

PROF LEE Cheuk Yin:

Thank you for the introduction. I was born in Hong Kong. I left Hong Kong in 1981 and I lived in the overseas countries for 25 years, but of course the other speakers were speaking in Putonghua, so I'll also be speaking in Putonghua as well in order to facilitate our communication. But as a matter of fact my Putonghua is not really that good. Later on I realised that Putonghua is better than Cantonese, but perhaps I haven't been speaking Cantonese for 30-odd years so maybe my Putonghua is better than my Cantonese and I believe that my Cantonese remains at the time of actor Chow Yuen Fat.

I always told my friends that I will use the slang of that time. But clearly many people won't understand that.

The topic of my presentation today is different from the previous two speakers. We did not premeditate on this. However, because my topic is going to be different from theirs, therefore we will be able to look at the same topic from different perspectives.

I'm going to talk about whether there is any confrontation between modernity and tradition. I want to bring up the discussion. In the past many decades, Asia has experienced many changes and transformation. One of the most outstanding changes is the four different tigers, economies in Asia, and also the modernisation of China. These two areas have attracted a lot of attention from many different people.

Some people also ask the question whether modernisation in Asia will become a distinction of Asian arts. When we talk about globalisation it is very homogenous, very singular, and so under such context, is Asia going to lose its own heritage and traditions?

Therefore, what I'm going to talk about is to examine if there's any confrontation or conflicts between modernisation and traditions.

What we mean by Asia, we need to divide it geographically. However, when we divide it culturally, it's very ambiguous. When we talk about Asia, many people only talk about east Asia or Southeast Asia or North Asia.

This morning a speaker mentioned that Hong Kong has a lot of South Asians.

When we talk about Asia, we also need to talk about Southwest Asia, including Iran and Iraq. There are 40 different countries in Asia, therefore it's a very broad area. Asia itself is a very complex area. It has a number of diversified cultures.

And the development within Asia varies. In North Asia, for instance, Japan, Korea and China, they have different process of development. Southeast Asia, for instance the ten different ASEAN members, they all have different stages of development.

When we talk about Asia, some people tend to think that when modernisation takes place in Asia, Asia will lose its own heritage. Modernisation will rip off all the traditional heritage.

And therefore we need to rethink the relationship between modernisation and tradition. Are they mutually exclusive? This is an area of my interest and this is an area that I want to share with you.

Just now I mentioned if we look at Asia from cultural perspective, even though in terms of development, the stages of development vary, however there seems to be a very common culture, especially in North Asia. In North Asia when we talk about traditions, they are facing the challenge of the continuation of heritage and culture, and this an area that a lot of people are concerned about. They have accumulated thousands of years of heritage and culture and they are now thinking about many different ways to continue this heritage.

Some of these south east Asian countries, their history is relatively short. For instance, Singapore, the country was founded in 1965. It's a migrant state and therefore multi-racial, multi-religion, very important to Singapore. It can be termed as a Chinese culture country, it can be termed as a Malay-speaking culture. It can be termed as a Tamil-speaking country.

Because of this, what is the tradition in Singapore? Singapore does not have one singular tradition. Some people even are doubting if there is tradition at all in Singapore. Some people in Singapore believe that our tradition is a melting pot, melting every migrant's culture and background together in the same pot.

In such a context, cultural heritage is not something very heavy, because they don't have a long history of culture. Therefore in some south east Asian countries, when they call about tradition, tradition to them is not something very heavy and they do not feel being challenged.

And therefore, even though we are all in Asia, we face different problems and challenges.

So I want to talk the relationship between modernisation and cultural heritage. How am I going to do it? I'm going to share with you some of the paintings in my collection to illustrate the relationship between modernity and traditions.

New year paintings have had some 2000 years of history in China. It is a very traditional form of art. When we talk about art, when we talk about cultural heritage, new year painting is a very good example. How do we conserve this traditional art form? And what are the challenges that we have?

This is traditional door guards. Now of course we can still buy new year paintings in Zu Zhou, Tianjing or Szechuan or in Guangdong or in Hebei. We can still buy these, these are still available. And this one is from Zu Zhou. And in Tianjing, it is a very unique painting, new year painting. Now such traditional painting first became available many hundred years ago. These are all wood prints.

And also some religious new year painting. For instance the god of kitchen, the god of wealth, these sort of new year paintings were very popular. When we read books, people worked hard in the past that it was a must for them to buy new year painting, whether they are rich or poor.

And there were new year paintings based on different folklore or stories. This sort of new year painting became some kind of decoration for the interior and they also had an educational purpose.

For instance, these fat babies from the Tianjing area, these were all paintings from several hundred years ago. And there were paintings from some stories. For instance this is mouse getting married.

These new year paintings were very popular many hundred years ago. The people nowadays still paste these paintings when new year comes.

In the past in China, most doors had two sections, one on the left and one on the right. Nowadays here in Hong Kong, even in China, we don't have that kind of doors any more, do we? And so we can't really put two guards up there, one on the left and one on the right. This is the way the new year paintings have been painted.

Because time has changed, as I mentioned, the architecture is very different. The way we build houses is very different, the way we have our doors is very different. Our dreams are different now.

In the past we all wanted to have a boy and therefore this new year painting was very, and nowadays if you want to -- if you want to have many, many different babies, then no woman will marry you.

Or topics, for instance, having five kids or three different generations living under the same roof, nobody does this any more. And so the way of living nowadays is very different from the way of living back several hundred years ago. So this fat babies series is not appropriate. However, this is our tradition. And when we talk about tradition, we have this notion that tradition is static, is stable, it doesn't change. But in fact tradition keeps on changing, tradition can accommodate the new changes. We can actually see the changes of new year painting.

At the end of Tsing Dynasty when Zu Zhou built his first railway station, you can see now on the screen, railway is being painted on this new year painting.

And also during cultural revolution, the topics of new year painting was in line with the party line.

So new year paintings do evolve with time. How does the modernity of traditional arts form get accepted by people of the modern day? It's a very complicated and complex issue.

Of course we have to look at the art form itself. We have to have very high-skilled craftsmen and the topics need to be very auspicious.

It's very difficult nowadays to identify those who are very skilful in creating new year paintings, except for areas where tradition, you know, new year painting has become an industry.

So this popular art form, traditional new year painting, used to be part of the popular culture, and yet it's because not too many people are able to do it, it's gradually becoming high culture because they've become very expensive nowadays.

So we walk past tradition, we do not leave tradition. We have just walked past tradition. We need to combine modernity and tradition in order to lengthen tradition. And this is an issue many people, especially those in the arts circle, are being challenged.

As I mentioned, the railway new year painting was a reformed tradition. And the cultural revolution new year painting is also a combination of modernity and tradition.

And also in Taiwan, the cultural construction committee started in 1994 to organise the competition of new year painting, encouraging people from many different sectors to contribute to the recreation of a traditional art form.

You can look at some of the topics. These topics are actually in line with modern development.

On the one hand, traditions could be kept. Tradition could also be carried on. This is a very costly process. Sometimes we have to give it up.

As I mention earlier, we need to have very good wood board, we need to have very good craft men, we need to have very good painters. This cannot be done by a single individual.

The modern new year painting in Taiwan is printed on screen print. Now this is a picture I took from Taiwan. I went and visited this friend of mine who is printing new year painting with machines.

So we do not need to use a piece of wood to craft. No, we don't, we don't need to do it. We could use modern technology. We could keep this

tradition by modernising the production process. These are some of the different colours.

The tradition, the topic is being kept, is very auspicious. And this blessing from heaven new year painting again is a very traditional topic and yet the production process is very modern. And you can see that the colour gold was also being used in these new year painting. Gold, of course, is very auspicious to Chinese people, it represents wealth.

So what we need to do is to utilise the graphics and the tradition, and yet we can use modern technology in order to continue this tradition and accommodate the changes in society.

New year paintings which I've collected, this is Zhou Zhou Ping-an, peace and tranquillity. You see nine dogs and number nine and dog in Cantonese are homophones. They represent auspiciousness. So that one was for the year of the dog. These two are for the year of the pig, ten pigs, number ten is the number of summation and completeness. You can see pig couples with three piglets.

You can see the continuation of the heritage. However, you can also see it's a novel way of expressing the same motif.

The other ones are for the year of the dog and the year of the mouse. This dog looks like Snoopy, so it's slightly different from the traditional image. And the year of the mouse. You can see a medallion, the gold ingots, et cetera. You can see the combination of heritage but also you see the distance from the heritage. To redefine it as continuation of heritage, can it undertake the task of inheriting this lineage?

When we speak of heritage, we want to preserve it, we want to promote it, we want to carry it on, but how do we do it? We cannot just pay lip service. The practice is very important. Earlier I said there were religious new year paintings. The deities included professional deities such as Hua Tua who is the deity for the medical profession, et cetera, but this is another religious new year painting. This painting includes eight religious personalities.

So is this a way out for the traditional new year painting genre? We do not have to ask this question.

What is tradition as we perceive it? Is this the tradition in your ideal? Or is it the tradition coming from history books? These are the questions we need to ask.

The most crucial questions we need to ask are: does tradition represent the characteristics of Asia?

Some say we run the risk of losing the characteristics of Asia. These people argue that if you lose the tradition, you are losing the characteristics of Asia. Actually, in many Asian countries the burden or baggage of tradition is not that long.

So what are the Asian characteristics? What do we refer to when we talk about Asian characteristics? As I said earlier, the notion of Asia is very complex. We normally talk about Asia in a very narrow sense, possibly referring to east Asia or even only Hong Kong.

So your horizon is limited by your cognition, by your perception.

So, when we say modernity is butting against the tradition, are we talking about Asian history, Asia in our mind, Asia in ideal or Asia in the eyes of foreigners?

In America and Europe, if you go to an Asian restaurant, those dishes are prepared to cater to the taste of Westerners. They are not Asian dishes.

How does art reflect Asian characteristics? Can we preserve tradition without going beyond it, without transcending tradition?

We say we want to preserve the characteristics of Asia, we need to find out what exactly do we mean by Asia, by tradition and by characteristics.

I'll give you an example. The tourist board of Singapore has launched the slogan: "uniquely Singapore".

The Chinese equivalent of this strapline is "Extraordinary Singapore". Extraordinary means the opposite of ordinary, whereas the English strapline is "uniquely Singapore", which means Singapore flaunts its cultural diversity, ethnic diversity and cultural diversity.

You can see different cultural backgrounds and different types of food in Singapore. This characterises Singapore. This makes Singapore attractive and appealing.

When we speak of characteristics of Asia, you have to define them. Are they your tradition? Are they your history? Are they your old buildings? Or are they the clock tower at Tsim Sha Tsui?

So where are these characteristics? How do you preserve them and carry them forward. These are the questions we need to ask and find answers to.

I can give you an example from Singapore. There is a famous painter Chun Chien Pau in Singapore. He is the recipient of Singapore culture award which is similar to the Order of Bauhinia in Hong Kong.

I've known him for many years. His paintings often feature in Singapore Airlines magazine. He followed a grand Master of Chinese painting Wu Chang Xua.

But in recent years, influenced by surrounding cultures, he started exploring ethnic diversity. For example, the Hindu people, people in Indonesia, the Malay people. These are the new genres you see in his paintings. There's an Indian old man. He made this portrait of an Indian old man.

And the other one was drawn in Bali Island in Indonesia.

You can see that he is trained in traditional Chinese painting, but he's influenced by Southeast Asian art forms. If you know the evolution of fine arts in Southeast Asia, there is a style called Nanyang style. So is this a new ramification of tradition?

Before I came to Hong Kong, I visited him. There was an exhibition of his works which I did not have the pleasure to visit because I was abroad. Recently he bought a digital camera, ten megapixel camera to take many, many pictures of the lotus flowers in his pond. He then enlarged those photos and then he wrote calligraphy on those photos. They are huge, so I could only take a picture of part of his picture.



So people say, "You are a traditional Chinese painter. You are combining photography with calligraphy. Have you gone astray? This is pagan art. You are trying to follow a short cut."

Can modern technology be married to traditional art form?

All these issues I've covered today centre around this crucial question. When we face the issue of inheriting and preserving tradition, it tends to be the business of a minority of people.

When we look at traditional new year paintings of China, it becomes pricey works of art. In the olden days you would buy new year painting, you would post it on the wall for the new year, then you would just tear it off. That is why very few could survive, because they were so cheap. You would not keep them.

But if the production technology becomes more and more expensive and the paintings become more and more pricey and the quantity is dwindling, what used to be folk art may become a collection of a minority.

So the inheritance of such cultural heritage, do we want it to lend itself to the collection by a minority? Because you look at these traditional motifs like having lots of kids and those rotund babies, people are not going to post them for the new year celebration, they're only going to keep them in the collection.

Another issue is indigenisation. Do you want to keep it indigenous? If you do so, will it effect globalisation? Because there's a certain conflict between indigenusness and globalisation.

Also, the dissemination or popularisation of an art form may vulgarise it, may secularise it.

We know that the boundary is more blurred, the generalist education we have today blurs the boundary between the public and the elite, which was very distinct in the olden days. Is this conducive to the inheritance of cultural heritage?

These are the issues we need to consider. The examples I cited just now, for example the new year paintings from the traditional the repertoire,

and other calligraphy art works in Hong Kong, we know the issue of how to preserve Cantonese opera. Professor Cheng mentioned Jiang Xi. These issues have the same background and boil down to the same question, how to preserve and continue the heritage, and can we popularise it, as we did before? And if we do so, what price should we be prepared to pay?

So the flavour of Asia, what is it? How do we define it? Can the flavour of Asia preserve our tradition and the life of our culture? I've posed many questions for you to ponder. Thank you.