



MY LIFE JOURNEY

THE RUGGED WALK

ED MUN

Kanyin[®]
PUBLICATIONS

CONTENT

01

Art shaped me

02

Life is a gamble

Businessman by chance

03

04

Making a statement
in this industry

The birth of S.U.A.
(Space Utilization Analyst)

05

06

The glory

07

The turbulence (downfall)

08

Climb back

09

The new me

10

Giving back to the community

Not how to live but how to die

11

The design industry -
The ugly truth

12

13

Passing the baton

My past created me

14

The day the world bow


15

16

The colour of my journey

Beginning anew -
The birth of a movement

17



01

Art shaped me



□ The heavenly back lane.
The best memories of my childhood.

It is the 22nd of May 2021, in Kuala Lumpur, the capital and largest city in Malaysia. The morning sun's light dapples through the trees as it reveals the colour of my hair and how my mind & body have been connected with a balanced mixture of black and white. Having negotiated all the distance between these two extreme colours, I am much more refined now.

Manifested by a warm grey, this colour of complexity seems to be perfectly neutral. Its warmth has now given me the push to begin something that has been on hold for a long time. Today, I am penning down my life's journey although it is neither a day of special occasion nor an auspicious one. After all, according to the famous Italian painter, Leonardo da Vinci, "A grey day provides the best light".

Recollecting my childhood days, when I was only seven, I used to gaze at all the things around me, objects and people on the bus, trees by the side of the road, objects along the road, or whatever was surrounding me. I had a special way of seeing things. I used to scan the whole picture which sparked a curiosity in me and I began to ask myself a ton of questions: "What is it? How does it work? Why is it that way?"

In a family with three siblings, I was born as the second son with an older sister and two younger brothers. We were living in a rented room, in a wooden house located in Sentul Pudu, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was a slump village back then. Unlike modern homes, the toilet was located outside the house and it was to be shared amongst the villagers in the village. The tiny room did fit all of us and in those days, sleeping on a mat was a luxury.

My dad was a carpenter and my mom a homemaker.

Sometimes we were unable to eat, simply because we had neither money nor essential food items. Going on an empty stomach most of the time was nothing unusual when the usual was experiencing hunger pangs. Having to get a chance to enjoy a meal a day was a blessing.

Once, as all the gnawing pangs of hunger attacked, I crawled and combed each square inch of our room in search of something that could satisfy my hunger. At other times, I tied a wet towel tight around my growling belly. It is a skill I learned to cope with my hunger, just to survive another day.

Soon, my family was asked to vacate our rented room for some development. We had to move out and luckily for us, we managed to find a house at Sea Park Petaling Jaya and rented it immediately. It was a single-storey house with four rooms - one room for all of us, and my parents rented out the rest of the three rooms to students. I was only nine, but I remember the location of the house and it was house number 42.

During the '70s, we were able to rear poultry in the residential area within the vicinity of our home compound. Having a meal of chicken was an exclusive affair then. We only had chicken or duck on special occasions such as the Chinese New Year and special prayers that totaled up to only twice a year. My family couldn't afford to buy them, so we reared them. I loved all the animals that we reared and I remember when my mom slaughtered the chicken, I would be sad because I was the one who had been feeding them and cleaning the chicken coops.

My father owned a scooter and it was our family transport. Both my sisters and I would be squatting near the leg rest. One squeezing between my dad and mom and the youngest would be held in my mother's arms. Six of us on a bike was normal back then. No helmet was required and it was not a traffic offence.

I was happy. I got to know everyone in our neighbourhood from the houses at one end all the way to those at the other end of the road. Safety was not an issue back in the early '70s. Houses were without grills, and house gates were always open, ready to welcome friends and neighbours of any ethnicity - that was the true Malaysia I knew then. All my friends were of different colours, and we enjoyed every moment we had together.

We were somewhat of the same age range and often got together during the evenings. Almost every single day, at five in the evening, we would gather in the lane at the back of the house. We would play simple games to keep ourselves entertained. One of my favourite ones was "Throwing Slippers"; where we would stack up slippers vertically into pyramids and make a throw with another slipper. Sometimes we replace the slippers with cards arranged at a distance and use a slipper to make the throw. The cards would have superhero images such as Ultraman and so forth. Baseball was played without any bats or balls but sticks.

Unlike the busy main road, the back lane was rather safe. The only vehicles that passed by were the bicycles or motorbikes owned by the neighbours and the bread vendor who sold cookies and bread. All the neighbours - adults and kids would be crowding around him. If some-

one from the neighbourhood was ever short of any grocery item; for example - eggs, sugar, and so on; another neighbour would provide it to them without any question. When cookies or cakes were prepared, they would be shared with everyone and we would have a mini party in the back lane with freshly baked delicacies from the oven!

There would be smiles everywhere as we relished the bites of cookies and cake.

Those were the good times. That's the picture I had seen every single day of my life at that point. That's how I would like to remember my childhood.

When I was 12, my father's hard-earned savings came to good use. The savings were enough to acquire a double-storey house in SS2, Petaling Jaya. For me, it was a sad moment though, as I had to leave all my close friends behind.

I was studying in a primary school then and landed in a school with students from different racial backgrounds - Indian, Malay, Chinese, and Eurasian. "Art" was the only subject that had kept me through school and in which I was doing very well. With sensitivity towards the beauties of art and nature, I drew whatever I saw, be it the sand, trees, wall, or paper, my tiny fingers drew relentlessly. It was then I found "Art" as a form of inspiration in life.

I lugged papers and pencils wherever I went, and I would start drawing at the end of my destination. It may be at a place with objects, scenery, vehicles, and whatever passes by. Although I was barely ten, deep in my heart I knew that I wanted to become an artist.

My dad observed my potential and enrolled me in an art class taught by Master Phoon Poh Hoong, a renowned local artist in Malaysia who had won many awards. He specialised in Chinese painting and oil painting. My art sessions with him were on Saturdays. I would look forward to them and I had never missed any classes. That was how I had spent my Saturdays for the next seven years until he passed away - he, who was my teacher, and my most adored mentor. My master conducted the art classes at his house which was located in Taman Aman, Petaling Jaya.

It was about 15km from where I stayed and I would cycle my way there. The art class included students from a very young age of eight to adults. My teacher who was quite popular back then is still remembered by the Chinese Artist circle.

As a student under his wing, my master had recommended that I work for his brother, Mr Phoon Poh Whang, a well-established architect. I worked for him as an apprentice during school term breaks. The firm, also known as *Akitek JuaraReka* was within walking distance from my home. I had always looked forward to work as each day passed was a day full of knowledge and I was loved by fellow colleagues.

Besides drawing, I was in charge of printing, organising drawings, filing, and even despatching at the architectural firm. The company had two bosses and I had to serve both of them doing their errands because I was the youngest and an apprentice. I got them their groceries and household items. Apart from that, I helped my seniors to prepare documents, drawings, carry their bags, and buy their meals and coffee. No complaints but I was glad that I could serve them and was always grateful to be given that chance. I felt useful. The good thing is I got

to learn architecture at a very young age, which helped me understand art and architecture.

Unfortunately, my memory of my teenage years was less than phenomenal. For starters, between the ages of thirteen to seventeen, my time was all spent doing work. My teenage years were taken away. I was the eldest amongst my brothers but not the favoured one in my family.

I was constantly rebuked and bashed for any of my wrongdoings. I would be the first to get punished even when my younger brother was at fault. That was something I did not understand back then. I had to hide my tears because I would be punished further if I had been caught crying.

Nevertheless, I was the most obedient and I felt it was my responsibility to take care of all my siblings' affairs. Hence, helping my parents without any complaints were my responsibility as a child. My family was rather conservative. I was not allowed to ask questions and speak up without any good reason. I would constantly get smacked. My lack of confidence must have come from the ongoing stressful and extremely critical life.

The year was 1980, my mom opened a furniture showroom in Subang Jaya, Selangor. The funds to open the showroom were acquired from the mortgage of our house that we lived in. I still remember it was about RM80,000. It was a huge loan at that time.

My teenage days were hard on me, I didn't have my own time. To me, normal teenage life would usually include playing video games, watch-

ing movies, sports, and so on. I didn't have a chance to be a teenager. I had no school friends. I didn't have time to hang out.

My parents were so engrossed with the business and had no time for the family at all. Every single day after school, I had to work at my father's carpentry factory. My colourless sweat smothers me as I dry wet timber until the late evenings and move furniture to my mother's furniture showroom after.

There was no colour in my life. I neglected my studies due to this routine. Anyway, education was not looked upon seriously in our family, my parents were too busy focussing on survival and thus, family values were not prioritised. I guess that was when our family bond began to fall apart.

Creating art was always a way out for me, it had given me a healthy outlet to express and let go of all my feelings. I guess art had given me a chance to slow down and explore the issues I was having such as growing up in a family where attention was not given. I didn't do well in school, except in art. It was then that I felt everything was crumbling down.

As a full-time apprentice, most of my time was dedicated to working at the architect firm. I was paid RM150 per month. I was comfortably and happily working there, until my master Mr Phoon told me to pursue a course as an interior designer... Interior Designer?

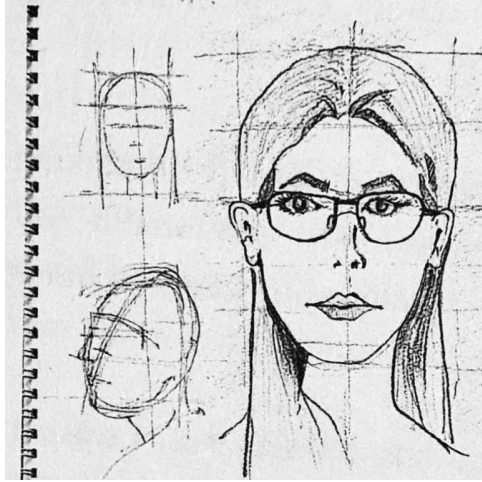
A profession that was alien during the mid-'80s. Nevertheless, I trusted my mentor who had my interest at heart as I was his most loyal student. My dream had always been to be like my master, to become an

artist. I asked, “Why be an interior designer and not an artist?” And I remembered his words until today, “to become an artist, you need to be famous and that’s the only way you can survive”. It took me a long while to understand the reason behind it.

Later on, I found out that my father hadn’t been paying fees for my art class. It had been going on for several years. Yet my art master continued to teach me because I was a good student. I was not informed back then, but I appreciate the support and advice given to me.

The answer to his suggestion lies in the fact that my family’s business was failing, and the only way closest to art that is feasible in a way I can be of good use is to explore interior design.

I could not have become an architect then unless I pursued an architecture course. In the back of my head, I knew my results at school would have not qualified me to enrol in the course, and thus, interior design was the only option.



So I bit the bullet, I listened to my master to pursue my career as an interior designer and I tendered my resignation to my boss. Initially, he couldn't accept it and warned me that there would be no future in interior design. My decision was clear, as I had always looked up to my master as my mentor and his advice would always be in my best interest. My architect boss finally accepted my decision. I loved working there, and leaving all my colleagues was a painful experience.

The only college that offered interior design was the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA). I signed up for the course and met the Head of the Department, Ms Liew, a reputable artist. She rejected my application because my SPM (equivalent to O levels) results were not good enough. I pleaded with her to accept me but she was hesitant. I did not give up, I met her for three consecutive days. I waited outside the MIA building and pleaded with her to give me a chance. I suppose after seeing my persistence, she decided to make a deal with me. She asked me to produce three pieces of artwork for her on the spot and to my delight, I finally saw a door that was open for me. So I drew three pieces of artwork as she looked on. They were a tiger, a scenery, and a portrait.

The tiger was the first piece. I couldn't drag it too long as she might change her mind. So my lines were pretty simple to form the shapes of a tiger. The second piece was scenery. I had never been to a beach before. For the third piece, I chose to draw a portrait and I needed a reference. At that time, Ms Liew's face was the only one in my thoughts as I was pressed for time.



She must have been impressed with my work and had me promise not to disappoint her. She took me in. I was proud to be in the batch of 1985 in MIA.

“

I am blessed to be born
with less - like an empty
cup, ready to be filled up
with joy, pride,
compassion, bitterness,
love and happiness.

What can you fill your
cup with when it is full
from the beginning?

”

≡≡≡ *d. Mum.*