

In Search of Tong King-sum

Lam Laam, Jaffa

The temperature has dropped dramatically recently*, which reminded me of 29 February 2008, a day when I was assaulted by the news of Tong King-sum's death. "He faced all difficulties with immeasurable persistence and optimism, treating all hardships as interesting episodes of life. He always compared life to a play, that no matter whether you are happy, angry, sad or overwhelmed with joy, every episode has its own attractiveness. Now, his life play has almost come to its curtain call. He enjoyed a fun and vibrant life, so for friends who are attending his funeral, please bid farewell to him in your favourite attire." This short obituary by his widow summarized the bountiful life that Tong had led, not overly sensational but enough to move its readers. The tremor embraced in calm composure just happened to demonstrate how much Chiu Wai-ye, partner of Tong King-sum for over sixteen years, had understood the artist.

We all dressed up for the memorial service. From the signatures on the funeral wreaths, I was amazed by the large number of friends that Tong King-sum had, including renowned visual artists, friends from the commercial circle as well as government bodies. Only at the memorial service did I learn that Tong, who seldom stuck to established practices, was once a civil servant. And among his works, apart from the steady wooden sculptures that are usually seen, there were also playful texts and humorous comics. Stunned, as

I was, I could not help blaming myself for my lack of understanding about my superior, and that I had only begun the research on him now.

I met Tong King-sum in 2004, when he invited me to take part in the "Concepts in Wood: Contemporary Hong Kong Wood Sculpture" exhibition held at the University Museum and Art Gallery of The University of Hong Kong. Before that, we had met at the Luk Yu Tea House while we were both students of Cheung Yee¹. As it was very noisy in the teahouse and we usually went there in a crowd, Tong and I only chatted very briefly. Although I became a student of Cheung thirty years after Tong, he invited me to join this exhibition without any hesitation when he knew I worked in woodcarving. I guessed it was our teacher's eyes he trusted. All these years, I was able to address him as "Ah Tong" light-heartedly, because our teacher allowed equal relationships between all his students despite their seniority, and because of Tong's selfless personality, with which the artist spread the seeds of his artistic creation.

I always heard senior artists say, "art is living; to live is an art," and "to absorb nutrients for creating artworks in everyday life." Yet in real life, these sayings are too abstract to comprehend. Tong King-sum never liked to apply art theories to his works. Based on the bonds between people, this article attempts to explore in a straightforward way how the artist integrated the two by depicting anecdotes

in Tong's life and creations, through recollection of visits to his former residence, dialogues with Tong, his wife (Chiu Wai-yee) and close students, as well as combining the accounts of his close friends.

Learn from Doing

To write this article, I revisited the artistic journey of Tong, and realized that he was not an ordinary student that could be trained in routine art schools. His creativity was inseparable from his life. "Learn from doing" was the right description for him², because "he was born to be a doer (who worked with both hands.)"³

Born in 1940, Tong King-sum was physically weak as a child, and was sent to live in the ancestral house in Mui Wo where he lived with nature. Fresh air, a spacious and beautiful environment, a big Chinese house with a pond of glittering water in front (Figure 1); compared with hectic urban life, his childhood dwelling was as idyllic as heaven. In later



Figure 1 Flying a kite in front of the glittering pond (Photograph by Tong King-sum)

days, he still invited friends and students to the place often, where they flew kites and lit lanterns during the Mid-autumn festival. It was probably his intimate bond with nature formed in childhood that made him more open-minded towards occurrences in life, and from which he created works with a leisurely state of mind. "The most important thing is to have fun" was what he said often. Reviewing Tong's album of works, most images were taken outdoors on a verdant lawn or against a lush forest; apart from the huge amount of resources needed, weather was also a determining factor. He left his very last piece of work to nature — asking his wife to cast the ashes of his bones into the sea. Tong King-sum belonged to nature; nothing could stop him from being so.

Tong decided to become a painter after graduating from secondary school⁴. However, the local art scene was immature at the time, with few resources available, driving Tong to explore news of overseas art circles. "Tong's brother who lived in Canada sent him three albums of works by celebrated Western painters. Tong was thrilled, and imitated every painting in the albums."⁵ By meticulously practicing on his own, Tong did good sketches and was cultivated with an acute sense, adding a contemporary air to his works. His work *Between Ringo and King-yiew (Qiongyao)* (Figure 2) not only employed a bold composition in terms of its perspective, but it also delineated the novels by Qiongyao and bookmarks



Figure 2 *Between Ringo and King-yiew (Qiongyao)* oil painting 1968

of Ringo that were taking contemporary youngsters by storm. Later, he developed a growing interest for non-functional fine arts forms. In the trunk series he created in the 1980s, he carved into teakwood the physical state of human musculature under different conditions, using the themes *Sketch:lying 1* (Figure 3), *Sketch:lying 2* (Figure 4), *Sketch:lying 3* (Figure 5) and *Sketch:standing*. There is much that these naked bodies are bound to express; what we see is Tong poised with chisel like a painting brush to execute a three-dimensional sketch on the wood as replacement for drawing paper, liberating the human body from the wood. At that time, another Hong Kong sculptor, Mak Hin-yeung⁶ who greatly respected Tong, once said, "Tong King-sum turned all wooden blocks into vivid body torsos"⁷. Mak Hin-yeung also did a similar piece entitled *Sit-up* (1975). His sensitivity in using sculpture as a medium to communicate his language and thoughts suggest an indescribable presence, just like the self-contained



Figure 3 *Sketch:lying 1* 1980



Figure 4 *Sketch:lying 2* 1981



Figure 5 *Sketch:lying 3* 1981

cohesion pursued by Tong. No wonder Wai-ye told me that both sculptors cherished their friendship, whether on the phone or at gatherings, they would

never run out of conversation.⁸ Although no one knows exactly what they talked about, as Tong was a "sponge for knowledge" and Mak had just returned from the United Kingdom after studying sculpture, Tong probably asked Mak a lot about the overseas art scene, while Mak would also have discovered through Tong the creative power of local artists. I remember hearing Yank Wong, a close friend of Mak, say, "Mak's creations took place in Hong Kong, he only exhibited works produced in Hong Kong during his lifetime." Although works by these two contemporary Hong Kong sculptors demonstrate different styles and creative forms, the two were connected spiritually, something that could only be experienced by detailed exploration.

Encountering Cheung Yee

Like other students, encountering Cheung Yee was a turning point in Tong's life. Tong was a student at the Department of Extramural Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1968; he only began learning at Cheung's studio in Fan Ling in 1971, becoming the first private student of Cheung Yee. Being a private student meant that Tong did not simply learn sculpting techniques from the teacher, but was also influenced by him as a role model. Through the ensuing four decades, Cheung and Tong maintained a close relationship as teacher and



Figure 6 *Ball* 1972



Figure 7 *Belly button* 1972



Figure 8 *Union* 1997

student as well as friends. Therefore, Tong's early works carried certain characteristics of the teacher's creativity, although Tong always tried to avoid producing works that resembled his teacher's works. If we compare an early exercise found at his home (Figure 6) (I suppose he would not like it to be called his "work", as it was apparently influenced by Cheung Yee) with a later work, entitled *Belly button* (Figure 7), we can sense the humour in Tong King-sum's style in the latter piece. Our teacher often told us to "apply what we learned to as many aspects as possible", so that the knowledge we gained could further "inspire," and "rebel against" what we already knew. Tong grasped the meaning, thus used an entirely different type of wood to that used by his teacher: Cheung preferred using hardwood planks with consistent colour and grain, so as to minimize the disturbance of the grain as well as the irregular shape the trunks might impose on expression of the artistic concept, enchainning the artist. On the other hand, Tong

employed expensive teakwood, integrating the grain of the wood with the texture of human skin; later, Tong even used the natural joints in the trunks as mortise, which formed the core of some of his works (Figure 8). Tong's teacher was famed for his paper cast prints, and resistant against digital printing. Yet, Tong did not avoid using digital technology when it came to colouring the naked female torso to express his views on beauty and desire. Reviewing history and knowledge previously acquired could give one new insights and open up future dimensions, yet for art, it is necessary to break from the past in order to create the new. Tong's way of rebelling against his teacher was probably what Cheung Yee looked for.

More precious is that Cheung Yee taught us his life lessons. "I mainly modelled Cheung Yee for how he handled his works and the happenings around him. He was an organized person; I realize that as a sculptor, one has to be systematic to resolve

the many problems that arise in the course of making a sculpture, or a good sculpture is deemed impossible.⁹ Cheung Yee and Tong could become teacher and student because of their similar mindsets. People often find the lives of artists a shambles, however, Cheung Yee and Tong had a unique interpretation of the art of living: If you do not treat yourself well, how could you create great artworks? Although the size of their studios differed quite a lot, both were extremely tidy. Tong once wrote in his blog, "I like all tools to be arranged neatly in my studio for my own convenience."¹⁰ When I entered Tong's studio, I was amazed by its small size, the short cabinet and tiny table he had made for his tools. One of cabinets was engraved with the Chinese characters "Tong King Sum" to distinguish it from other people's at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre. Likewise, Cheung Yee could locate the tools he needed in his dormitory at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as well as the enormous studio at his home in California. Despite the orderliness, fun and humour also formed part of their lives. Cheung Yee always folded the order sheets at the Luk Yu Tea House into tiny objects; likewise, Tong enjoyed cutting napkins into the shapes of hearts, stars and apples while in hospital. Artists do not necessarily create artworks in solitude and misery. Tong had definitely modelled after the teacher for this, perfecting his life and creative career.

The Art of Tong King-sum

People who knew Tong King-sum admired his restless perseverance, that he could overcome the imperfection of his body to accomplish what even normal people could not. This was indeed true; yet if this factor is to affect how we appreciate his art, that would be unfair to him. Seeing his passion for art at an early stage, we could understand that physical defects would not keep him away. Chan Man-hung recalled that "In the beginning Tong carved around ten pieces with *Fruit* as the title, each piece was in teakwood about the size of a basketball; the shop refused to sell the wood in small pieces, so Tong boldly bought the whole trunk, had it cut into smaller pieces to bring home."¹¹ This is in line with what Cheung Yee often said, "for every artist, boldness should be above everything." The digital prints by Tong King-sum were also produced in repeated experiments. "He liked using the computer. At first, he was not familiar with the operating platform, and often crashed the computers. Then he gradually became an expert."¹² When Kevin Fung recounted the past, the image of Tong holding his newly produced prints and smiling was conjured up in my mind.

Tong once said in an interview, that "many people have the misunderstanding — there should be no distinction between works by artists who are physically sound or impaired...physical defects

should not add credit to one's works." "When there's an enormous object that both you and I could not move, then we are equal; people always move what weighs more than themselves, yet that is not a problem."¹³ It was not an overstatement to describe his studio as "*dou shi* (an extremely small room)." In less than a hundred square feet were tools, wood blocks, and plinths for exhibition, etc., leaving only a room of less than thirty square feet, where the artist was creating the life-size likeness of a human body to scale. The amazing part was that he only needed a few styrofoam pieces and his crutch. He once used a chain saw to produce a standing female figure that was taller than himself, and another time he precisely created a carpenter's joint with two irregular trunks; it was not only a matter of physical strength, but also a manifestation of his ingenuity.

Tong King-sum had a lot of friends in the local art circle. In the 1980s, he was the art editor of *Youth Today*, and was close to artists in art and literature circles. Whether it's the Hong Kong Sculptors Association, Hong Kong Visual Arts Society, or the recently established Hong Kong Sculpture Society, he simply enjoyed chatting with people; being able to show one another's works in the same exhibition would be a bonus. No curator, no theme, just mutual appreciation. He also had a clear understanding of the positioning of artists within the circle: "We play our own games — draw a circle, step in and step

out, playing by our own rules"¹⁴.

Tong used "we" referring to an individual's identity. The sense of identity was often pivotal in his works, not only in terms of form but also in theme. For instance, *I thought I am beautiful* (1986), showed no sense of arrogance, but simply composure and confidence. I also had the pleasure of seeing another moving piece at Tong's home: *Sculpture* (Figure 9). Mrs. Tong recounted that Tong produced the piece at the 11th edition of the International Sculpture Conference in the United States in 1980. Tong had been stunned by a working demonstration by an American sculptor, thus went on to experiment with his own piece. He simply made three incisions into a wooden cube that was pieced together to echo the three strokes in the Chinese character "*diao*" meaning "sculpture", and then added on top two thin slices. He said, "This is how sculpture should be." At first, I didn't understand why Tong had never shown this work, but on second thought, I know he



Figure 9 *Sculpture* 1980

was right. Firstly, it bore too much resemblance to works by Western sculptors of the time, so Tong considered this as an exercise only. Secondly, this piece was totally different from the rest of his oeuvre, so viewers could not follow the thread of his artistic development. After that conference, he concentrated even more on producing his signature trunks, awaiting the influence of that piece to die down and become part of his experience before he could apply the techniques spontaneously to his works.

And what is art? In an interview in 1986, he said, "Fine art should not pay too much attention to reflecting characteristics of the society, or certain values...if it does, then it becomes a functional tool."¹⁵ This was perhaps the reason why he never expressed his views on politics or society in his works, though Tong's friends were well aware as he often discussed these topics. How did he hide

his feelings? We can discern similar viewpoints from Tong's teacher Cheung Yee: "Art should not speak too much of the complaints of a society."¹⁶ The art of Cheung Yee and Tong King-sum are mainly concerned with addressing the question of aesthetics¹⁷, making other additional elements unnecessary; beyond aesthetics, more imagination should be added, so that the works are not merely superficial representations. As Tong King-sum said, "My view is that as we live in a modern society, we should work on what we're most familiar with, what we think best suits us to do."¹⁸ Therefore, since the 1970s, he only worked on creating what he was most familiar with — human bodies, retaining the torso and discarding the limbs.¹⁹ By the 1980s, the subjects of Tong's works were further reduced to depict only part of the torso, with the addition of a semi-abstract winged form (Figure 10), turning them into slightly representational abstract sculptures; until



Figure 10 *Wings* 1984



Figure 11 *Empty* 1998 (Photograph by Stephen Cheung)



Figure 12 *Concept* 2004

in the 1990s, his works totally abandoned their figurative forms, *Empty* (Figure 11) and *Union* (Figure 8) are examples that could only be interpreted as non-figurative. In 2004, his work *Concept* (Figure 12) turned the sky into a virtual image by mirroring its reflection, onto which he placed tiny sculpted objects, so that the landscape composed from these objects was incorporated as part of the sculpture, expressing the otherworldly temperament of Chinese landscape painting. I believe that only a humble and down-to-earth sculptor who had mastered the art for many years could manage to express this spirituality and liberty. I admired the teacher all the more after seeing this work. It is not easy for an artist to gain fame, and even harder for a renowned artist to further improve and develop at different stages of his artistic career; Tong King-sum was definitely among the very few.

Epilogue

Because of this article, I had the opportunity to touch Tong's works at his residence, a rather addictive gesture for me; when I saw his works again at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, I could not help but touch the enticing figures again. Those works always tempt you to touch them; this is the consolation Tong left for us. I hope Mrs. Tong would not mind to help apply protective coating on the works at home several more times.

* Editor's note: This article was written in early 2009.

- 1 Cheung Yee, born in 1936. Renowned Hong Kong sculptor and a pioneer in contemporary art, graduated from National Taiwan Normal University. After returning to Hong Kong, he founded "The Circle Art Group" with a number of friends, and was active from 1960s to 1990s. He was awarded an MBE by the British government and won the "Sculptor of the Year Award". Noted for wood carving, metal sculpture and paper cast prints, his subjects included oracle script, tortoise shells, crabs and worms.
- 2 Based on an interview with Kevin Fung by the author in 2008.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lee Kam-ping: 'Tong King Sum the Sculptor', *Kung Kao Po*, 14 March 1990.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Mak Hin-yeung(1951-1994), renowned Hong Kong sculptor who studied fine arts and sculpture at the University of London. Returning to Hong Kong in late 1970s, he was actively involved in the local art circle until he passed away. Excelled at creating figures and animals cast from wax models. His works are surreal, and are usually full of political connotations.
- 7 Based on an interview with Chiu Wai-ye by the author in 2008.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 'An Interview with Tong King-sum', *Melting Pot Art Journal*, September 1986, p. 3.
- 10 Please refer to <http://hk.myblog.yahoo.com/tongkingsum> (blog closed).
- 11 Please refer to <http://blog.artron.net/space-71701-do-blog-id-141097.html>.
- 12 Ibid. 2.
- 13 Based on a television interview in TVB8.
- 14 Ibid. 2.
- 15 Ibid. 9, p. 4.
- 16 Based on an interview with Cheung Yee by the author in 2008.
- 17 Ibid. 9, p. 8.
- 18 Ibid., p.10.
- 19 Ibid., p. 8. The original text is "I think it is too trivial to carve the head, arms and legs, and rather unnecessary. I think the upper body itself is perfect."