

# COMMEMORATIVE LECTURE

## “The Relation Between the Past, the Present and the Future of Khmer Culture and Arts: Peace, Balance, and Spiritual Harmony through Khmer Celestial Arts”

### CHHENG Phon

First of all, I would like to deeply thank the 8th Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize Committee for bestowing their Grand Prize Award to me this year.

#### My Personal History and My Drama

My father was a school master. My mother died when I was eight. Ten years later, my father passed away. I went through a very lonely childhood being an orphan without any brothers or sisters. In 1945, I lived and studied with monks in a pagoda. From 1946 to 1948, I was brought up by my widowed aunt who had five children and who made a living selling mixed vegetables.

I continued my schooling after my father's death in 1949. At that time, I lived with other people and worked by carrying water and washing clothes.

Cambodia had almost nothing after the Second World War. Without proper school supplies, poor children went through much hardship. Despite such struggles, I persevered after seven years of study to graduate from the Kampong Cham Primary School in 1951 to receive my primary and complementary certificate. I then entered the Phnom Penh School of Pedagogy (School of teachers) in 1952.

As an orphan, I used to be looked down by every social circle. Being fed up, I became tired of living, turned delirious and started looking back at the past with nostalgia. I was not good at studying, always failing examinations. Strongly disappointed of my fate and dissatisfied with my only nature given character, I started to be drawn to Dramatic Arts (plays) where so many roles and lives are enacted. I preferred to play the role of a clown which was highly optimistic on stage. However, in real life, I was a serious pessimist.

Willing to live such a creative life, I became a very well-known clown among the students at the school. I, myself, had no happiness at all, but I was able to provide much entertainment to my friends. For instance, quite often, as I had nothing to wear to go to a friend's wedding, my friends would bring me borrowed clothes so I could accompany them to entertain them.

During 1955-1956, after Cambodia won her independence, a theatrical troupe was created under the sponsorship of the State. Because of a lack of actors, the director of the troupe asked me at the school to perform the first play entitled “The Student's Fate”.

I graduated from the pedagogy school in 1956 but did not go to teach children. I joined the national troupe instead. There were many plays I acted in such as “The Dancing Stone”, “Miss Chariya”, “Our Elder Brother”, “A Beloved Ring” and “Love Experiment”.

#### The Encounter with My Teacher

My teacher, professor Hang Thun Hak, was the only Cambodian dramatist who had studied performing arts in France. He joined the independence movement against French colonialism of Khmer Issarak with Soen Ngoc Thanh (a Khmer leader for independence at that time) at Dangrek Mountain Chain. After the Geneva Treaty, Prof. Hang Thun Hak returned to Phnom Penh where he became my

Dramatic Arts teacher. He was a broad minded artist with highly-animated ideals. He also was my very best father. I still remember very well the day he ordered his car driver to pick me up. He then convinced me to take his examination which I, at the time, had no intention of taking.

He blamed me often for my reluctance to go study abroad. When I finally decided to study in China, he saw me off at the airport where he gave me a small package of clothes.

Prof. Hang Thun Hak was a keen and excellent leader. He started work early in the morning and went to bed late at night. He was very good at writing plays. Once he started writing, it was as if a spirit had entered his body.

Thanks to his untiring help in supporting me, I became a qualified professor of art. Prof. Hang Thun Hak eventually became the Prime Minister of Cambodia, but was executed during the Pol Pot Regime (1975-1978).

## Drama and Life

I first realized in life that nothing pleased me more than being an actor. The atrical stage was the true Universe to me. It was created when the curtains went up and died when the curtains closed. On stage, many were born, many died and many experienced love, hatred, pleasure, anger and even fear. Life in Drama (stage performance) displays the plentiful aspect of human life. I am therefore strongly convinced that the rough, sulky, bored and distressful state of the human character is eliminated by the almost superhuman expressive performance of an actor. Furthermore, it is through his best performance that he can minimize stressful dilemma.

Later on, I profoundly learned that "Drama is life and Life, Drama". Even after my death, the Life of Drama in me will live on. And at last, I realized that the Body enhances the Mind. Those who come to see plays come to receive the "Mind" from the performance. In the end, the Body and Mind fuse and disappear. This is the last view on Celestial Arts which objectively guides people into celestial bliss.

The definition, positioning, role and objective of Drama are deemed very important for human life. For this reason, I would like to dedicate my life to the following tasks:

- (1) Conducting research studies, compilations and effecting preservation of all forms and essences of existing Cambodian Dramatic Art.
- (2) Disseminating, educating and training the younger generation in the spiritual value of Khmer Dramatic Art.
- (3) Revitalizing Khmer Drama within the lifestyle of the Cambodian people. The past is still important for the present. Every flower has the right to be on stage, even though it may grow in the remote mountain jungle.

Material disowns Material. Useless preservation means death. The monkey's tail disappeared because it no longer was useful. Form without essence is comparable to a cage without sparrows or life without charm. Form can not, of course, reject essence, but it can betray or prevent essence from developing. Essence can deny form or destroy form when deemed inappropriate. The essence of morality, virtue and wisdom is portrayed in all forms of drama, wherever it is developed. Virtue and wisdom are vital to human life irregardless of how much material and technology may progress.

The works of arts and culture are properly and closely connected with humans and/or between humans and their future destiny. Cultural and artistic achievements lead the people of the world to move closer to each other, to understand each other, to tolerate each other and to peacefully live with each other.

Art and culture develop to maintain a proper balance between the inner and outer worlds, material and spirits, the body and the mind, intelligence and the environment. Spiritual culture takes the world through ignorance and gloom which are the main causes of life suffering.

Inner peace (peace of mind) generates outer peace (global peace). Inner morality engenders outer peace. Peaceful people bring about social peace, leading to global peace.

The most appreciated compliments come from the people and the masses. Actually, once performing arts are scheduled, thousands of Cambodian spectators come to these events carrying their children on oxen-carts. They arrive and prepare food around an open stage waiting for the artistic performance with joy. As a performing artist, this gives me great honor. Every year, hundreds of our artistic performances are given to entertain state leaders, members of Parliament, national and international guests, and regional townspeople and villagers.

## Preservation of Art

In order to preserve arts and culture, there are obstacles and hardship to overcome. Cambodia was no different. Prior to 1964, folklore dance and ethnic minority art in Cambodia were not popular nor were they appreciated by the public. They were in a state of virtual nonexistence. Yet there was a movement to strengthen these forms of art during the civil war which took place between 1964 and 1975.

Difficulty arose after the Polpot regime took over in 1975. At the time, the two currents in Cambodian culture, being the court culture and that of the masses, were in a state much like an amputation of both legs. Many cultural assets were destroyed and artists, killed.

When the Polpot regime perished on January 7th in 1979, we were finally liberated. However, we had to start from scratch, from the very beginning to restore our arts and culture. In Cambodia, only 10% of her artists survived the slaughter.

The urgent and important task of the time, was to identify what human and material resources had survived. To achieve this goal, many national festivals were initiated. Both regional and provincial meetings were actively implemented at the grass roots level as well as efforts made to register statistics on our remaining cultural resources. In one year, professional art festivals were put on to strengthen professional artists. In another year, festival on the arts of the masses were put on to promote non-professionals who had been trained by professional artists.

In the six month period during the rainy season, artists were usually assembled to conduct research as well as to realize artistic achievements such as in drama, dance, music and poetry. Thereafter, during the six month period of the hot season, these artistic achievements were brought in to entertain teachers, students and the grass roots elements in every district and province of the country. Being fully educational, these performances are put on to regain the hope and confidence of people, and to bring a light of identity to themselves so they can deal with their problems, themselves, before depending on others.

Effective preservation of arts and culture is to enable people to participate in preserving and protecting their ancestral culture. By realizing the genuine value of their culture, people can rediscover their national identity and find the joy of human life.

Gradual loss of our senior artists is a phenomenon which should be looked upon with concern. This is because artists have different vocations and personalities. The current status of cultural activity in the area of compilation and dissemi-

nation is still limited. The situation regarding materials and financial possibilities are also weak.

## Future Goal

Now I would like to speak on our future goal. Objectively, what is researched and compiled must be carefully preserved. We should also continue to research on what is lost/uncovered and on what is being lost. For instance, the conservation and tape recording of 1212 pieces of music, poetry and song are essential. Also, the preservation of the 60 methods on reciting Khmer poetry along with its 53 styles of writing and the 4500 languages of Cambodian classical dance must be realized. I believe that the construction of the best theater in the country is needed to heal the spirit of the Cambodian people.

In order to increase excellence in art achievement, we must strengthen education and the dissemination of arts and culture, especially with regards to educating our younger generation. We also have to effect important accomplishments in preservation to benefit people of all age and of all nations.

Next, I would like to touch on some of my expectation I have for the future.

Currently, material for human life is gradually being perfected. However, the human spirit is becoming dilapidated. Vengeance, hatred, tormenting threat, mistreatment, tense situation and daily concerns make life chaotic.

Material perfection does not necessarily render happiness to human life. The beauty of the body does not equate to the purity of the mind at all. Misunderstanding in life increases illusions. Proper life has no greed, but full of compassion and tolerance.

With my love for the arts and culture and a strong commitment to our future generation, I gave much of my effort, energy, and time to help rebuild the University of Fine Arts, especially after its devastating destruction during the revolutionary period of the Khmer Rouge (1975-79). In fact, I led the revival of Khmer culture and arts, not only to keep them alive but also to see their flower blossom again. In my life, I have only two goals.

One is to research, collect empirical data and information, and to revitalize Khmer culture and arts as well as Khmer traditions, customs and values. This first goal has already been achieved to some degree.

Second is to help rebuild Khmer values, morality and philosophy which are fundamentally an important source of Khmer wisdom. This second goal is being carried out gradually through the Vipassana program, a kind of spiritual training through meditation to restore Khmer morality. To achieve this goal, I have built an open-air museum with a library and a Center of Culture and Vipassana on two hectares of land I own in south Phnom Penh, to serve the needs and benefits of all people.

I believe the honor which has been bestowed upon me through receiving the 8th Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize is the result of many.

First of all, I would like to thank our ancestors and brave artists. For so many generations spanning thousands of years, they have subsequently sacrificed their lives to preserve Cambodian cultural heritage, whether tangible or not. Secondly, I must give my gratitude to my teachers and professors in art for offering me an untiring amount of advice.

Thirdly, I was fortunate in being able to continue with my patient, persevering efforts through a prolonged struggle which began in 1951. Even during the Polpot regime, I used to receive warnings on my dancing gestures: "Do that again and you're dead" I was often told. This was a frightening experience.

On this great honorable occasion, I would like to dedicate this Grand Prize to my brave artists and to all of my teachers, irregardless of whether they are alive or not. May they accept my profound gratitude.

In other words, I wish to consider this magnificent honor as an honor bestowed to my country.

Finally, I would like, once again, to respectfully thank Mayor Kuwahara of the City of Fukuoka, Mr. Kawai, the Chairman of the Yokatopia Foundation, members of the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize Committee, the citizens of Fukuoka, and the people of Japan, for conferring this grateful and unforgettable Grand Prize Award to me.

May you be very happy and prosperous. May Compassion and Tolerance prevail forever in this changing world.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.