

SOME THOUGHTS ON EXPECTATIONS: THE SECOND MUSIC EDUCATION ALLIANCE ACROSS THE BELT AND ROAD CONFERENCE, CCOM BEIJING, 2019

Interview with Sarath Chandrajeewa (University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo) by Gisa Jähnichen (Shanghai Conservatory of Music)

Abstract

This interview is to review the event of the THE SECOND MUSIC EDUCATION ALLIANCE ACROSS THE BELT AND ROAD CONFERENCE, CCOM BEIJING, 2019, as well as the thoughts of a participant who is one of the most recent members of this initiative. He is also one of the authors in this volume representing the case that a co-operation of this format should always be substantiated by active research.

Keywords: Interview, Silk Road Culture, Co-operation, Education, China, Sri Lanka

In the context of this high-ranking event conducted at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing (Chen Nan, 2019), I had the chance to ask an invited guest some questions arising from the program. The person I asked came from Sri Lanka being the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sarath Chandrajeewa. His expertise regards sculptures and rather ancient architecture. As one of the very few, he contributed an academic talk to the discussion meetings that were organized for all leading people from various Music Academies, Arts Universities, and University Faculties during the 3-day event from 29 April to the 1 May 2019. I admired his determination in dealing with any kind of request and his strong will to make the best out of any difficult situation.

At current times in Sri Lanka, the reputation of close connections to China is not very high. However, being different from what is often propagated, the facts do speak another language and there are many facts and details to be considered.

I present the questions and answers as they were put and answered by Sarath Chandrajeewa directly here:

Question 1: Do you think that the idea of a network of education and artistry that is growing along an old trade route (Silk Road) and now along a route of global co-operators can have a lasting impact on the different regions which are touched by this route?

This is an attractive concept and is activated at this moment showing first results. The old Silk Road is mainly a trade route. However, also knowledge and wisdom travelled through this road in ancient times. One interesting example is the Chinese monk Faxian who walked along this route in the 5th century AD. He travelled from China to Sri Lanka using sometimes caravans. He was passing the Taklamakan Desert, one of the dangerous deserts in the world. After reaching India he had taken a trade ship to cross the Palk Strait and stayed in the Abhayagiriya Monastery of Sri Lanka for two years. He collected Buddhist teachings of Vinaya Pitaka and went back to China using the sea route of the Silk Road.

This story is well-known to many scholars and Buddhist laymen. Interesting is the fact that this story could be taken as a metaphor in not only showing the positive results, but also the way of sacrificing

comfort in order to achieve the necessary changes in life. Not only for nations and regions, but also in the personal view of a single human being. Sarath Chandrajeewa continues:

There are benefits of education and artistry, especially in music, dance, visual arts and any craft. There were many Chinese exhibitions, concerts and cultural shows in the past years in Sri Lanka and a lot of students have opted to study in these streams. To my knowledge, eight students have enrolled in Chinese universities to study music and visual arts in the past year.



Figure 1: Prof. Dr. Sarath Chandrajeewa playing on a replica of a lithophone exhibited in the small museum of the Central Conservatory of Music, Beijing, China (30 April 2019, photo by Gisa Jähnichen).

These might be just numbers to others, but studying abroad is a very sensitive issue for Sri Lankan students. There are destinations that are traditionally held in high regard such as any university situated in the UK or US, at least in Australia or New Zealand. The option to study in Asian universities is often disregarded as not being good enough. The only exception is India, where most Sri Lankan students who want to study abroad may go for a few reasons such as low admission fees, familiarity with living patterns, and simply tradition.

The purpose of the event in Beijing could not be made clearer than with the words of Sarath Chandrajeewa:

Various countries participated in the recently held ‘The Second Music Education Alliance across the Belt and Road Conference’. This shows their motivation to enter the network of music education and artistry. Also, the Sixtieth anniversary of the Shandong University of Arts was held last year in October 2018 with a participation of 32 fine arts universities from all over the world. All attendees were leading artists. China is a country with an impressive cultural history and products. This all attracts other countries. It also is a meeting point for global cooperators. So, these regions can have a lasting impact of education and artistry depending on the political and economic stability of each country.

Without saying it, he expresses that economic stability is a basic precondition for any cooperation. This is what the event in Beijing tried to convey: finding stability and balance. There is nothing to be prioritized: the arts, economy, infrastructure, everything is important and depends on each other. This is what Sarath Chandrajeewa has to say about what he thinks could be changed to the better, more effective and more helpful in the future of arts education:

Language barriers should be minimized. Cultural shows, exhibitions, and education systems that not only talk about teaching but also about learning should be subject of exchange activities.

The future of arts education depends on the cultural values and thoughts unique to each country. No specific art education system can be introduced to the whole world at the same moment. Prominence should be given to express humanity rather than counting on market value.

He also thinks that “any initiative will have space for both long- and short-term projects”. It goes unsaid that these short-term or long-term projects should be purposeful for many people, institutions, and countries, and not simply to justify expenses or to accumulate personal merits. In this regard the big number of participants is not only organizationally challenging, but also a way to control effectiveness.

Sarath Chandrajeewa wishes mainly to “produce good citizens with a sense of appreciation for diverse cultures and art forms”. He is a reformer with his own profile, a strong personality, and willing to “frequently discuss with all parties the vision of their institution. He always expects results and takes actions accordingly”.

However, nothing good comes without feedback about possible improvements. Thinking of what is worth to be corrected in the approach to arts education in general, Sarath Chandrajeewa answers with very few words: “Respect the other traditions and styles; Freedom to engage in the arts; Encouraging people who are engaged in traditional arts to do experiments”.

Sarath Chandrajeewa believes that teaching, research, and creative work are well balanced at his institution. Therefore, the University of the Visual and Performing Arts in Colombo produces good artistes and researchers that serve the society. He knows many excellent examples of Masters and PhD holders, as well as great teachers.

Considering all these positive statements is yet one perspective that should not be ignored. Nevertheless, positive statements are never completely free of a critical undertone. While saying that respect is a point to be improved, and that ethical issues in the arts should be set more into the centre compared to market values, the Vice Chancellor of a relatively small country situated half way of the traditional Silk Route, contributes remarkably to the understanding of the arts’ future for all. One can only wish that many of the participants join these ideas that will be further nurtured through planned actions in the coming years.

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