

## **Getting to the heart of Chinese culture**

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 05, 2014

YI Lin Tan, 19

From Singapore, studying at Singapore Management University

“Every artist only creates four embroidery pieces every year,” said our embroidery mentor. I was surprised at the small quantity they produce every year. However, after experiencing Gu embroidery and visiting the museum, I understood the reason why they only create four pieces every year.

We were given the opportunity to try Gu embroidery on our own. After observing the exquisite details, I tried to imitate and sew the thin threads as closely together as possible. Sadly, I failed. I spent close to half an hour sewing a small pedal of a flower which is around the size of a sunflower seed and my sewing was messy and rough.

Of course, I was not discouraged as it was impossible for my work to be of the same standard as the professionals. I am not even a beginner. Having tried Gu embroidery, I developed a profound respect for these artists. It is definitely not an easy art to master. It requires people to be strong in drawing and painting as well as calligraphy before one can start learning Gu embroidery.

The passion and devotion of these artists are evident from the smile on their faces. This rare opportunity has been an unforgettable experience and I strongly feel the skill has to be passed down to future generations. I strongly encourage more people to go forth and learn about Gu embroidery.

Meenakshi Pareek, 19

From India, studying at St Xaviers College

Chinese incense culture is something that blew my mind. The place where the activity took place in some way touched my heart and mind and made me experience the calmness that our mind and heart yearns for. I felt something that changed my mind and calmed my soul.

Incense sticks were not new to me since in India we use them daily to worship our god and spread the scent to create a spiritual feeling.

But the way I witnessed it here was totally different. I saw the way it was made and how it leads to a sense of calm.

**Publication: Shanghai Daily**  
**Date: 05 June 2014**  
**Headline: Getting to the heart of Chinese culture**

This culture generated deep feelings in my soul which was surprising given the fact I am a very excitable person and ball of energy. The smell of the incense was something abstract but pleasant, something more charming than sights and sounds. The incense not only smelled pleasant, but also gave a sense of darkness, mysteriousness, a feeling of steadiness and gracefulness.

The power of the incense smoke helped me forget my sorrow and took me to a world of happiness.

Though incense sticks are used daily in India, the experience I had in Shanghai will be missed. At least I got to experience it rather than just reading about it on the Internet.

Though I won't be able to take this back to India, I am definitely taking back wonderful memories and an experience that will remain with me always and forever.

Heike Vetter, 27

From Germany, studying at Universität Heidelberg

Before I came to China, I had some ideas of what it would be like. I imagined it would be a very crowded place with bad air. But on the other side, I imagined seeing beautiful gardens and ancient Chinese buildings.

For sure, I wanted to get to know the way of life in China. With the project "I Love Shanghai" it was the best opportunity to get to know traditional Chinese culture.

As a German I always felt a sense of being rushed and under pressure. In China most of the cultural lessons we experienced were about letting people calm down and forgetting about their worries.

Listening to the sound of the traditional Chinese music instrument "guzheng" led me into a state of near meditation. It produced the sound most foreigners equate with Chinese music. "Guzheng" is a little bit similar with a harp but you sit in front of it as if you would play a piano. To produce well sounding tones, it is important to be seated properly; straighten your back and form the right hand as if there is a ball inside but at the same time try to relax the hand.

Normally every finger of the right hand is taped with a plectrum, for us it was only the forefinger. With this plectrum you produce the sound while plucking the strings.

The left hand is used to change the sound of a tone so that it becomes lower or higher.

The teacher gave us a little melody that we had to practice.

**Publication: Shanghai Daily**  
**Date: 05 June 2014**  
**Headline: Getting to the heart of Chinese culture**

I think everyone was proud that we were able to play the melody, a simple part of a children's song, by the end of the lesson.

We also visited a classical musical instrument museum two days later. What really impressed me were the musical skills of three young Chinese girls.

Connected to the museum there is a school which places a priority on music. To see the professional way they were able to play those instruments was really inspiring and showed how much effort and concentration is required to play so well.

The unique sound of "guzheng" stands for traditional Chinese music and it is good to know there are still schools teaching people how to play this wonderful instrument.

Rebecca Samala Rajakanthan, 19

From Singapore, studying at Singapore Management University

I awake every morning to a cup of tea and a bowl of cereal. To me, that cup of tea is nothing special. It is made in five minutes, and drunk in five minutes. After numerous tea culture lessons in Shanghai, all that has changed.

Stepping into my first tea culture lesson, I remember thinking about the last time I drank Chinese tea. My mom had made it at home after my dad had returned home from China. I had taken a big gulp and cringed because of the bitterness. So clearly, I was not looking forward to having Chinese tea again.

But I was surprised with the elaborate setup that the tea culture master had prepared for us. There were cups evenly placed on the table, a ceramic pot, sunflower seeds for snacking on, a towel for the master to place his hands on, and a boiler for the water. The excitement in me grew, as I thought about the process that was about to unfold.

The first thing the master did was to reach across the room to a shelf where he grabbed a bag of tea leaves and used a shovel-like utensil to scoop some into the teapot. I turned my head back to the shelves to see what other kinds of tea he stored. I was amazed. I must have seen at least 30 different bags of tea, and I guess there were probably more in the backroom. The master then explained that each tea originates from a different part of China, and thus Chinese people have hundreds of different teas. Amazing.

I learned of the purpose of tea, and how it has so much more meaningful than the tea that I gulp down every morning. It is a proper way to welcome a guest and show respect. Seeing the hard work that the master had put into his tearoom, I understood why. The following process happened quickly and smoothly, and before I knew it, each of us had even amounts of tea in our cups.

**Publication: Shanghai Daily**

**Date: 05 June 2014**

**Headline: Getting to the heart of Chinese culture**

Finally, it was time to drink. Thinking nothing of how I should partake of the drinking process, I simply poured the tea into my mouth and ended up burning my tongue. The master laughed, and then explained the three steps to drinking tea. Suddenly, it all made sense. The whole process was about patience and calmness. It is meant to cleanse your body and your mind. Not a single part of the process is to be rushed.

After almost 30 cups of Chinese tea in the past 30 days, I have a different perspective on tea. It is something to behold, and to be respected. Never again will I gulp down my tea.

Qiqi Li, 19

From Canada, studying at Wilfred Laurier University

Chinese culture is really different from Canadian culture and every activity was a shock for me. Of all the activities, I found ink-wash painting the most shocking. I have learned oil painting for 10 years and the colors we use along with the brush are very different from ink-wash painting.

For oil painting I mainly studied realism, which required us to have the objects in our paintings look as close to real life as possible. This was not required in ink-wash painting. The teacher told me ink-wash painting is about capturing the essence of the object.

The first time I ever attempted an ink-wash painting, I tried to paint a plate of cherries. It was really difficult because I couldn't use the brush correctly. In oil painting, we usually hold our brushes the way we hold a pen, whereas in ink-wash painting we hold it upright. By the end of my first attempt, it looked like someone spilled red paint all over my paper. After getting the hang of using the brush and controlling the water level, I finally painted a plate of cherries that somewhat resembled the essence of cherries.

I'm so glad to have been given the opportunity to study Chinese culture because there is so much history in China that should be shared around the world. I have learned so many new things that I can't wait to go back to Canada to share. I am also happy to know that so many schools are still teaching traditional ink-wash painting.