Mum’s poem brings tears

Poet Leong Liew Geok’s reading brought back childhood memories for Teh Su Ching, also a poet

Nabilah Said

Like mother, like daughter. Looks like that is how life played out for writer Teh Su Ching, daughter of prominent local poet and literary critic Leong Liew Geok.

Teh, 30, who is also a screenwriter, film producer, playwright and actress, started writing poetry last year. She recently wrote a screenplay for a telemovie, titled Baby Bumps, which will air on Channel 5 in March.

She is married to Mr Ho Ren Hua, the eldest of Banyan Tree Holdings power couple Ho Kwon Ping and Claire Chiang’s three children.

Leong, 68, has two poetry collections under her belt - Love Is Not Enough (1991) and Women Without Men (2000). She is working on her third, Passions, slated for publishing next year.

She taught at the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore for 21 years, until her retirement in 2002.

Mother and daughter shared the stage for the first time on Tuesday evening during a monthly writers’ sharing session, Writers Talking, organised by the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) Wee Kim Wee Centre.

It is apparent that the two have been inspiring each other in their literary output.

After Leong read out her poem, Sisters - I, about how Teh, then 14, reacted to her elder sister’s departure to the United States for further studies, Teh had tears streaming down her face.

“That poem brings back memories,” said Teh, whose father is Ascendas chairman Teh Kok Peng.

She proceeded to read The Other Woman, a Chinese poem she wrote last year about her childhood wish to marry her mother.

Born in Penang, straight-talking Leong is known in some quarters to be a feminist poet.

She said: “I wrote a poem railing against Chinese New Year because this is the annual ritual for the enslavement of women.” Her poem talks about how women have to fulfil many expectations during the festive period, including doing all the spring-cleaning.

She edited the popular anthology, More Than Half the Sky (1998), comprising writings by 30 Singaporean women.

Teh recalled, to laughter from the audience in SMU’s cozy university lounge, writing her first story at age five about a classroom haunted by pontianaks. It was documented, along with drawings of the local ghost in white sheets, in a scrapbook her mother gave her and her two older siblings as kids.

She said her mother taught her that “sometimes emotions are difficult and they are not always politically correct. But it’s fine to confront and express them”.

As if to illustrate this point, a teary Teh told the audience: “Sorry I’m emotional. I’m breastfeeding, which messes with your hormones.”

She and her husband have a three-month-old son. They will be moving to Bangkok next week, following Mr Ho’s recent appointment as chief executive officer of Thai Wah Group, a starch and consumer foods company.

Teh admitted that she used to shy away from the Singapore poetry scene in favour of film and theatre “because I felt it was my mother’s scene”.

She appears more confident of her place in poetry now, after making her first public foray in April last year during the Singapore Poetry Writing Month (SingPoWriMo), where writers wrote poetry responding to daily prompts on a dedicated Facebook page.

Her poems were published last year by Math Paper Press in two anthologies, SingPoWriMo 2014, as well as A Luxury We Cannot Afford.

Incidentally, her mother also started writing poetry when she was in her 30s.

Said Teh with a smile: “It’s like a family business, where you’ve grown up thinking and talking about these things.”

nabilahs@sph.com.sg