

# "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono"

## How it all started

### Sooncheng Cheah,

Soon for short, is the Kusamono teacher of the Houston Bonsai Society (HBS) and the Chinese Bonsai Society of Texas. She started as an autodidact to plant accents for the bonsai of her husband Hoe Chuah, who has shown his trees at numerous exhibitions. Meanwhile, she has developed her own style and achieved true mastery. She travels all year round collecting grasses, wildflowers, mosses, ferns and herbs in the great outdoors and in the gardens of her mutual friends. She cultivates her collection in her own garden and creates complex plant communities in pots of all sizes, but also on tree bark or alluvial wood, as well as in broken porcelain vessels, reminiscent of forest edges, embankments or wild flower meadows. Nothing is safe by her. What the garbage collector cannot dispose of quickly enough is meticulously transformed into a miniature wilderness.

Shortly after I had started to make my first own ceramics, we met on the Internet. My rather rough work must have aroused Soon's interest and soon the first two pots made a journey across the Atlantic. I was astonished when I got some photos of my masterfully planted pots. Numerous correspondence followed, we exchanged ideas and thoughts not only about Kusamono and with time a intimate friendship developed.

### The "Pot of Friendship"

At some point I showed my two friends a photo of a pot with a surface reminiscent of dried and torn earth. When asked how I would pinch such pots, it was hard for me to put the process into words. So I made a larger one and documented the hand movements in pictures and video sequences. The demo pot also made the trip to Texas and reached Soon and Hoe just in time for Christmas 2017. Hoe immediately described it as a symbol of friendship and so we started talking about the "Pot of Friendship". I consider this designation a great honour. In the spring of 2018 Soon started planting.

### "Bonsai on the Bayou"


Also in spring 2018, the American Bonsai Society (ABS) decided to have the annual exhibition in 2019 hosted by the Houston Bonsai Society. While Hoe immediately started thinking about the organization of the event, Soon made the decision to

present the planted "Pot of Friendship" at this exhibition. Many months of intensive work followed, because Soon should also offer a Kusamono workshop. She additionally planned to design 80 accent plants as table decorations and gifts for the gala dinner. Numerous members of the HBS met to pinch, glaze and fire a sufficient number of small pots, which were then planted together.

### The "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono" is formed

At the same time Soon refined the planting of "my" pot more and more. She documented the development steps and discussed them with me. I was not a great help: I could only regularly express my admiration for the "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono".

Shortly after the closing date for registration of the exponents for the exhibition a completely unexpected message reached me:

 <b>VIEWING STONE AND KUSAMONO EXHIBITOR ENTRY FORM</b> American Bonsai Society/Houston Bonsai Society April 11-14, 2019 Houston Marriott Westchase, Houston TX	
EXHIBITOR	Soon Cheah and Uwe Harwardt
ADDRESS	Houston, TX 77095
PHONE NUMBER	EMAIL
BONSAI CLUB(S) / AFFILIATION	Houston Bonsai Society
ONE ENTRY PER FORM	
Viewing Stone Name and Origin	
Viewing Stone:	Display in Dalza <input type="checkbox"/> Sulban <input type="checkbox"/> Cut <input type="checkbox"/> Uncut <input type="checkbox"/> Stone
Kusamono Species Name	Mixed Species in pot made by Uwe Harwardt of Germany
Dimensions of Viewing Stone or Kusamono	8" round pot and 16" tall      Dimensions with stand (inches x inches)      2 ft.
Previous Awards	
Approximate space needed for display	2 ft.
Vision for the display that you wish to share with the view.	The pot was made by Uwe Harwardt of Germany in December, 2017. He filmed the whole pot making process to show Soon and Hoe how it was made, and sent it as a Christmas present. Soon used it to plant kusamono and sent Uwe the photo the final results of the combined efforts.
Want	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Commemor # of Copies

*Exhibitor entry form*

Soon had actually registered the planted pot as our common exhibit! Several days, all jackets were too tight for my shoulders, I was so proud... Soon made the last corrections the evening before the exhibition. It was the superfine work whose necessity I could not understand. In my eyes the Kusamono was finished, but Soon was striving for precision and even discussed a single cloverleaf. I still have a lot to learn!



*The "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono"  
at the exhibition of the American Bonsai Society 2019 [1]*

## The Response

Already during the exhibition Soon and Hoe told me that the "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono" had met with lively interest. But I am particularly pleased with an article by Jonas Dupuich. Jonas is a highly esteemed bonsai teacher and intensive blogger. He reported on his blog on the topic [»Learning about accent plants at Bonsai on the Bayou«](#) about Soon's work and also found words of praise for the "Friendship Kusamono". His compliments was combined with a comprehensible criticism. I had made the pot to demonstrate a flicks of the wrist. It is by no means an optimal support for Soon's Kusamono.



*Another Kusamono from Sooncheng Cheah in a pot made by me <sup>[2]</sup>*

## What happens next?

Freely adapted from Sepp Herberger [3]: "*After the exhibition is before the exhibition!*" I accept the challenge that Jonas Dupuich indirectly posed me. This includes taking a closer look at Sooncheng Cheah's Kusamonos, collecting more plants, trying out combinations and, last but not least, making new pots with better suited shapes.

And maybe at some point there will be a "Transatlantic Friendship Kusamono, episode 2"

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[1] Photo courtesy of Hoe Chuah

[2] Photo courtesy of [Jonas Dupuich](#)

[3] "*After the match is before the match*" - Thoughts of the German team boss Sepp Herberger after the 2:0 victory over Yugoslavia in the quarter finals of the world soccer championship in 1954.