TABLE TALK WITH KOH TAI ANN

‘We need a truly thinking society’

By Cheong Suk-Wai
Senior Writer

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ISITING the United States in the mid-1960s, the young Koh Tai Ann found herself going into the homes of poor people around Boston to tutor children. Professor Koh recalls: “Coming from Singapore, which had so many slums then; when I was in these homes, I said, ‘You call this poor?’ They had washing machines, TVs and gardens! So poverty is relative.” Few know poverty better than Prof Koh, who grew up in the slums of Chinatown in the 1950s. But by 1971, she had begun lecturing in the then University of Singapore’s Department of English. And later, she found not one, but the two chairs in Nanyang Technological University (NTU) between 1990 and 2006, a rare first among women.

Feisty and forthright, the literature don has advised the Government on arts, education and communication policies, and chaired the Speak Good English Movement from 2005 to 2008. She returned to full-time research last year and has since been busy writing a chapter on English in Singapore in the book Management of Success: Singapore Revisited, which was launched last week; guest-edited the Singapore-themed issue of the international transcultural literary journal Moving Worlds; and written an appendix on the topic of the late Goh Poh Seng’s first novel, If We Dream Too Long. She is also working on an upcoming book on the links between Singapore and Malaysian literature for the Malaysian literary journal Southeast Asian Review of English.

Now a senior associate at NTU’s Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Prof Koh reflects on a maturing Singapore thus:

What about Singapore today do you like?

Our famous pragmatism. Let’s be fair: Singapore is now a society that every underdeveloped country would like to be. It’s seen as a kind of paradise; everything works and we’re very proud to be Singaporean. As soon as I return to Changi Airport, even when I have been in the developed West – I say: “My God, I wish everybody could run things the way we do.” If you’ve been stuck in some capital cities for hours, you’ll realise immediately that we have a government that does look after every segment of society, and is incorruptible. So resources are freed back to the public.

But we don’t rank very high in the Happiness Index. Nor are we ranked highly in the Regularity of Sex Index.

So to what ends are our means leading us?

D.H. Lawrence asked the question of industrial England: “Where does all the go, go?” So once you’ve got your car, house and all that, you’ll come back to the question President S R Nathan asked in his recent book: “Why am I here?”

These days, people talk about tolerance as a virtue. But tolerance is a kind of sloth because it’s passive: you’re not doing bad, but neither are you doing good. So we have to ask: “What good can we all do?”

Is Singapore today among the best places to live in the world?

It is a Golden Age. Those of my generation who have lived in slums ourselves and seen the riots and so on are very grateful for what we are today. But being human, we are all fallible. That’s why we created religion, to keep ourselves in rein. What we need is a truly thinking society, not thinking for the sake of economic development, as such; but thinking of virtue as its own reward, when we do something for its own sake. If it’s recognised, good; if it’s not, well, you’ve done it and, in fact, feel happier.

But isn’t shunning self-interest unnatural and irrational?

“Do unto others as you would want others to do unto you” – that’s in all the major religions.

And we are an achievement-oriented and competitive society, and that’s the downside of meritocracy – the Devil take the hindmost. So there’s a lack of respect for non-achievers and subordinates. And also you want your children not to be non-achievers. So there’s that tendency to pressure your children. It’s about aiming for perfection and not being understanding of imperfection.

How much is our education contributing to this mindset?

The hard sciences were more valued in the early days of our development... So the best talent was channelled there. But, as E.M. Forster said in his novel Howards End, you need the prose, but you also need the poetry. Prose is the business, which provides the how-rightful for us to have the poetry, the arts.

It’s no coincidence that the arts scene here has grown as Singapore has become more developed. Now a state support for the arts is generally expected, but with that support comes expectations, which artists may not be able to meet. So we need a public that is well-educated in the humanities and fine arts, who’d support the arts such that artists do not look as much to state support.

Is it too late for all that?

No, I never think it’s too late... I’m a great believer in the parable of the sower and the seed, that if you scatter these seeds, some may fall on fertile ground and sprout immediately. Some may lie in a corner until one day, a shaft of sunlight or a bit of water gets to it.

Frankly speaking...

SHARP and succinct, literature don Koh Tai Ann champions the necessity of looking beyond the material. Here she is on the 3Cs of Singapore:

Constrained, constricted and cramped.

The importance of dialogue

“We have to let in more air. It might be hot air, but it still lets the issue rise nicely and then you bake a better cake. But if you blast cold air on it, the cake will sink!”

Idealism

“If the young are not idealistic, then who are? The old, with experience, tend to become disillusioned; it’s always an achievement if they don’t... and I think I may be one of those people!”

Why she is not afraid to speak up

“I’ve never felt that my job was at stake. This is not a totalitarian state.

And maybe I don’t take things to the extreme because the academy’s capacity for seeing both sides of the argument means that I do very often see that there are merits to other arguments.”

Civil society here

“Long ago, I said we seem to prefer civic society (consisting of) helping hands, rather than civil society (consisting of) thinking heads...”

Why passion counts

“In the Age of Reason, passion was looked down upon but the Romantics brought it back because rationality was in some ways imprisoning. As William Blake said: ‘Dame’s Braces: Blesss Relaxet.’”

Why Singaporeans seem brusque

“Action speaks louder than words, so you just act and not talk too much about it. And if work has to be done, why should you waste time making people feel good?”

Cheong Suk-Wai

Speaking of sprouting, you recently guest-edited a special issue on Singapore of Moving Worlds. What about the project struck you most?

Although I did not tell my contributors what to write – the theme being culture and the arts here – in one way or another, the pieces were all engagements with the state in one way or other. In every arena here, the state is so present... It’s not for nothing that people call it the Nanny State. But the state would say: “Well, if we were not keeping everything in order, there might be anarchy.” It’s fulfilled its responsibility and its punchline is: “You elected us.” The thing is, are your good intentions what the recipients of your actions agree with?

There’s a pragmatic tendency in Singapore culture to agree so as not to seem disagreeable. But ultimately, it’s also quite corrupting because it results in a certain inauthenticity... It’s in the Asian culture to defer to authority and so leave decision-making to the state. But individuals might want to take matters into their own hands.

So why haven’t they done so?

In addition to school-based boys’ networks, there is also national service, which nurtures an officer corps that formed the male-dominant elite in the public and quasi-public sectors. This elite is a product of the hard sciences, resulting in a hard-nosed administrative culture that tends to be unsympathetic and, to the untrained eye, somewhat lacking in some of the so-called “soft” aspects of culture, including the arts and women’s experiences. It’s little wonder that Singapore’s major achievements are all in engineering – be it infrastructure or social engineering.

So what might temper such a hard-nosed culture?

Literature in general teaches us coherency and cogency, which we lack today because our attention is distracted by too many things. Literature leads you everywhere – into history, philosophy, psychology... So by making us reflect on these, literature is an antidote to an age of distractions, and also educates our imagination.

You’ve said this and more on many advisory committees. But how much have your views counted, really?

Well, you never know... Many a time at meetings, I’ve thrown up an idea and it’s been resisted. But then somebody – usually me and so perhaps more listened to – would see my point and argue it. And so the idea gained traction.

Being so outspoken, how have you survived this long?

I’m very frank but people do value honesty and integrity and I’ve tried to maintain that. I just do things according to my principles; I do not owe loyalty to persons. Nor am I overawed by authority. Sometimes people in authority value this because they know where I come from. suk@spk.com.sg