

“Any tradition or practice with a history of more than three thousand years has a good story to share and therefore is worthy of attention.”

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7.2015

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Tell us a little about you and what you do.

I run a non-profit organization devoted to the promotion and study of Chinese culture and history. We organize events and projects and collaborate with other like-minded organizations and individuals to promote Chinese culture. I founded the Chinese Cultural Studies Center (CCSC) in 2013.

My background is in Chinese antiques having formerly been an antiques dealer. Having spent time with Chinese antiques I have had numerous opportunities to work within a world of elegant forms and well-balanced shapes. My desire and inquisitiveness in learning the historical background and artistic significance of each individual piece has enriched my understanding and knowledge of China and its history. This understanding and knowledge is what made me fall in love with China and its vast cultural heritage. This is also the reason why I have decided to spend more time in promoting and helping to conserve Chinese culture. I feel there is a need to develop a sustainable method of conserving heritage as well as restoring cultural influences that have waned and been neglected.

I set up the CCSC with the goal of helping our local community as well as young people in general to understand China and its cultural heritage through historical and textual research as well as by organizing academic conferences and workshops to broadcast and disseminate information found through such scholarly research.

How did you become interested in the tradition of aromatic use in China?

I would like to see the historical, cultural and spiritual aspects of this elegant art getting proper attention.

While the market promotes this ancient art, the focus seems to be incorrectly attached to the commercial value of agar wood and expensive ancient bronze censers. Although agar wood and censers are part of the paraphernalia of the Chinese aromatic tradition, the essence of this tradition is the spirit of discovery and appreciation; additionally, it's a search for truth and knowledge. This is both a solitary and solidarity art which one can share with like-minded friends. The process of searching and concocting a new fragrance provides time and space for one to embark on a journey of experimentation to rekindle the pioneering spirit of breaking new ground and the desire to pursue knowledge and things that nourish the mind and spirit. These are the cultural and spiritual aspects of the ancient literati that I would like to promote to young people – a desire to learn, to seek out knowledge, to improve oneself and one's relationship with nature and others.

Why do you think it is important to promote this tradition?

Any tradition or practice with a history of more than three thousand years has a good story to share and therefore is worthy of attention. The origin of this tradition goes back to the Neolithic period. The art evolved through the different dynasties in China and changed and adapted itself socially, historically and climatically. The content of this art is therefore the compound and synthesis of thousands years of history. Apart from having an elegant form, this art contains deep traditional values as well as profound spiritual and philosophical content. When something has such a long history and rich content, it becomes our responsibility to ensure its survival for future generations.

Why do you think that there were so many different types of books coming out in the Song dynasty?

The foundational structure of the Northern Dynasty is that the life of a Confucian scholar must be spared and not taken no matter how serious a political conflict he was found to be involved in. This is a decree issued by the founding emperor of the Northern Dynasty as a way to show his respect for the literati as well as to protect them from political conflict. As a result of this foundational policy, literary, artistic and scholastic endeavors reached new heights in Chinese history. Scholars and educated people in general were given new freedoms to express themselves without the fear of persecution. As a result, they involved themselves in various activities which had previously been frowned upon – and from then on the details of the lifestyle - from architecture and interiors to daily necessities such as a bowl, a cup and a plate or a piece of furniture - attained a new aesthetic and refinement which surpassed previous dynasties.

In the Northern Song period when the Chinese were recovering from the devastation incurred during the chaos of the late Tang to the founding of the Northern Song, many scholars felt very strongly about keeping inventories of their tangible and intangible heritage and materials for future generations. One way to keep a good inventory is to write everything down. Thus, during this period, lots of books similar in nature to today's encyclopedia were published. The two guidebooks on incense/aromatics that we are collaborating on with the Northwest Normal University are from around this time.

What do you like the most about what you do?

What I love the most is the opportunity to learn through studying Chinese history and culture and then sharing my knowledge with friends and people I meet. It's the classic mantra about doing the thing you love to do!

What does a typical day look like for you?

I get up at 6am to ensure that my daughter has some breakfast before she rushes off to school. After this I either listen to or watch the morning news and at the same time do some stretching exercises. When I reach the office I catch up on email. Then I talk to my colleagues and we exchange views on different topics. I normally read, catch up on my research and then practice calligraphy whenever I have a chance. I aim to get home in time to have dinner with my daughter and spend time with her. After my daughter is asleep in bed, I will either go for a walk or practice calligraphy - more likely the latter as my calligraphy teacher has asked me to submit a piece of calligraphy for an exhibition in December this year!

Where would we find you on a Saturday morning?

Normally I'd be at home enjoying a big breakfast with my daughter and husband. Afterwards, I go to my office and spend a good part of the day reading or doing calligraphy or further research.

What are you looking forward to?

Currently, I am looking forward to the symposium we are organizing with the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This symposium will take place in October. The goal of this collaborated event is to present different aspects of Chinese history through the lens of archaeology.

Interview: IMW | Text: Oi Ling Chiang | Photography: Oi Ling Chiang

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