance art is Tang’s love. He is not in pursuit of art’s perfection. Since life is full of imperfections, how could art, which reflects life, be perfect? He loves performance art because he can come face-to-face with his audiences. He is able to interact and communicate with them sincerely. Tang said: “When I perform, I carry out many actions and hold conversations, and the reactions from audiences are real. Sometimes I may be rash and say or do things that would embarrass myself, but I like such moments too because they are real. This is why I like performance art.” It was his sincerity, his relentless pursuit of performance art, his spearheading of the movement and his concerns for the earth, culture and mankind’s future that made Tang such a prominent figure in the art circle in Southeast Asia and Asia. This is why he was awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize in Japan in 1999. He refuses to use terms like “recognition” because he feels that his art does not need any form of recognition from the Japanese or anyone else for that matter. The only person who can validate an artist’s work is the artist himself. The award was an inspiration for many of his admirers and followers. As long as one possesses depth, essence and their own distinctive style, real art will not stay buried for long. One day, they will shine and be appreciated like treasure from sifted sand.

**Tapioca Friendship Project – One Root, One Human Race**

One of Tang Da Wu’s most talked about projects is the Tapioca Friendship Project. In 1995, during the 50th anniversary of Japan’s surrender and the end of World War II, Tang placed a large bunch of tapioca leaves on a table full of offerings before the Civilian War Memorial. A middle-aged lady saw what he did and said to him: “That is very thoughtful of you.” Tang did a performance that same morning. He took a red plastic pail and some red linen and spread them out before the monument. The red cloth represented the military flag of the invaders back then. Tang wished for them to apologise to the people who died as a result of their actions. In the same year, he was awarded the Excellent Artist Prize by the Japanese Chamber
of Commerce and Industry in Singapore. During the prize presentation ceremony held at the Hotel New Otani, he covered the round dining table with a piece of red cloth and placed a big plate of steamed tapioca in the middle. (Fig. 1) When he went on stage to receive his award, he spoke about how both the Japanese yam and the local tapioca were roots, and that all human beings share the same roots, appealing for everyone to get along peacefully. After receiving the award, Tang acted as a waiter and served every guest with a plate of steaming hot tapioca. The following year, he was invited to make a stone sculpture for the Osaka International Peace Centre in Japan. He made two objects, each representing yin and yang: the yang element took the shape of a bunch of tapiocas, while the yin element looked like an indented and eroticised tapioca. Tang named the work One Root, One Human Race.

Subsequently, Tang was invited to the nuclear-devastated Hiroshima, where he erected a large sculpture on top of a hill near the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. One Hand Prayer was three metres tall and two metres wide, and was hand-made from five centimetres-thick metal sheets. He asked the local women to place their painted hands on some metal sheets as they made their wishes for peace. He then collected thousands of such hand prints and merged them into an average-sized hand print. This was enlarged and printed onto the metal sheet, which he cut out to form a giant hand. He then erected the giant hand and used the rest of the metal to form its base, creating a symbolic praying sculpture. (Fig. 2) This giant hand embodied the power of women, which he hoped would be able to alleviate the horrors of war, typically initiated by men. Tang had hoped to produce another such hand in Singapore to achieve the effect of two hands in prayer. He said that it would take the efforts of many people to pray for peace, and that he had yet to find an opportunity to make the second hand.

After returning from Japan, Tang organised tapioca-related workshops to share its history with the next generation so that they would understand the hardship that their ancestors faced during the Japanese Occupation. He hoped that they would learn to appreciate this staple food that millions of people relied on during the three-years-and-eight-months-long Japanese Occupation in Singapore. Most children in Singapore have only heard of tapioca flour and tapioca cakes, but few have actually seen the tapioca itself. He got the children to do some research in the library about the war and to ask their grandparents to tell them stories about the Japanese Occupation.

Tang got his students to feel the tapioca, steam them and eat them. They made carvings on the surface of raw tapioca and painted them to produce prints. The action of printing patterns was similar to the way the Japanese stamped seals on both human bodies and identification papers as part of the Great Inspection during the Japanese Occupation. In sixty of such prints shown at The Substation, we could see that the children had developed a sense of disdain and disgust towards war and invaders. They carved words like “die”, “kill”, “soldiers” and “Japan” onto their tapiocas. Some used blood-red paint while others had skulls and crossbones in their prints. At the same time, there were also drawings with the word “love” as well as hearts and flowers. Of course, Tang did not conduct these events to encourage hatred for the Japanese. He said: “I question whether we should continue hating the Japanese. Fifty years from today, can we overcome this hatred? We have managed to dispel some of these feelings through these workshops. Of course, we cannot change history. We have sent out many requests for the Japanese to admit that they committed a crime by invading us. History cannot be forgotten, but hate can be dispelled.” He brought a large amount of tapioca to Yamashita High School in Osaka, Japan and carried out similar activities there. (Yamashita was the chief war
criminal back then, so there was some significance for Tang’s choice of the school. He invited the students to bring along all sorts of root vegetables such as lotus roots, Japanese gobo and carrots. Everybody conversed as they ate and made prints. He said: “I wanted to tell everyone that there are many types of roots, but the roots are all the same. There is only one kind of people – the human race. There is no difference in race, colour or region. On the two tapioca-shaped stone sculptures that I made in Nanao in Osaka, I engraved the words ‘There is only one type of root, just as there is only one type of human.’ It is because we differentiate each other by race that we hate and kill one another. There will be never be peace if we continue like this.” It appears that Tang hoped to use art to resolve the hatred between mankind, but can his kind-hearted wish ever be realised? […]

Don’t Give Money to the Arts

Another one of Tang’s much discussed performances is Don’t Give Money to the Arts. In 1995, he wore a suit embroidered with the words “DON’T GIVE MONEY TO THE ARTS” to the opening ceremony of ART ’95, an event organised by the National Arts Council. What he did next shocked everyone: he handed a letter to then President Ong Teng Cheong, who was presiding over the opening ceremony. (Fig. 3) What? Do not give artists money? Do not sponsor the arts? He, too, was involved in the arts, so what exactly was this man up to? When the news broke, it had everyone talking. No one knew what his intention was. The answer is, in fact, rather simple. He wanted to convey a message to the President and the public: “I am an artist, I am important.” He did not proclaim: “I am an important Artist.” The former statement related to all who worked in the arts, while the latter sought to draw attention to oneself. He did not say “Please give money to the arts” as that would be too clichéd and blunt, with the possibility of incurring negative reactions. “Don’t give money to the arts”, however, was a powerful statement that made people stop to think. If not money, what could be given? Love, care, encouragement, space, support and so on. He wanted to let the country’s leaders understand that the arts were important. Artists are not just people who decorate or entertain; they are an indispensable part of nation-building. No matter how technologically advanced or prosperous a country might be, a country without cultural depth cannot be considered a developed country. This is why artists are important, and must be given support and encouragement.

Taking Soil into the Museum

Tang places emphasis on learning over appreciation when it comes to art. To him art-making is, in itself, a learning process. He does not like to work in isolation and is not interested in ‘high art’, which he considers to be out of touch with reality. When Tang returned from London in 1979, he boldly created the Earth Work series in Sembawang on a site that was slated for redevelopment. The trees had been chopped down and rain had washed the earth into canals of muddy gullies. Tang cut a few pieces of long white cloth and hung them in these gullies. He then made some marks on the cloth to record the depth of these trenches. Over the next few days, the linen pieces were marked and soiled by rain and other natural elements, creating interesting abstract patterns in various shades of black and ochre. These patterns reflected the changes in the gullies too. Tang also slapped mud onto a number of wooden planks and drew circles on them using black ink. These were then left to dry in the hot sun, causing cracks to form on the dried mud, which also ruptured the circles. On another set of mudded
wooden planks, he drew circles using waterproof paint before rinsing them off with water. As a result, the mud that was not protected by the paint was washed off, symbolising the natural destruction of soil when not protected by plants. Subsequently, these works were brought to the National Museum Art Gallery to be exhibited. (Fig. 4) Earth Work was an unprecedented move that was bold and original. Although he tried to communicate through the media that the exhibition’s objective was to let audiences understand that art was produced for learning more than its own appreciation, this sort of exhibition was, for most audiences, difficult to understand and accept. The organiser, under pressure from various parties, decided to close his exhibition, only to reopen it at his insistent protests. Subsequently, these artworks were moved to the now-defunct Sin Chew Jit Poh Exhibition Centre where they were fully displayed as he intended them to be. [...] 

Taking a Stand Against Serving Endangered Animals in Chinese Restaurants

Hermann Hesse, a great modern philosopher from Germany, once said: “Art begins with love. The entire value and realm of the work depends on the power of an artist’s love.” (Taken from the chapter “Art and Artists” in Hesse’s Quotes.) The reason why Tang’s art has such a profound impact on us is precisely because his art stems from love. He sympathises with the suffering of animals, especially those that have become endangered due to the greed of mankind. I have witnessed, with my ears, a few of his performance art works at the National Museum Art Gallery. I heard the final cry of a dying rhinoceros as it lay on the ground. The hundreds of bottles placed around it were not bottles of the popular ‘cooling water’ made from rhinoceros horns, but bottles of its blood instead. (Fig. 5) The artist then transformed into a skinless lizard, struggling as it exhaled its last breath. Due to the superstitious belief that lizard’s meat could cure asthma, the lizard became sought after by many. Also, because it was believed that the penis of a tiger could boost one’s virility and that its skin and bones were beneficial to health, we started to see the tiger population in the wild dwindling. Such is the selfishness, ignorance and cruelty of mankind! The artist used steel wire and white linen to create many life-sized tigers that appeared to be roaring and struggling. However, despite the many efforts, the tigers could not escape their fate of extinction.

One year, on Mother’s Day, Tang did a thought-provoking performance at The Substation’s garden. He gathered a lot of information on birds’ nests and told audiences about how the mother swift uses her saliva to build a nest for her young. Needless to say, a lot of saliva goes into making a single nest. Along comes mankind, who takes away these nests in large quantities to fulfil their selfish desire for health and beauty, robbing the chicks of their homes even before their feathers are fully grown. Consequently, the poor mother swift has to continue to produce more saliva to build a new nest, to the point where she spits blood and dies. These blood-tainted nests, in turn, are regarded as the most nutritious and are sold as prized tonics. The most ironic thing to come out of this unfortunate situation was the marketing messages rehearsed by retailers, who claimed that the best gifts for our mothers on Mother’s Day were birds’ nests, especially the blood-stained ones.

With similar concerns for other animals, Tang also pleaded against the excessive hunting of whales. He created a huge whale out of metallic netting and hung many used rolls of film on it. He wanted to address how whales were hunted to produce gelatin, which is used as a photo-sensitive agent in photographic films. Tang proclaimed that we should not be wasting
our film unnecessarily. In addition, the collagen of some whales could be used to make perfumes, making them an even more hunted animal. The tail of his whale sculpture was put on display with piles of empty film canisters surrounding it during the 1996 Singapore Arts Festival on the Art Bus by The Artists Village, and drew a lot of attention.

In 1991, Tang presented the exhibition Chinese Restaurant at the National Museum Art Gallery. Taking on the role of a waiter, Tang served his customers a table full of scrumptious dishes, including bear paws, monkey brains, deer noses, whale penises, wild boars and civet cats. There was so much food that one felt full just looking at it. Indeed, the intention of the artist was unmistakable and his painstaking efforts moved everyone.

A Heart for the Less Fortunate – from Selling Handicap to Life Boat

In 1989, when Tang and his family were living in a wooden house in Sembawang where he was also teaching and making art, he would also plant vegetables and take care of his geese to pass time. He had a total of six geese—all gifts from the landlord—which he grew very fond of. He became good friends with these geese and learned how to communicate with them. Tang’s friend, Koh Nguang How, once shared how attached Tang was to his geese. When one of them died for no known reason, Tang gave it a proper burial, during which its partner cried out loudly in grief. The other geese also waddled over to grieve for their dead brother, faces solemn, not unlike human beings. This touched him greatly and his feelings were reflected in Tang’s performance, Gooseman, during which he danced with the geese; in that moment, man and goose were one.

Through his performances, Tang also criticised the way art was judged locally, and questioned isolated incidents including one where a Filipino domestic worker leaped to her death, and another where a boy hung himself in an attempt to imitate Superman. In 1989, he did a performance called Selling Handicap at The Artists Village. It was about a very hardworking artist who, try as he might, could not sell a single work. However, he was in an unfortunate accident which severed his hands and legs so he had no choice but to start painting with his mouth. An agent saw his works and thought they would sell, so he marketed the pieces using the artist’s disability as a selling point and people swarmed to buy his work. The artist lamented: “If I knew that my paintings would sell better when I’m disabled, I would have gladly become disabled earlier!” Such was the plight of an artist’s life.

In 1991, Tang performed a comedy called Four Men in a Suit with three other friends and had a lot of fun in the process. The four men put on suits of the same style and colour, and were joined to each other by their sleeves and pants. Stuck together, they took to the streets, starting from the National Museum Art Gallery and going past the McDonald’s outlet at the YMCA to Dhoby Ghaut MRT station. They could not take the train, so they went on the bus. When someone had a loose shoelace that needed tying, everyone had to bend down as well. They could only function as a group; there was no such thing as individuality. Most interesting were the reactions they received from the pedestrians and passengers around them. Some stared in awe, some had expressions of shock, while others derided them as mad men or said they had nothing better to do. Tang explained that all he wanted to experience was how four people would live together, to the point of using public amenities.

In April 1989, Tang’s Life Boat, presented outside Orchard Point, expressed his sympathy and care for the Vietnamese refugees. During that period, many Vietnamese took to the sea to escape the political unrest and chaos in their country, hoping to find refuge in neighbouring countries. Some were lucky to be able to escape to Singapore’s seas, where they were
rescued and put into refugee camps. Although they managed to survive the wrath of the raging seas, they were faced with the uncertainties of their future. What could they do? Where should they go? With heartfelt sympathy for these refugees, Tang spoke out for them. During the day, he would draw a spiral shape on the ground and ask audiences to fold paper boats, which they would push towards the centre of the spiral, suggesting that the refugees were led to safe harbour. When night came, he would ask audiences to light a candle on each of these paper boats and to spread the boats out, symbolising hope for the refugees.

Another impressive performance that Tang did was Just in Case, presented at the National Museum Art Gallery in 1991. He brought with him a case with two air vents used in Myanmar to transport animals. He took a torchlight, flashed it through one of the vents and invited the audience to peep through the other hole. They saw a single word, “Just”, written on the bottom of the case. The effect was stunning. It reminded me of democratic warrior Aung San Suu Kyi, who was put under house arrest for years. The artist expressed his ideas in such a simple manner, one that was surely more effective than a thousand words. What a touching and astounding work!

An Award Well-Deserved: The Concept of Democracy

The English philosopher Bertrand Russell once said in his autobiography: “Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.” (Taken from Bertrand Russell’s book Has Man a Future?)

Of course, I have no intention of comparing Tang to Russell. I just feel that the three life passions mentioned by Russell seem to be what Tang has been pursuing in recent years, intentionally or otherwise. He is a sensual person, and has an elegant and able companion by his side to share his ups and downs in life. His wife Hazel, a charming, gentle and capable lady, is also an artist. However, it is not easy being the wife of an artist. At one point in time, Tang was so engrossed in his work that he spent most of his time at The Artists Village and neglected his wife. She was disheartened and flew back to London with their son. However, Tang’s love for his wife and only son did not diminish. He especially missed his only son Ben Zai, and would try to take time off to fly to London to spend time with his family. The avant-garde artist did not have any airs about him. He is easy going, generous and always ready to lend a helping hand. In 1975, it was owing to his help that I was able to fulfil my wish of studying art in London. We did not know each other then, and what happened since then is yet another story. Tang had great interest in things we normally do not take notice of, such as tapiocas, bananas, rubber, tin, water and mud. He would do intense research on them to fulfil his curiosity. They were the source of his inspiration.

Tang’s works reflect his disdain for power, and his sympathy and concern for the weak and oppressed (including animals). He did not give in to the hegemony of the art world either. As Hermann Hesse said: “Any true artist knows how to protect himself from society’s pressures and norms. This ability to let go requires the spirit and courage of the ascetic monk; this is extremely valuable!” (Taken from the chapter “Art and Artists” in Hesse’s Quotes). Tang’s unique approach to art is the path that he decided to embark on after finding his way through the fog. He hangs on to his own beliefs without being swayed by societal pressures and norms. Although he was mocked and appeared to be ‘lacking’ in the material aspects in life, his spiritual world was a rich and fulfilling one. All his hard work and effort did
not come to naught for he was given due recognition for his work. Speaking at a press conference held at The Substation, Tang said that he could not believe his ears when he received the phone call from the organisers in Fukuoka. He thought that the many distinguished artists in the region, such as those from Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, deserved an award more than him. He expressed his gratitude to the nominators and the organisers, and felt that the award was a huge encouragement and support for him, giving him the confidence to continue his practice.

Tang gave a heartfelt speech during the press conference. He stressed that he was a strong believer of democracy, and that it is only with democracy that art and culture can grow. Taking India as an example, he said that it was their democratic environment that allowed Indian culture to bloom. To him, democracy is not something that only politicians should be worrying about, but every citizen can do their part in making democracy a reality in their own country. In a democratic society, personal freedom and space for development will grow. Although freedom and democracy has sometimes been abused, he believes that it will make our world a better place and that its protection is the responsibility of one and all. Tang believes that artists, writers, philosophers, critics and anyone with a conscience can play a part in democracy. Only in a democratic environment can the ideologies of literature, the arts and all humanities flourish. When he discussed the challenges performance artists face in Singapore, he addressed the tremendous effort artists have to put in just to secure a suitable space for performance and exhibitions. He hoped that the authorities would consider allocating bigger spaces for performance art as well as other art forms.

It was his passion for performance art as well as his courage and spirit that made Tang well-deserving of the award. Mr Murakami Hiroshi, Council Chief of the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize said: “Tang Da Wu is an exemplary modern artist in Southeast Asia. The series of cultural activities that he spearheaded in Singapore in the eighties and nineties has made him an influential voice in the Southeast Asian arts and cultural circle. As a form of recognition for his extraordinary contribution, the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize Council decided to award him with the Arts and Culture Prize.” Other prize winners included Grand Prize winner, Taiwanese movie director Hou Hsiao Hsien, as well as Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong and Japanese historian Obayashi Taryo, who both won the Academic Prize. The Artistic Director of The Substation T Sasitharan was visibly excited at the press conference. He said: “Today is an important day in the history of art in Singapore. It is one where we rejoice. We can finally take a breather and congratulate our fellow countryman for his great achievements. Finally, all his toils and sacrifices have been recognised. Tang’s receipt of this award is proof that any sincere artist and art form that can directly express the voices of the people cannot be suppressed for too long. Good art will one day be appreciated by all.” All that had been said were indeed fitting reviews of Tang’s artistic contributions.

Chng Seok Tin was born in 1946 in Singapore. She holds two Masters degrees from the New Mexico State University and the University of Iowa in USA, majoring in printmaking. In 2005, Chng was recipient of the Cultural Medallion. She is also an established writer and was given the Singapore Chinese Literary Award in 2007 by the Singapore Literature Society.
End Notes


