

Shen: All is the END in Itself

by Terence Li



TANNA CHONG

Young academic Simon Shen Xuhui considers all his accomplishments as necessary yet ordinary conditions for achieving his goal in the field of international relations, while others may take his achievements as a result of astonishing talent.

“I share similar experiences in secondary school with you guys, so it is not worth mentioning,” Prof Shen, who was wearing a pink shirt and had his hairstyle set high on the interview day, said to *Varsity* reporters.

Yet his title and background speak for themselves.

At the age of 30, Prof Shen has already been a research professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies for a few years. He got nine As in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 1996. He then obtained his bachelor’s and master’s degree at prestigious Yale University, in the United States, majoring in political science and history. Four years had just passed from the year he took his HKCEE to the time he graduated from Yale.

“I treasure the opportunities I had during my secondary school years. But does it mean that I have to highlight my achievements in kindergarten as well?” added the professor who gained his doctoral degree at the University of Oxford.

Compared with his personal achievements, he is more interested in international relations, a field that deals with the power relationship between countries.

“I was driven by curiosity towards the world,” the young professor said. His childhood hobby of stamp collecting enabled him to get to know the history behind the stamps and has

At the age of 30, Simon Shen Xuhui is now a research professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies



COURTESY OF SIMON SHEN XUHUI



FANNA CHONG

provided him with inspirations towards the relations among countries.

But there are also practical concerns. He said, “The study of international relations is relatively more applicable to different domains. It’s more useful for my future career.”

He added that his choice of the art stream during secondary school had restricted his choice of career at first as it was considered “non-mainstream”. But he said that people can always do something to gain recognition despite the restrictions.

Given his brilliant academic achievement, it may be understandable if his family wanted him to carve out a lucrative professional career. Fortunately he had no family pressure about his career choice.

He said, “Every individual should determine his or her own path. Of course, I have my baseline. Only through passing the material threshold I would have the condition to pursue what I like. But leading a decent life is not difficult for the path I am taking.”

“Results-oriented” may be an important rationale for Prof Shen when making choices. He gave an example, “No matter if you like it or not, there are some skills you must have to work in this society, such as public-speaking skills. I knew I was afraid of speaking publicly so I joined the debate team during my time in secondary school and forced myself to speak.”

Prof Shen is also famous for his kaleidoscopic knowledge and his ability to cross academic disciplines.

Head of Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong government, in which Prof Shen is a part-time member of, Prof Lau Siu-kai wrote in the preface

of one of Prof Shen’s book “(Prof Shen) has a broad range of knowledge over various countries and bringing unique perspectives in writings”.

On how he gained all his knowledge, he said, “I use a results-oriented approach when handling questions.”

He added, “The most important thing to do is to explore the implicit rules behind everything. For example, being a university student, you may want to know the standardised requirements given by the university and the rules of the game.”

He attributes his wide-ranging knowledge to the university education he received in the US, which focuses on inter-disciplinary learning, contrasting to the single-discipline kind of learning he received in Hong Kong.

The US mode of learning and education system provided Prof Shen with the basic tools for logical thinking and coping with problems. Moreover, having acquired some basic economic and political knowledge has made it easier for him to pick up other concepts.

Socialising is another thing that Prof Shen does not like, but would still do when it is deemed necessary. He said, “Basically every job means luncheons, emails, proposals and meetings. I do not like showing up at social events but networking is necessary for what I do.”

His work is as inter-disciplinary as his knowledge base. One “hat” he wears is as chancellor of the well-regarded Roundtable Network which he regards as a discussion platform for social science people.

Prof Shen said, “Here we share common values and dilemmas.”

The aim of the network is to encourage social scientists to express their

own opinions and to give them a forum for interaction, and to raise the status of people learning social science.

In 2008 when the government’s appointment of deputy secretaries and political assistant for policy bureaux was a hot topic, rumour had it Prof Shen was one of the designated appointees.

“I refused to discuss that rumor,” smiling as he said it.

He said, “Being an official is not the only way to contribute to the government. I am trying to contribute through being the member of the government’s Central Policy Unit and some other advisory committees.”

He added that he does not like to be a self-proclaimed spin doctor, the popular term referring to the consultants who deal with the public relations of the politicians. He would consider accepting engagements as long as that can help to achieve his goals.

“But I have almost done everything in promoting international relations that I can do, given the capacity of

(Above and below) Specialising in international relations, Simon Shen Xuhui travels to different countries to attend conferences.

Hong Kong. All I can do now is very academic,” Prof Shen said. According to him, a clear international position of Hong Kong is needed as it now lacks position and identity.

He added, “We need a government body to handle the external relations of Hong Kong.”

About how he is regarded, Prof Shen said, “Labels such as ‘public intellectual’ cannot be given to oneself. It’s more important for every one to have a clear position on issues.”

He added: “At my age, I am satisfied with where I am and my own identity.”

Other things of Prof Shen aside from international relations may sound interesting. He is currently learning French and playing the drums.

“If you stop learning, life will become empty. So I have to keep myself inspired,” Prof Shen, who also plays the piano, said. 🎵

