

A Brief Account of Tong Chek-sing and His Seal-carving Art

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As the old Chinese saying goes: “Serve a royal court if you want a reclusive life; live in a town if you prefer it in a mild way” (大隱隱於朝，中隱隱於市), virtuous and able people in history chose their affiliations as their temperaments dispose them. Thus wise men such as Hou Ying 侯嬴 and Lin Xiangru 藺相如 secluded themselves at royal courts, while chivalrous men like Jing Ke 荊軻 and Zhu Hai 朱亥 resided in towns, and the arts of Mei Shami 梅沙彌 (aka Wu Zhen 吳鎮), Shi Tao 石濤, Zhu Sansong 朱三松, Shi Dabin 時大彬 helped them socialize with art lovers from both the court and the commonalty. “A gentleman can find himself in no situation in which he is not himself” (君子無入而不自得), indeed. And Tong Chek-sing 唐積聖 was one good example.

Beginning of the inclination

A native of Lian County in Guangdong, Tong Chek-sing (1920–2010) came to settle in Hong Kong after the war. Working for a newspaper in his early days, he demonstrated unparalleled skills in carving types. Though such printing technique has become obsolete with the advance of computer typesetting, the artist was able to transfer his ingenuity in carving to other artistic pursuits and expand a much wider domain for himself. Tong began to dedicate himself to cutting collectibles in his thirties. He could work on different materials, such as copper, porcelain, clay, jade, bamboo, wood and stone; nothing was beyond his mastership. He particularly excelled in cutting jade seals, his signature craft.

As Tong himself recalled, his picking up the art was rather unusual. As a child he had a fondness for carving, always chipping and cutting any bamboo, wood and stone pieces at his disposal. Coming from a family of religious background, the young churchgoer made friends with an old engraver who, suffering from glaucoma, was deserted by his apprentices. Recognizing Tong's talent and enthusiasm, the old artisan asked him for help. Tong was then initiated into the art. The master himself was good at handling all kinds of materials, and as a helper, Tong had to work on stone, bamboo, wood and the like, anything that came to his hands. At the end, jobs received by the old artisan became Tong's assignments, which enabled him to hone his skills to professional competence.¹

Tong began to work for newspapers during the Sino-Japanese war. At that time, illustrations on newspapers were woodblock prints, electroplated blocks were rarely used in printing. When he was working for a newspaper in Shaoguan, Tong teamed up with the cartoonist Chan Chi-dor 陳子多, carving the illustrations drawn by Chan on woodblocks for printing on the newspaper.

Tong joined Yiyi Seal Society 藝一印社 as an employee when he settled in Hong Kong after the war. The owner, Ho Siu-foon 何筱寬, was himself a seal-carving artist who also took up assignments of various kinds, including company chops and private seals with wood, stone, ivory, jade and all other sorts of materials. When He was overwhelmed with work, he would delegate the jobs to Tong. Carving seals gradually became Tong's major duty. He could work on any materials, but mostly jade.

The art of seal-carving began to take off in Hong Kong in the 1950s. Many famous seal artists in Guangdong, because of political changes, came to settle in Hong Kong and Macau one after another. Among them were Tang Yi-nga 鄧爾雅, Fung Sze-hon 馮師韓, Fung Hong-hou 馮康侯, Jian Qinzhai 簡琴齋, Liu Yulin 劉玉林, Chan Yu-san 陳語山 and Zhang Xiangning 張祥凝. They split their time between mentoring apprentices and offering professional service. Yiyi Seal Society at that time served as a correspondence address for the artists. Many of them often came to collect assignments and chatted. One of the most frequent visitors was Tang Yi-nga.

Sometimes, Tang Yi-nga would set to work immediately at the society when he received an assignment. Tong remembered that Tang used his tools briskly and neatly, with a masterly handling of the script style (*Zhuanfa* 篆法), carving (*Daofa* 刀法) and graphic composition (*Zhangfa* 章法). He could complete a seal with ease and deliver the job instantly. It was a good opportunity for Tong to watch how Tang worked and to ask him, occasionally, questions about seal cutting. Tang never hesitated to share his unreserved opinions with anyone who came to him for advice. As Tong recalled, Tang were often accompanied by his students like Liu Yulin and Zhang Xiangning when he came. They were also accomplished in seal-carving and would engage Tong in many insightful and interesting discussions about the art. These encounters would prove to be pivotal to Tong's pursuits in seal-carving.

The art of seal cutting by materials

Jade: Tong Chek-sing could work on different materials. In addition to cutting stone seals, he was also good at producing wood, bamboo-root and olive-pit seals. But it was his jade seals that gained him the most notable recognition.

Jade seals were reserved for the exclusive use by the privileged class in the Qin dynasty. It was not until the Han dynasty that common people were allowed to use jade seals. Like their copper renditions, jade seals used by government officials and individuals reached their pinnacle of refinement in the Han dynasty and then plateaued from the Six Dynasties onwards before regaining interest and momentum in the Qing dynasty.

According to Tong, the major difference between cutting a jade seal and a stone seal is that jade is much harder than stone. Carving jade seals therefore needs a special make of blade. Tong's graver for Carving jade was a gift from an Italian engraving artist, a fine tool made of high quality steel. He might use a mechanical drill to smooth the surface around the scripts carved, a process known as *Qi Dadi* (起大底 debasing).² But it makes no difference as far as the script style and graphic composition

are concerned. In Tong's opinion, carving jade should be the same as carving stone, "It must have a graceful tone and not be dull and boring, otherwise it will become lifeless." This explains why Tong's jade seals are richly infused with the flavour of a stone seal, making them remarkably unique. Judging only by the rubbings, some of his jade seals have fully expressed the characteristics of the stone seal-carving style of the Anhui and Zhejiang schools.

Ivory: Apart from being different from stone seals in hardness, ivory has veins, which means a special set of carving tools is needed. One of these ivory gravers is called "trailblazer" (*Kaishan Duo* 開山刀), which is used to smooth the surface of the seal. It is important that the carving of an ivory seal must be clear, neat and tidy, which is very unlike the tone of a stone seal. Many modern Guangdong seal-carving artists were under the influence of Huang Mufu 黃牧甫 of Anhui, whose brisk and neat carving applied exceptionally to ivory. It is little wonder that modern Guangdong artists like Tang Yi-nga and Fung Hong-hou were accomplished in carving ivory seals. Tong once said that he was inspired by Tang and Fung, having had the opportunity to observe the two masters at work and listen to their insightful comments and advice on carving ivory seals.

Bamboo, wood and steel: Tong could also work on materials like bamboo, wood, steal, clay, and crystal. He found bamboo and wood the most challenging of all. Bamboo and wood are not as hard as steel, jade and ivory though, their veins of certain patterns may easily mislead a graver. Besides, it is extremely difficult to bring out the calligraphic effect of some of the lines of the scripts used (e.g. *Shabi* 沙筆). A flaw in painting on materials such as bamboo and wood may relatively be easy to mask and remedy, a slip of the graver is irreversible. Carving bamboo and wood is by nature a daunting task, much more so when it involves fully expressing the spirit of the original calligraphy and painting. I had the good fortune of seeing several wood seals by Chen Mansheng 陳曼生 of the Qing dynasty, which are in fact not at all as fine as Tong's stones seals. In comparison, the several wood seals Tong cut for me were crafted with a rustic and natural aesthetic that surpassed Chen. This is probably because Tong was more competent than his predecessors in handling wood seals; and equally were the bamboo root seals he cut.

When inscribing on bronze or steel vessels, Tong had to resort to the use of a small hammer and chisel, since steel is a very hard metal and carving it is a much more time-consuming process than working on jade. Tong personally found working on old copper seals more challenging than on new ones because the surface of old copper seals were often pitted as a result of poor minting, which had to be carefully mended before carving.

Purple clay teapots: When dealing with purple clay teapots, Tong demonstrated a unique style which was different from that of the Yixing teapot gravers. Yixing in the Jiangsu province is the place where purple clay teapots are produced. The teapot gravers usually use wooden and bamboo tools to carve the clay vessels that are dry and yet to be fired. But Tong's work was done on fired pots by tracing the writing and painting drawn on them by artists. Purple clay pots are easier to work on, being not as hard as stone and jade. Tong believed that the appearance of the teapots might be altered during

the firing process, and the problem could thus be avoided if the carving was done on fired wares. Carving purple clay teapots, however, demands a greater skill in the control of the force exerted than working on materials like bamboo, wood, ivory and copper because the teapot may break even with the slightest mistake.

To conclude, the art of carving all kinds of seals or collectibles demands consummate skill and artistry, a desire to strive for continuous improvement towards ideal and perfection. Tong Chek-sing, who for decades personified an unwavering dedication to his art, was one such consummate professional. This explains why he was a sought-after collaborator by renowned modern Chinese artists of painting and calligraphy, including Chao Shao-an 趙少昂, Yeung Shan-sum 楊善深, Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤.

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Thomas Wai-hung Tang (written and edited), *Yun Quan Studio Art Series 1: Tea Rhythm: A Joint Creation of Three Hong Kong Artists* (Hong Kong: Kong-Au Development Company Limited, Yun Quan Studio, 2007). Painter: Chui Tze-hung; Carver: Tong Chek-sing; Macramé artist: Wong Chui-ying Angela

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¹ Editor's note: For all Tong's quotes, experiences and remarks, please refer to the author's interview with the artist, which is published in *Xianggang Yishujia Duihua* (香港藝術家對話錄 A Dialogue with Hong Kong Artists) (Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd, 1998), p.27-32 (in Chinese).

² Editor's note: In seal-making, there are two character styles: *Zhuwen* 朱文 (literally, "red characters") and *Baiwen* 白文 ("white characters"). A *Zhuwen* seal is carved into a raised relief to create imprints of red characters, whereas a *Baiwen* seal is carved in intaglio. The technique of *Qidi* 起底 (debasement, also known as *Qi Dadi* 起大底) is used on *zhuwen* seals to remove extraneous background, which is ground and polished to achieve a smooth surface.