

REVIEW OF URBANISM, MODERN ARCHITECTURE & HOUSING

RUMAH

50 YEARS OF SIA 1963 - 2013

STORY OF THE
SINGAPORE ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSION



SYNCHRONISATION A Chinese Approach to Architectural Education

It was suggested to me by Kheng Soon in the course of a dinner, that I should consider writing for the SIA anniversary special publication, a piece on how Chinese education has informed my approach to Architecture.

Kheng Soon has always been fascinated by territories unknown to him; the mind-set of the Chinese educated is one challenge to him – the concept seems so close yet the knowing so far away for him. Whatever the topic may be, Kheng Soon could usually confidently grasp it, wanting to get to the core of it, so I hope this will be intriguing enough for him!

Kheng Soon is indeed quite right that, having lived over 20 years in the UK, I may have adopted a more British way of looking at the world, and to some extent even their sense of humour. However, I have maintained the same old Chinese literati self – still reading, speaking, and thinking in Mandarin when given a choice.

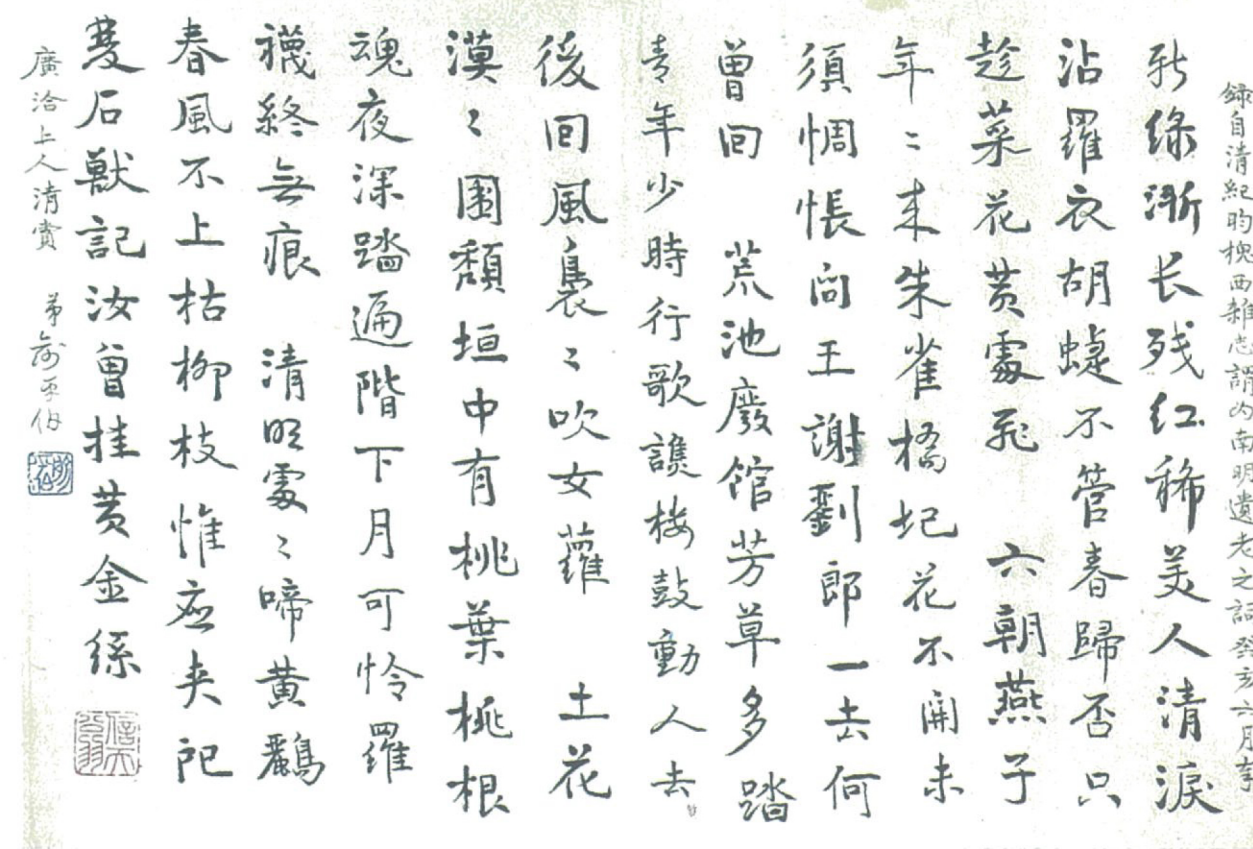
I started writing in Chinese for local Newspapers at the age of 16, long before becoming an Architect, enjoying the exploration of words in modern Chinese, whilst reading old Chinese for both A and O levels as two of the six subjects chosen at National Junior College. Perhaps it was through this unusual profound experience with the Chinese language at an early age, that I have come to appreciate in rather condensed old Chinese texts the descriptions of scenario, scenery, and mood by prolific writers. I then reinterpreted these descriptions in my own writings, which mainly expressed the feeling of a then contemporary Singaporean youth of the 70s.

When the form of Chinese characters are observed closely, the pictorial diagram of each word always strike a balance between top and bottom, left and right, never completely symmetrical. This has a close similarity to architectural plans. In fact the structure of Chinese characters is close to the Modern aesthetic, perhaps both stemming from something originally figurative, an abstract representation. Even with a superficial appreciation of Chinese text, one is trained to observe the art of balance, and detect any off-balanced element.

We were taught at an early age the formation of Chinese Characters and practiced the accuracy of each stroke – written with brush on pages mapped with squares; each word with different strokes would form within nine fixed squares. These strokes date back to days when manuscripts in figurines were done on turtle shells or bamboo slates; so it was familiar ground when encountering the de Stijl movement at the AA. Whether it is the sun and the moon in Ancient China or the colourful tulip gardens in Dutch land, I understood in an instant what Piet Mondrian or Gerrit Rietveld were trying to do.

Then there is the spacing between each stroke, the beauty of sometimes leaving a blank space, so that the word that was just formed by wet Chinese black ink could breathe. In considering this we are moving into Tao territory, where the real purpose of each structure of the character, is to enclose or open up a certain space. At that time we were not taught the meaning of it all of course, but the magic of this education is that it grows on you, each time finding out more, each time full of pleasant surprises.

The same brush and Chinese black ink we used to practice the strokes each week extends itself to painting; our eyes are trained to draw the forms by capturing the shadow. In a way it is about understanding the lighting condition of objects, and landscape. The tonal treatment in a brush painting would imply shadow overlaid with shadow, depicting foreground, middle ground and back ground, again it is about spaces, but on a much grander scale.



Calligraphy by writer Yu Ping Bo (Kong Hiap Memorial Museum, Singapore):

"When the form of Chinese characters are observed closely, the pictorial diagram of each word always strike a balance between top and bottom, left and right, never completely symmetrical. This has a close similarity to architectural plans."



Double ink-brush paintings by Feng Zi Kai (Kong Hiap Memorial Museum, Singapore):

"words were picked carefully to describe the event and space, so precisely when recited, the words would rhyme beautifully
...This is particularly obvious in Tang Poems or Song Lyrics; of the same level of sophistication as the sonnet."

My Chinese Education in the 70s went in depth into literature that spans the 2000 years of civilisation since the Han dynasty. No one was overly worried about the usefulness of a passage from antiquity in our modern daily life, nor were the teachers worried about the extent to which the students actually understood these ancient texts, they were mostly written in "wen yan wen" – equivalent to "Latin" in the Western context.

Frankly speaking, none of us understood fully the texts we were made to learn by heart, but miraculously, a lot of the time we came to understand or appreciate them many years later; be it in the context of relationship with a sibling, superior, loved one, or when caught in a difficult situation. The words written hundreds of years ago often describe matters so well, often so close to our hearts that it makes us feel more at ease, as it reminds us that we are part of a greater continuity. My old schoolmates, many of whom are now CEOs, can still recite passages from texts we learnt together.

In these texts, words were picked carefully to describe the event and space, so precisely when recited. The words would rhyme beautifully, where the sentences would match, mirror or contrast with each other. This is particularly obvious in Tang Poems or Song Lyrics; it is of the same level of sophistication as the sonnet. More importantly, the thoughts of the person who penned the piece so many years ago, still warmly transmits his emotion; sometimes joyous; sometimes sad or with a slight touch of melancholy.

We were made to understand through these passages that feelings are seldom expressed directly, so through the descriptions of seasonal change, living environment, weather conditions, light level, mountains and lakes, and plants in the garden we see the inner world of the writers. Colours and texture often described with a purpose in mind and passage of time often implied.

The most amazing part of it, after learning a passage for a couple of days, we were then told that the journey in the tough mountaineering experience is not about mountain climbing after all, but more to do with an unappreciated official rank, having a hard time steering the right direction for the nation, or finding the right moment to advise the emperor.

Another passage that still stays in my mind, simply teaches one how to butcher a cow. How meat could be separated perfectly from the bone by feeling the joints, first to feel it at the right spot, cut with the tip of the knife and then slide it all the way in. And how, if not done with skill and patience, bone and meat will end up in a mess, with blood all over the place.

Perhaps it is through this learning of the old Chinese texts for many years that when I come to starting an architectural project, design concept will usually first emerge as a series of key words rather than pictorial images – words that capture the essence of the project, with room allowed to expand to sometimes unexpected areas, well before any shapes or forms would take place. This perhaps explains well why designs by our office may be consistent in the quality of work we aim to produce each time, but the appearance of the architecture rarely repeats itself.

The beauty of a well written ancient Chinese text, be it in the form of a poem or prose, is that the descriptions may be multi-layered, the thinking conveyed may be complex, but the words chosen are always precise and irreplaceable – all that flows well in the passage seems so effortless, carefully chosen and placed together. In that process, exactly like our Architectural design process, an act of editing usually takes place, pruning and trimming, resulting in a work so concise that not one redundant element is left in the end, creating a truly succinct piece of work.