Chua Soo Pong: As He Is

In the autumn of 1976, I met Soo Pong (蔡曙鹏) by chance in London while travelling in Europe with my wife. The joy of being able to meet a friend abroad was indescribable.

While in London, my main activities were visiting museums, art galleries and bookstores by day, and going to the opera, ballet and concerts by night. I could manage the former on my own, but had to depend on Soo Pong to arrange the latter. There were so many programmes that we hardly missed a night of entertainment. We attended performances by the Polish National Dance Troupe, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the London Symphony Orchestra; we caught Mozart's The Magic Flute, Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake, and the musical Oh! Calcutta!, among other shows. Incredibly, Soo Pong was always able to get hold of tickets on the day of the performance; moreover, these were always the best seats at the most affordable prices. Once, he was unable to join us for Beethoven's Eroica because of his academic work. Thus, he sent us to the Royal Albert Hall and left after showing us the way home. Little did we expect that when the performance ended at midnight, he would be waiting for us at the entrance, in the chilly autumn wind. He had specially gone to fetch us home as he was worried that we would lose our way. Such sincere friendship is deeply touching! Later, when we returned to London after our trip to Spain, he helped us find accommodation to replace the hotel room that the travel agency had booked for us. The cost of one night's stay at the hotel could have paid for two weeks' rent at the boarding house. In working so hard for the economy of others, Soo Pong displayed a spirit that is hard for us to ever forget.

One moonlit night, Soo Pong had us and a few friends from the art circle over to his apartment for dinner. Although he was busy with his academic work, he still found time to cook, displaying his culinary skills. His dishes were cooked in various ways, from steaming and stir-frying to stewing and deep-frying, while the food — fish, prawns, chicken and duck — looked and smelled as good as it tasted. Indeed, Soo Pong's cooking was comparable to that of Chinese restaurants in the Soho district. We were really surprised. Everyone sat on the floor and chatted freely, displaying a passion and forthrightness that is characteristic of young men. I felt as if I was suddenly ten years younger. Just as I revelled in this atmosphere, a cup of fresh tea in hand, I was suddenly attracted to the piles of books and magazines scattered all over the room. At one glance, I could tell that most of the books were about the arts. They were also more disorderly than the other books, a telling sign that they were frequently flipped through. There was a large number of files containing many special publications relating to art activities, such as operas, ballet, music and others, as well as concert programmes, newspaper cuttings of reviews and photographs of celebrities. These signified Soo Pong’s interest in and seriousness towards his field of study.

I have read many of Soo Pong’s great essays and feel that his writing is fluent and tightly structured. Most importantly, they are devoid of empty talk, thus leaving one with a deep impression. One hardly knows the reason or where to begin to understand why his writing is so animated. However, once you step into his trove of treasures, you will realise that behind his writing is a wealth of resources. It is no wonder that he writes such good articles! Just like any self-motivated individual who desires an in-depth understanding of a certain issue, Soo Pong specially visits the people concerned, such as actors and directors, and talks to them face to face. Thereafter, when he begins to write, factual and lively articles start to appear.

Soo Pong read geography at the University of London, the same subject he had previously read at Nanyang University. Yet, he chose to read anthropology at Ireland's Belfast University. Although these courses seem different, they are, in essence, closely related. Soo Pong's philosophy of study has always been like a pyramid: it is buttressed by a broad foundation and a lofty target. Thus, his achievements for any subject of study have always been outstanding. He has already been conferred a master's and a doctorate degree. The Development of Traditional Chinese Dance in Singapore in the Last Thirty Years is the title of his doctoral thesis.

To put his theory into practice, Soo Pong has organised theatre groups and directed and performed on stage. When overseas, he would give talks which promote Oriental dance and opera to a Western audience. Thus, whether in academia or daily living, he can be regarded as a young man of many talents.
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The Eleventh National Day Art Exhibition

1969 was the year that art in Singapore took a turn for the better. To celebrate National Day, the Ministry of Culture collaborated with various fine arts organisations to organise a national fine art exhibition. First, this served to showcase our local artistic talents to the world, letting them know that this tiny country is ready to shine. Second, it also showed genuine cooperation between the government and its people in the joint promotion of art. As an aside, this exhibition also helped the entire community of artists to realise their unity. Owing to the overwhelming response to and incessant compliments from that exhibition, the National Day Art Exhibition has been held annually since then.

The rise and fall of a country’s culture and the quality of its character are usually related to its artistic standards and its people’s ability to appreciate art. There is no lack of examples in history to prove this. No one would dare disagree that art is the spirit and soul of a country’s people.

It is generally thought that commercial prosperity and economic progress make for an affluent and happy society. That is but one side of the story, one that represents only material gains. A society is only complete when the other side of the story — its culture and spirit — is addressed. This is achieved through abundant artistic creation and a passionate love for beauty.

Singapore is a multi-racial country. If the various diverse cultures are not integrated, creating a unique artistic style for our country would be an extremely difficult task. It may take several decades, centuries even, before one can smell the blossoms and taste the fruits of success. However, in aggregating the works of various ethnic groups and factions, the National Day Art Exhibition is a good start in this direction.

In the creation of art, different schools have different insights. Generally, however, it is undisputed that imagery is subordinate to spirit and intelligence, and that technique arises from awareness. If one desires to reach a higher realm and to display a vivid character in one’s works, one must engage in deep learning and cultivation, and keep an open mind. If one is also endowed with the spirit of the times and the traits of one’s locality, one would be able to reach the peak of perfection. Although no miracles have

ENDNOTES

1 The book referred to here is most likely Chua Soo Pong’s 《世界艺坛巡礼》 (A Survey of the Global Art Scene), which was published in July 1980.