

She Shi – Strolling In The Long River of History

Yu Wenrong

I gather lotus blooms across the stream,
In orchid swamps the fragrant flowers teem.
To whom am I to send this sweet bouquet?
The one I love is living far away.
——From Nineteen Old Poems

I always see Kelong as an artist strolling in the long river of history, and who will dwell in it eventually.

She-Shi (a Chinese term which can be roughly translated as wading through what one has to do) is not a complex concept, though its precise connotation is hard to tell. According to the famous painter Pa Ta Shan Jen, a leading artist of the early Qing Dynasty, “A day of She-Shi means a day of painting”. I guess he was referring to a Zen motto, “no doing, no eating”. The late Pa Ta Shan Jen made a living by painting, so painting was his way of doing.

Painting is Kelong's mode of living too.

She-Shi indeed has many connotations. In Chinese language, the first character implies that we are dealing with a complicated and volatile world with undercurrent, in which the good and the bad are mixed. The second one tells us that doing is our duty, as the classic Shuo Wen Jie Zi (The Origins of Chinese Characters) indicates. It also tells us that in doing what we have to do, we are making history. Therefore, in Shuo Wen it has stated: “Shi, the person who records history.” It also says that the one who gives orders is called “Li”, the official; and the one who runs errands is called “Shi”, the servant. Everything we do becomes history. According to Lao-tzu, everyone is doing things on his own initiative or not.

Pa Ta Shan Jen already made history. As for Kelong, She-Shi impels him to get involved not only in things but history.

Kelong and I both admire Pa Ta Shan Jen much. He once said, “We don't usually open Pa Ta Shan Jen's painting album as we please, afraid it would blaspheme the works”. We were fortunate enough to buy copies of Pa Ta Shan Jen's album Flowers On The River. Kelong paid homage to it by producing two oil paintings of his own, one of them was collected by me later.

Kelong first studied Chinese calligraphy when he was young, later he turned to oil painting at Nanking Art Academy. In my eyes, he was highly gifted. He was never institutionalized. He spent six to seven years painting in North Fujian Province and Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province. He knows that place so well that when I visited him at Da Likeng I realized he has already become an honorary villager in the eyes of the locals.

Kelong has lived in Fuzhou for many years, a city hailed as the capital of Chinese lacquer art. He was fascinated by lacquer yet suffered from allergy caused by it for ten years, a mixed pain of deep love and itch.

Kelong has practiced lacquer painting for over three years. I can see what he has been through from his works: fine lines of Chinese calligraphy, tranquil scenes of Southern China, and above all, romantic stories from history.

Kelong may not care for romantic themes, but I do. Zhang Chao, a famous writer of Qing Dynasty, once said, "Old people tell us that a life without flower, moon, and beauty is not worth living." I would say, "those who have no writing brush, ink, chess game and wine don't live as humans."

In fact, since the great poet Qu Yuan, romantic things have been endowed with plenty of morals. I appreciate literary works concerning romantic things, just the one I cited at the start of this preface. It is from the famous Nineteen Old Poems of the Eastern Han Dynasty (140A.D. – 190 A.D.). The four lines I cited match up with my understanding of Kelong's artist path and aspiration:

I am strolling in the long river of history,
Trying to get the cream of it.
Instead, I see myriads of treasures.
I pursue them for the truth within.

Although it becomes less poetic to impose specific meanings on a poem, my interpretation may still do justice to Kelong's art. One night after chatting with Kelong about She-Shi, I opened a book of Zen stories. I vaguely remembered one of them:

The master entered the classroom. He cited "I gather lotus blooms across the stream...The one I love is living far away." Then he asked, "Any questions?"
A monk asked, "Why did Dharma cross the Yangtze River?" The master answered, "He's pushing his way through water, it's none of your business!"
The monk asked, "What is the way?" The master replied, "Over the Wall." The monk stressed, "I'm asking for the direction of the way." "It leads to Chang'an," answered the master. Finally, I dropped the book and found myself trapped in a labyrinth.