

QUEST - WHERE HEAVEN AND MAN MEET

The heart of Sun Yu-li contains deep thoughts that have been the concern of man for thousands of years. His works cannot be separated from his unwavering attachment to this question of the relationship between heaven and man. They cannot be separated from his pursuit for the harmonious state of heaven and man.

From Architect to Sculptor

It is quite a coincidence how I came to know Sun Yu-li. He made his name overseas but in Singapore people are not yet familiar with his works. I met Sun Yu-li through the editor of "Hua Xiao Sheng", Jane Chong, whom I know well. One day, she told me about her architect friend who indulges in sculpting and has a master's understanding of He-Tu and Luo-Shu.

He-Tu and Luo-Shu are important books which preceded the ancient I-Ching. What do they have to do with sculptures? I was curious because of my own interest in and knowledge of He-Tu and Luo-Shu. The first time I met Sun Yu-li, we talked for four hours.

Sun Yu-li was born in China and educated in Taiwan. He graduated from the Architecture Department of Tung-Hai University, Taiwan, and is a registered architect both in Taiwan and Australia. He is also a member of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

In recent years, he left his architecture practice decisively and started to sculpt full time, a decision that is surprising. He came under the tutelage of Professor Yuyu Yang, Taiwan's master sculptor whose many remarkable works in Singapore provided great inspiration for Sun Yu-li's own creations. However, one can see in Sun Yu-li's works that he has his own unique character. In April 1991, his bronze sculpture "Trace" won him the first prize of the Republic of China's Contemporary Sculpture Award. It is a good proof that he has carried his work in his own direction. Sun Yu-li jokingly said that since his younger days in school, he has never been placed first before, and winning this first prize encouraged him greatly. It also earned him a recognised position in the field of sculpture.

Thoughts of a Philosopher

Sun Yu-li's works are mainly cast in bronze. Other than the award-winning piece "Trace", he has interesting pieces like "Heaven & Earth", "Yin-Shang", "Elegance", "Vitality", "Harmony", "Cycle", "Affection", "Predestined" and "Flame of Life". Professor Yang once said that Sun Yu-li's sculptures show a strong logical thinking from a concept to its final form, and does not emphasize the usual techniques of sculpting. This is a fine observation. Sun Yu-li sculpts not just to create forms. Behind each of his works are the deep thoughts that have been the concern of man for thousands of years. Therefore when you talk to him, you will find that he is more philosophical than a philosopher.

The primary idea of Sun Yu-li's sculptures is to probe into the relationship between heaven and man. He started from researching into symbols and meanings of topology - a knowledge that deals with the relationship between dot, line and plane, which is believed to link back to the origin and variations of the universe. Later, when Sun Yu-li studied the He-Tu and Luo-Shu, he realised that the principles found in them were similar to those in topology. After

further studies of related literature and much thinking, he could confidently state that the principles governing the derivation of the ancient I-Ching from He-Tu and Luo-Shu were the same as the principles governing topology.

We know He-Tu and Luo-Shu are graphs that recorded the developments and movements of the universe. They contain mysterious and infinite contents. From them came the great philosophical book of the I-Ching that shook the world, from ancient times till today.

Scholars had described the He-Tu and Luo-Shu as such, “If you use them to discuss the heaven, you find heaven inside. If you use them to discuss the earth, you find the earth inside. If you use them to discuss man, then you find man inside. Therefore all subjects from the “left” to the “right” are inside and all branches of knowledge started from them. It is not exaggerating to say that the world universe is framed inside and all creation is included.”

Where lies the true wisdom of He-Tu and Luo-Shu? It remains a mystery after thousands of years. From our limited understanding, He-Tu and Luo-Shu are two-dimensional graphs composed of white and black dots and lines. The dots are a unity of form, number and content. Every dot is a philosophical concept. To give an example using the white or black dots to symbolise “yang” or “yin”: their contents can be firm and positive, or soft and passive, growing or dwindling. The simple combination of dots and lines symbolising the infinite variations found in the universe and evolving regularities of nature. Through the philosophical understanding of He-Tu and Luo-Shu, Sun Yu-li’s sculpture uses the simple graphs to probe into the origin and the principles of the universe.

Quest - Where Heaven and Man Meet

From the 24th to the 29th of December 1991, Sun Yu-li is holding his first solo exhibition at the Singapore National Museum Art Gallery. The theme is “Quest - Where Heaven and Man Meet”.

“Quest” is the work of the poet Qu Yuan of the Chu Kingdom (340-278 B.C.). In his work, Qu Yuan raised a number of questions on universal phenomena and its legendary sayings. Sun Yu-li used “Quest” as his theme because he feels he has the same queries as the ancient poet.

There are over 40 works by Sun Yu-li in the exhibition representing his vein of thoughts that constantly probe the mysteries of the universe and man. He said that the universe started from a dot from which all variations are derived. This is understood by all. But where is the dot from? It is a question that reaches the highest level. For years he has pondered this mystery and finally concluded it is beyond the capability of man to answer this question. It can only be answered by God.

“Where Heaven and Man Meet” originated from the historian, Si Ma-Qian, of the Han Dynasty (145-87 B.C.). His book, “Shi-Ji”, had three aims - quest for where heaven and man meet, knowing the variations of ancient time till today, and establishing authoritative sayings. Therefore searching for the relationship between heaven and man has been a concern for both ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, philosophers and historians. In simple terms, “heaven” is nature and “man” is man. But strictly speaking, “heaven and man” implies much more than merely nature and man. We always say that “man can only attempt, but whether

he succeeds depends on heaven.” In this statement, heaven not only means nature, it also means opportunity and luck. “Man” in this case implies man’s subjective efforts. In Chinese philosophy, it is said that “heaven and man can be one”. It is one of the most widely studied topics of research. It is considered the basis of Chinese mentality and of the highest ideals of life. Sun Yu-li’s works cannot be separated from his unwavering attachment to the question of the relationship between heaven and man. They cannot be separated from his pursuit for the harmonious state of heaven and man. For example, his work “Heaven & Earth” symbolises the harmonious co-existence of yin and yang. It also contains ancient man’s thoughts of heaven as a circle and earth as a square. “Yin-Shang” symbolises man’s retracing the true meaning of life and the link between the ancient and modern. “Trace” symbolises man’s retrospective thinking of the marks left by civilisation and implies regressing to nature. “Harmony” symbolises the harmonious unity of all things in the universe, in which are hidden the veins and regulation of life.

Regressing to the Simple and Returning to the Truth

Some say that Sun Yu-li’s works are with a Zen flair. In fact the way to describe Sun Yu-li’s creative mentality and his works are regressing to the simple and returning to the truth. He likes to use squares and circles as his basic forms. They are the most primitive symbols and diagrams of man representing the finite and the infinite. In space and time, the conflicting pounding of finite and infinite represents the continual changing of state.

Sun Yu-li uses squares and circles because they are primeval. He believes that by going back to using these forms can one reach that primeval mentality and emotional state of early man.

Why does he want to bring man’s mentality to reach back to the primeval state? Sun Yu-li sighed, saying “In this world it is difficult to see things simple and unsophisticated. Things you see now are usually lacking in depth and are decorative. Although human civilisation is advancing continually, this pushing force is getting weaker. If this trend continues, man will be lost in an artificial and unreal world. If we can regress the position of our spirit and mind to the primeval state, then when we restart, man will be more confident and purposeful. The aim is to be able to walk further into the future.”

As a sculptor, his mind and his work contain deep thoughts that have been the concern of man for thousands of years. As an intellectual, I now feel a little at a loss.

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