

PROF SHIH Shou Chien:

Thank you, Mr Ma, for your introduction.

Today I want to talk about the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and modern creativity.

Now, the focus of our forum is modernity. We have entered into the age of modernity for a hundred years now and during this one century we've been asking ourselves: are we more modern?

Usually the answer to this question is positive. However, I think we also need to ask: after becoming more modern, are we going to lose ourselves? This is a unique phenomenon here in Asia, where in the West you can't really find such phenomenon. I think this is a pressing issue, and this has become some kind of anxiety. On the cultural level, we are afraid of losing ourselves and this has become subsequently our modernity.

The fear of losing ourselves means that we need to rethink the relationship between me and the past. This issue, I think, in the area of art creation can be illustrated in a very vivid way. And I'm going to share with you an example, Luo Shen Fu to eliminate the dialogue between me and art creation.

I'm sure many of you are aware of the fact that Luo Shen Fu was written in 280BC. But it was not treated as a piece of art. It was only being treated as a piece of art in the fourth century. You can see on the screen is written by Wang Sien Shih. This is the calligraphy by Wang Sien Shih. And this poem was crafted on a piece of stone.

And then another painter, very famous one, Gu Kai Zhe, based on the poem, he painted a picture. Now, I'm sure the original copy was long lost, however right now there are three different duplications. One is being kept at the Freer gallery in the United States, the other two are being kept currently in China. So this piece of art was recreated by poet and Now, of course, you should go home and read about it in order to understand the poem. However, what we are going to do today is look at some of the wording that we use nowadays, which has the root in this particular poem.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, the painting of Gu Kai Zhe, the original copy was lost and the stone carving in the 12th century was almost disappearing. In the Sung dynasty, one of the emperors, he was able to collect some 13 lines of the poem. Just a little bit of what used to be.

And in the 12th century, a lot of people were very enthusiastic about restoring Luo Shen Fu to revitalize it.

And so on the screen you can see they would craft the 13 different lines collected by one of the Sung emperors and it was published. This was an important event in the arts circle. The three different scores that still exist nowadays were actually recreated during that time and therefore this period of time was instrumental in revitalising Luo Shen Fu.

Therefore, I would like to encourage you to think about how did they come about doing it? Actually, what I want to emphasise and underscore is the need to continue to inject life in art.

The painters and artists in the 12th century, what else did they do? Well, they were imagining the original painter's work, how did he paint the whole thing? And also they had to imagine how people used to live in the fourth century and also they had to interpret the poem. The poem was talking about a world that was very different from what it was in the 12th century. It was also talking about a divine world.

I think three fifths of the poem is talking about the incompatibility between the divine world and the secular world. The god of lao and also the poet were able to celebrate life together. However, they realised that the barrier between divinity and humanity was too difficult to overcome and therefore they went on their separate ways.

So the poem was also talking about the realm of divinity. It was very interesting. You see on the screen the boat seems to have a pair of wings. Actually the boat in the painting was a very modern boat at that time and people used their imagination and added that pair of wings to it.

And so people were underscoring some of the things that they don't really get to see. You can see one of the goddesses had a pair of animal feet and the chariot was being carried by six different dragons. It's full of imagination and there are a lot of different animals.

People were very interested in these sorts of things, which demonstrate that people were very curious on that level, on that spiritual level, on the level which was talking about divinity and god, et cetera.

And in the 14th century, you can see on the left is Bai Mao, recreating this setting. They saw the Beijing version of Luo Shen Fu.

And on the right is Ling Puo Wei Pu. The painter believed that it was a very important aspect, and so the painter recreated so-called pure Luo Shen and this of course was the interpretation of the 14th century.

It was painted in 1368 in the Ming dynasty. And there was an uprising in China and the visual artists; and the poets were looking were looking for tranquillity at that very unstable time and therefore Luo Shen, for people during that time was an escape from reality.

At that time, Wei Zho Din used painting to talk about his feelings and after finishing the painting he also wrote something about his own feelings and so we could imagine Wei Zho Din the 14th century together with his friends, trying to use art to return to the 4th century and reinterpret Luo Shen Fu in the 14th century.

The 14th century is very different from the 16th century. In the 16th century, China was experiencing a totally different age. In Shu Zho area there were commerce, there were a lot of very rich collectors, and therefore there were professional painters who had very high skills.

You can see the portrait of Luo Shen Fu by another artist. This one is more life like, more secular. Very different from the pure divine goddess on the left-hand side. So on the right-hand side you can see a real life beauty who is the goddess. She is not different from the unparalleled beauty in the secular mortal world except for some flourishes, the cloud flourishes that decorate the painting indicating that she is a goddess rather than a mortal.

Of course, that arose from the needs of the society at the time and it also at the same time brought a crisis to Luo Shen Fu as a motif so-called overinterpretation.

And this one is called "Beauty languishing in spring time" and the people who look at this portrait probably mistake her as a mortal beauty in the secular world.

By the 18th century, the same motif had a totally different interpretation. Emperor Chen Lung was the biggest, greatest art collector amongst all emperors in China. He also had the strongest interest in art, fine art.

For him, goddess of Luo Shen was an important element in artistic heritage and he very much wanted to become part of it. That desire, compared to Cho Ying or Wei Zho Din or the 12th century artists, that desire was more stronger his predecessors and he wanted to do more.

On this slide you can see his decree, imperial decree. He said this painting needed to be remounted. Behind this scroll he wrote the 13-line annotation, so turning this piece of work into a trinity of calligraphy, painting and poetry.

He believed that he became patron to this trinity. He was responsible for the restoration of this tradition.

He also did something else. He ordered his court painters to make another version of goddess of Luo Shen as if to substitute the work of Gu Kai Zhe.

And this court artist was called Ding Guang Pong. If you look at his works, they are very rationalised compared to his predecessor's works. The top left-hand corner is from the Tsing court artist. The bottom right was by Gu Kai Zhe.

There were some important changes. The imperial version of the interpretation of this goddess, that interpretation is full of rationality and expresses a desire to return to the broad heritage of Chinese art. But it doesn't mean that his interpretation was something for posterity to follow because it requires every generation's input and reinterpretation.

With that I'm taking you to modernity. The attraction of the goddess of Luo Shen has never ceased. On the right-hand side you can see the 20th

century version, because 20th century people were particularly interested in the love story associated with this goddess.

On the right-hand side, the Yuan Lee Hua, famous actress of indigenous Taiwan opera Gu Hai Zi, which is the indigenous Taiwan opera form. It's a story between He Tau and Zhung Fei and Luo Shen was actually the backcloth for the story. But in this particular case it came to the foreground. So you can see this became a part of 20th century popular culture.

On the left-hand side there's a performing troupe, emerging performing troupe in Taiwan. It's a performing troupe with male vocals. It's called Hang Fung Yue Fu. Chang Fung music troupe. This is one scene or act of this show. The dance of six dragons. The perspective is very similar to the perspective we saw in the 16th century painting. About two fifths of the time of the show was devoted to the fantastic spectacle of fairies and immortals and Celestials.

You can see the six dragons with six masks against a background. The background was drawn by a modern landscape artist, so it's a fusion between ancient and modern times. It's very similar in spirit to the scroll from the 16th century. Asian images in a modern setting.

The emphasis was on the mythological element of the goddess of Luo Shen story. Top left corner you saw Ping Yi beating the drum, with very extraordinary backcloth and the stage set of modern design, using materials and techniques available to us in modern times to reinterpret what one would see from the goddess of Luo Shen scrolls. So the mythological ambience is highlighted.

The bottom right corner is a photograph of the goddess of wind. On the stage you wouldn't be able to sense the power of wind, but he used photography to manifest the energy of the wind, of the god of wind.

I think this is the most outstanding aspect of his show. This show, in my opinion, the Taiwan opera rendering of Luo Shen goddess are the new 21st century manifestations of the reinterpretation of this mythology. This approach and this reinterpretation indicating that we are seeing a very unique phenomenon of 21st century Asian art, i.e. we must not depart or sever the umbilical chord with our cultural heritage.

This is not uncommon. People may wonder maybe it's only possible in the show which is associated with the Han dynasty and Tang dynasty art forms. However, in fact some avant garde works are also related to this approach.

On this slide, on the right-hand side we see the work of Shui Bing who is now living in America. He was trained in Jiao Kiang academy of art. This work is called "Heavenly Script". This "Heavenly Script" is composed of characters, some of which are amplified on the left-hand side. People try very hard to read this "Heavenly Script" to no avail, and that is the purpose of his work.

Shum Bang's work goes very deep into the origin of Chinese script. In other words, Shum Bing coins his own characters.

The left-hand side characters are actually his own autograph "Shum Bing" but beyond recognition. They look squares, however they are not Chinese characters, but there's a code embedded in there. They are Bing Ying XU, thus the pinyin phonetic transcription of his surname. Second one is Bing. B-I-N-G. You see this radical on the left-hand side which is the ear radical, is the Roman letter B. So he is going back to the pattern of script creation. He used this pattern to create his own characters.

So it looks ancient or it looks avant garde. These are irrelevant.

I think this is an important angle from which we can observe the future Asian art. This is one aspect which we cannot afford to overlook.

That is my presentation. Thank you.