

05

PASSING ON THE MOBILITY AND LOCAL WISDOM OF THE OLDER GENERATION

CHOCOLATE RAIN -
MAK NGA TUEN PRUDENCE

“ Today’s city life has long been different from life in the olden days: parents are too busy to read bedtime stories to their kids, hawkers are driven out to clear the way for urban development, and even streets are disappearing; no one knows how to patch their clothes any more, nor does anyone cherish the last grain of rice in their bowl. This has not made us happier, nor has it made the city freer. ”

I met Prudence at her studio in Kwai Chung, and could not help but marvel at the sight once I stepped in — the walls were filled with her original designs, including dolls, teaware, storybooks, and so on. I was welcomed by the warmest, quirkiest colours and shapes, as if I was teleported to a childhood wonderland filled with love and fantasy.

“Come in!” Prudence raised her voice like a hawker. She was candid and cheerful, opening up about her true feelings and thoughts on society even to a stranger like me. Her self-mockery and humour revealed an innocent refusal of complete socialisation. She was painting a mural for a primary school in Kowloon City on that cold winter morning. At lunchtime,

she hurried back to her studio to conduct a workshop for a charity. She then squeezed in some time to talk to me while she gulped down her lunch. Her schedule is full every day, a sign of her devotion to creative work and the community.



CREATING EMOTIONAL RESONANCE WITH ART

In 2008, Prudence was doing a master's degree in design at Central St Martins in London, learning about community-oriented design. "Design must be incorporated in our daily lives, and it has to be relatable." But she only came to realise this after being in the industry for years. Looking back, when she just graduated, like many other girls who studied art, Prudence dreamt of becoming a cool artist. She started her own handcraft brand, Chocolate Rain, in 2000. "My target was high-end international markets. It was all about getting my works in galleries." But after a few years of creating designs on her PC and indulging in lonely self-admiration, she found that she was not happy — "Back then, my works were only created for the rich, or for narcissistic self-fulfilment. But after all, art should create emotional resonance. To achieve that, I decided to be more down-to-earth."

And that was her background. Just like in Robinson Crusoe, everything was built from scratch. Prudence grew up in a squatter area in Stanley. Her mother was a tailor, and her father, a carpenter. She found her love of painting because coloured pencils were the most affordable

toys that her parents could get her. Her grandfather was a scavenger, and he would, from time to time, bring her old dolls and broken toy keyboards. With a few strokes of colour, she would give them new life as the coolest toys. She would then give them to her classmates, who would treasure them dearly.

"People in the village were caring and loving. If you didn't have time to cook, you could go over to your neighbour's for dinner. If you were too busy to take care of your child, Mrs Lee next door would be there to help — in fact, she was taking care of all the kids in the village. People did things together and shared everything. We shared our bathrooms, we shared Mrs Lee's motherly love, we shared our woks in the kitchen, not to mention all the daily necessities. That was just how things were for us."

The values of sharing, doing it yourself, and treasuring things — values which she grew up with — were gradually passed on through her designs and the social enterprise she founded. Prudence smiled and pointed out that these are "the trendiest and the most old-fashioned values" that people often talk about, but

are also hard to realise. The reason why she came back closer to the lives of ordinary people, though, was the experience of owning a little store in Central's SoHo, Hong Kong's most affluent district. Housewives living in the Mid-levels brought their daughters to the store to learn how to make soft toys; office ladies working in the district, too, were Prudence's clients. Those clients, who would usually buy whatever they liked, were intrigued by the time-consuming process of making something, and fell in love with it. "They said they'd never thought they could make something so 'primitive'. It was only then that I realised the process of creation could bring about understanding and communication."

The "Hong Kong Fairy Tale" social innovation project was incubated during her participation in the Good Seed programme, 17 years after teaching rich housewives and office ladies. The popularity of her classes had grown over the years; she worked with 10 to 20 charities every year and participated in more than 200 projects. People from all walks of life joined, from teens to young adults, to even people in their sixties and seventies.

"But I wanted to build an NGO myself. I wanted to start a campaign from scratch, watch it grow, and pass on the messages I want to convey."

Prudence learnt industriously in Good Seed classes every week. Gradually, an idea of a social innovation project took shape, a project to tell fairy tales about local heroes to children in different districts.

"It's important to get in touch with kids in their neighbourhoods. They are overprotected, and know nothing about the basics of life. Once I held a bean bag workshop. I couldn't get beans, so I got rice instead. The kids played with it as if it was sand — they spilled it onto the floor and stepped on it carelessly. Their parents were so embarrassed and asked them to pick it all up, grain by grain. It was clear that their parents had never taught them where the rice they ate came from. If it had been needles, thread, or rags, I would've just let it go, but rice — that's a definite no-no. Since then, I've been determined to teach kids about the value of each grain of rice."

“ Having grown up in a squatter area, Prudence is used to caring neighbours like those in The House of 72 Tenants, as well as ragpickers and street food stalls. These all contributed to her optimistic and passionate disposition. More than 10 years after becoming a local artist and designer, she returned to the community, wheeling a storytelling trolley as a girl who sells stories. ”



BE A HAPPY FOOL

Prudence built a wooden trolley shaped like a mushroom house. She wheels it into different districts as if she were a hawker selling fish balls. She has been to Sham Shui Po, Kwun Tong, schools, public housing estates, and countless more places. She tells stories and makes soft toys. She saw the success of TOMS' buy-one-give-one model, and followed suit. When a customer buys one Hong Kong Fairy Tale DIY Kit, Chocolate Rain will donate one kit to children from low-income families. "TOMS mobilised the whole United States. Shoes were sent to kids in the Congo and Mumbai. It's no easy task in Hong Kong." Despite so, she has already sold more than her original sales target of 30 sets a month. With 200 already sold, she is off to a good start.

Kids love listening to Prudence's stories. She tells them about Ming Gor offering free meals to the poor in Sham Shui Po. She talks about rock-climbing champion Lai Chi Wai having a car accident, and then conquering the Lion Rock with his wheelchair tied to him and never giving up. She adapts the story of the theatre

actress and directress Lai Yan Chi's childhood in a farming village, how she loved climbing trees, and that she would climb up to the top and think about what she wanted to do in life. Prudence also shares with them the badminton player Yip Pui Yin's love of baking and other hobbies, and how she finally found something she was good at.

"It doesn't matter where you're from. It's okay if you want to do many things too. Take it slow. Something's bound to stand out."

Her aim is not to tell stories about how people become successful, but to recount their silly moments and how they get themselves into trouble — no matter how silly they are, or how big the trouble is, there is always a way out. It is a truism, indeed, but she wishes to help kids of this generation release emotions that they have bottled up. "Society expects a lot from them. They're not understood and become sad. They then lose the ability to understand others. These kids — they aren't happy."

"I have done countless life planning courses at secondary schools. Kids are usually told to stay positive. They're also told to strive for good results and dream big. What I tell them, instead, is how I got an E in Visual Arts. It catches their attention, and they all focus and listen to me."

Positivity is not something that can be simply appear when requested by teachers or parents. Prudence's family, neighbours, and the squatter area where she grew up in have constructed a support network for her and made her the person she is today. And now, she has the ability to create resonance in the community. She grows more confident with each experience, and she passes on the social values and emotions of the older generation in each encounter with youngsters. She hopes that, at the very least, she would inspire them to become a "happy fool".

