

Chua Chor Teck - My Role Model & Counsel

When I joined HM Dockyard, Naval Base Singapore I was given a merit No: 52 out of a chosen 120 candidates. Very quickly by word of mouth I learned that Chua Chor Teck was the most outstanding Shipwright apprentice of the Chief Constructor Department. Chor Teck was at least 4 years my senior and I made him my role model and I had his initials CCT inscribed on my wooden bathroom plank wall. With him as my motivator and the initials on the wall as my reminder, I managed to stay in the top 7 positions during the 4 years at Dockyard Technical College Naval Base Singapore.

I consulted him before accepting the Colombo Plan Scholarship 1969~1972. He opined that I should not go for the scholarship for with my experience, I would have missed opportunities by the time I graduate. I was at that time, already a Manager at Selco Shipyard. He was half right. There were already scholar graduates parachuting into Swan Hunter's Shipyard at Naval Base and if I did not go for the scholarship I would have worked for Keppel Group, simply because Chor Teck was my idol. However, I figured that to better my career, I would need a degree and the right credentials.

By the time I graduated in 1972 I realised that there was a high concentration of scholars in the Keppel Shipyard Group. The real challenge was amongst the Colombo Plan Scholars and they included really bright fellows like Choo Chiau Beng, Tan Cheng Hui, Chen Tou Sin, Chung Chee Kit, George Chow and Tan Hai Yong.

National shipping however was a new territory and on graduation, I was assigned to NOL to serve my bond. I was appointed ship surveyor/owner representative with a salary just S\$50 more than my last drawn salary before I went for my degree. I never forgot how the job was offered with a terse, "Take it or leave it." And that was after I revealed that "my father had been unemployed for 13 months, please don't take advantage of me." Now I say to myself, "Stupid boy!" To clarify matters it was not Goh Chok Tong who made the offer but someone else. So Chor Teck was half right, in that I missed opportunities by trading \$50 salary for 3 years of study at Newcastle. However, surveyors in Classification Society were paid at least S\$3,000/- monthly plus dirty money, car allowance, danger money and overtime. My job was just a little different and you can put working for NOL to civic mindedness.

From 1978 to 1980 I was a contractor to Keppel Shipyard, Sembawang Shipyard and Hitachi Shipyard repairing Russian fishing trawlers. The Russians were surprised that every where they went I was the contractor for the installation and repair of conveyors. Chor Teck was instrumental to my happy windfall. He rang me one morning in my Murray Street office to ask if I would do conveyor repairs for Russian Fishing Trawlers. I said, "Yes, of course!" He was fair and forewarned me that the Russians had for unknown reasons already thrown out 3 contractors. I told him that I didn't have money to repair 6 fishing trawlers at one go. So he made me a very generous offer: to go to him for authorised payment and get immediate payment as the repairs for each ship were completed. He literally bankrolled me for at that time, payment from Keppel Shipyard was a tortuous process! It was: get the job, finished the job in record time, do the additionals and alterations immediately, present bill for payment, cut down bills, go to Heller Factoring for discounts or wait for 6 months to get paid. I figured that if I had carried on without ChorTeck's fair play and help, I would be poorly off and with ill health.

I dashed to MPH, bought "Teach Yourself Simple Russian" and picked up a few key phrases. Noting my keenness to communicate in their language, the trawler crew became most sympathetic, helpful and as a matter of fact down right friendly. For example, I needed 2 workers just to carry a motor down a rather steep gangway then sent 8 motors for repairs. However, one Russian deckhand could carry 2 motors - 1 under each arm and amble down

the gangway! Before long the ship's crew under the Captain and Chief Engineer were most co-operative! I just treated people as people and they helped.

To show my appreciation, I gave a farewell dinner. At the table the Captain sat opposite me, the Chief Engineer on his left and another person on his right. This person was introduced to me, but I did not quite know who he was. The dinner proceeded well with sumptuous "oni" (raw whale belly meat) washed down with a few rounds of neat Vodka. I then said that I would like to present them with tokens of appreciation. I pulled out a Seiko watch and gave it to the Captain. He was shocked at my gesture and quickly shoved the watch to the man seated on his right. I sensed that that man must be more important or senior than the Captain and the Chief Engineer. I immediately followed up with, "No, this is for you, Captain" moving the Seiko watch back to the Captain. Then I pulled out 2 Seiko watches from my pocket and gave them to the real host seated on the Captain's right saying, "These 2 watches are for you", much to the relieve of the Captain and Chief Engineer! It turned out that the VIP was the Commissar. Of course the Chief Engineer was happy too for he was also presented with a Seiko watch.

The revelry went very well and at 2330 hr I was presented with 6 crimshaws (whale's teeth) with my names and credentials B Sc (Hons), P Eng, MSNAMES, C Eng, MRINA, MIMarE, MInstM, MBIM. Today, these credentials are of course not needed anymore.

Chor Teck treated people as people/persons and not just as digits with only arms and legs to be taken advantage of. To me his highest attainment was when he was awarded the Friend of Labour Award by NTUC. He indeed led by exemplary deeds to earn the accolades. Chor Teck had empathy, humility, steadiness and consistency as a worker/person. His spirit of learning, work ethos and civic mindedness thrives in us.

Often amongst my contemporaries, I joke that I am a "naval architect gone wrong". I also lament that the University taught us how to make a living, but not how to live. Having gone through the Maritime, Economic & Financial and China Collectables sectors I do wonder from time to time if we should strive to be a Techno-man, Econ-man, Financial-man or Cultured-man? In our 21 Century of modernity, inter-disciplinary co-ordination of professions in management is essential otherwise we lose out in opportunities to create wealth in a more wholesome manner (in the interests of shareholders, management and employee) for a better way of life and gracious living.

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