



I am not a wen ren

by Amelia Loi

Widely acclaimed as “Wen Ren”, which is generally understood as intellectual, writer and radio show host Tsao Chip refutes the title as he defines it in a different way.

Mr Tsao, better known as To Kit, has impressed the public with his sarcastic style in his newspapers

columns, books, shows in Commercial Radio and in Television Broadcast Company and Asia Television Limited. He has many admirers who acclaimed him as “wen ren” and “Hong Kong’s first wit”.

Talking to *Varsity*, Mr Tsao denied both titles by shaking his head.

He thinks world-renowned author of Chinese martial arts novels and founder of Hong Kong Newspaper *Ming Pao*, Mr Louis Cha is more credible as the ‘first wit of Hong Kong.’ “In my eyes, Louis Cha is the first wit of Hong Kong. Not only in Hong Kong, but among all Chinese,” said Mr Tsao.

For the title of “wen ren”, Mr Tsao also refutes it with his own definition of intellectual in China’s context.

He said “Wen Ren” was a product of the traditional Chinese examination system. To him, it refers to those traditional Chinese intellectuals who appeared to have strong characters and did not go along the tides. They stood aloof from political and material pursuits.

“Wen ren’ is something very Chinese, and is a disrespectful term. Anyway I am too good for that,” said Mr Tsao. “Wen ren’ are expected to have strong characters, do not make money and live poorly. This is very stale and trite,” he said.

Another reason he does not consider himself as a ‘wen ren’ is his relationship with the media, in which he has been employed. He said he is like a lawyer, performing with the best of his professional skills and sometimes advocating something that he may not agree with. “I am only using my professional skills in languages to serve my client,” said Mr Tsao on his times as an editorial writer for a newspaper. “They pay me and so I work for them,” he said.

In contrast, he thinks a ‘wen ren’ works with a different mentality. “What a ‘wen ren’ writes should be what he strongly believes and what he really wants to write. But in these newspaper columns, I am just writing according to the stance and style of the newspaper,” Mr Tsao said.

Having grown up in a media family whose father was the deputy

editor-in- chief of *Ta Kung Pao*, a pro-Chinese newspaper and his mother was the editor, Mr Tsao was exposed to many literary classics at home since he was a child. He won many prizes in literature competitions when he was studying in the secondary school.

After graduating from the University of Warwick and London School of Economics and Political Science for his bachelor and master degrees respectively, he has worked for the media, including the British Broadcasting Corporation and two major Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong: *Ming Pao* and *Oriental Daily*.

He is critical of media in the territory.

“There is no freedom. There is no emperor, but the media enslaves themselves by performing self-censorship,” said Mr Tsao. He believes local journalists nowadays abuse their freedom in some aspects while giving up their freedom in others. “They have no courage to criticise political issues and instead they send paparazzi to disturb artists who are unable to defend themselves.”

His acrid tone in criticising Chinese culture and his admiration of the Western culture, especially the British culture, is prevalent in his writings and comments made on television and radio shows.

“Though there are many good aspects in Chinese culture, but there are few Chinese who have inherited the essence of them,” Mr Tsao said.

“Confucianism, after two thousand years, has proved itself to be a failure. It has been abused

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by people to deceive and to enslave others,” Mr Tsao said.

To Mr Tsao, Chinese culture has been debased and functionalized. He cited feng shui, a Chinese art in maintaining harmony between people and the environment, as an example. It has been misused and exploited by feng shui’s masters for profit.

“Chinese people have become more materialistic. Chinese culture by itself focuses on spiritual, rather than material matters. Killing wild animals for food and cutting down trees are regarded as a violation of

the spirit of Chinese culture,” said Mr Tsao.

“However, does Chinese culture works? If it works, why does China send students to study abroad? Why was imperial rule abolished and then the Republic of China was set up?” said Mr Tsao.

He admitted that he is an advocate of Western culture. “Wasn’t Dr Sun Yat-sen (the Chinese revolutionary and politician who overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911) also an advocate of Western culture?” Mr Tsao said.

He prefers to position himself

as a globalised Chinese. “It is the happiest thing to be,” he said.

He believes that Chinese people should become globalised. Lee Ang, the world-renowned Hollywood film director, and the famous architect Pei leoh-ming who designed the Bank of China Tower in Hong Kong are examples of successful globalised Chinese people, according to Mr Tsao.

To educate and inspire his two sons to be a globalised he has given them both Western stories such as the *Harry Potter* series as well as Chinese novels like *Journey to the West* to read. He also believes Japan is a good place to learn about Eastern culture, then he has taken them there to see cherry blossoms. And they went to Oxford to see the grand and historical architectures. “They were very happy about the trips,” he said.

“The offsprings of Chinese who live overseas like the daughter of late TV personality Lydia Shum, are very happy people. They have no unnecessary burden from Chinese culture,” said Mr Tsao.

Mr Tsao added that Chinese culture should not be a burden to Chinese. “As a Chinese person, one should inherit the essence of a Chinese. They are gifts from parents and family relationship,” he said. “But promoting Chinese culture is definitely a burden.”

However, Mr Tsao said he would not encourage his students to promote Chinese culture. “This is not my responsibility. It is too heavy a burden for me to bear,” said Mr Tsao, who is a part-time lecturer at the School of Journalism

and Communication in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Mr Tsao believes that Chinese culture does have some values worth learning, so he exposes his students to films and books that embody or promote the culture. For example, he recommended *Kwaidan* which is a horror movie produced by Japanese director Masaki Kobayashi. According to Mr Tsao, this movie adopted the same way of telling ghost stories as the one used in “*Liaozhai Zhiyi*”, a classic Chinese novel about ghosts. “You see, the Japanese have has successfully utilised Chinese culture,” he said.

Apart from bestowing his knowledge on his students, Mr Tsao also teaches them how to think. “I try to teach them how to think decently and rationally, how to judge and how to appreciate,” he said.

He mentioned that some students grumbled that what they have learnt from school cannot be applied in the ‘real world’. “It is useless when you are a fresh graduate. But it becomes useful when you are at the management level ten years later,” he said.

Mr Tsao again shook his head again while talking about his future plans. “I haven’t thought of that. I am used to taking actions but not simply talking. That’s what a British person will do,” he said.

Mr Tsao said that freedom, health and happiness are the most important things to him now. He agreed that anywhere having freedom and taste would be his home. “I have an English passport and I think that my home is in England,” said Mr Tsao. ■