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ANGEL'S SHARE

The Muses Foundation for Culture and Education is a low-profile organisation founded by May Koon. It has a simple ambition, to provide funding for creative people that will help them realise their potential. DANIEL JEFFREYS reports.

The strongest growth comes from the most profound experiences, and so for two HKDI students, Cheng Wing Chun and Wong Tsz Wai, 2014 is likely to be one of the most important years of their lives.

Cheng, a higher diploma student in Architectural Design, and Wong, a year 2 student in Product Design, spent the first part of the year in Copenhagen, as exchange students at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, courtesy of funding from the Muses Foundation for Culture and Education, founded by May Koon.

The Foundation first worked with HKDI in 2013. The collaboration with the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts was developed by HKDI Principal Leslie Lu with the blessings of Vocational Training

Council's Executive Director, Carrie Yau.

The Royal Academy was founded in 1754 and was originally dedicated to educating artists and craftsman. The admission standards are stringent and the cost of studying in Denmark is high. And yet the potential benefits of the Academy's programmes are enormous, helping students to expand their understanding and launch successful careers. Past students of the Academy include Henning Larsen, who designed the Copenhagen Opera House and Verner Panton, a product designer known for his iconic Panton Chair.

In the arts, theatrical productions are often made possible by "angels" who provide funding for plays, which are usually written after the playwright has been visited by a literal or metaphorical muse, who implants the seed of a new drama. These two ideas come together in the Muses Foundation for Culture and Education, which provides funding for artists, designers and performing artists to reach their dreams. For Cheng and Wong the news that they had been awarded funding by the Foundation was like a scene from a movie.

"When I got the phone call I was punching the air like I had scored a goal and silently saying 'yes!, yes!'," says Cheng. Wong heard the news on her birthday and she had a noisier celebration. "I was shouting and running around. I am so glad that I got a full scholarship."

The Muses Foundation was founded four years ago by May Koon and is supported by a Board of Councillors, which includes her sister Professor Mayching Kao. For

two decades Koon had a successful career in the financial markets, rising to be Co-Head of Institutional Equity Sales at Morgan Stanley and Head of Asian Equities at Credit Suisse. She is now President Emeritus of Global Sage, a privately held executive-search firm, where she acts as Senior Adviser of the Pacific Region.

Professor Kao is the former Professor of Fine Arts and Director of the Art Museum at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on Chinese painting from the Ming dynasty to the present day. She is currently the Museum Expert Advisor of the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department, she chairs the management committee of the Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre and is an advisor of the Hong Kong Society of Education through Art.

Kao and Koon, whose younger sister Grace Kao is the former Head of the HKDI's Design Section and its Professional Engagement and Education Centre, remember their family hosting artists and performers at "elegant gatherings", where a passion for Chinese culture was the main reason to draw them together. The aesthetic experiences they had in their childhood has had a profound influence on their later lives.

"I am from the financial world," says Koon. "I would get up at six to go to work, and work late, all of our energy was consumed by the markets. Eventually you feel there must be something more than selling. I credit that to my parents. My mother and father put together a huge art collection, but they didn't do this for monetary



PICTURES VANESSA KO & HKDI

THIS PAGE MAY KOON, THE FOUNDER OF THE MUSES FOUNDATION FOR CULTURE AND EDUCATION (RIGHT) AND HER SISTER PROFESSOR MAYCHING KAO (LEFT), A MEMBER OF THE FOUNDATION'S BOARD OF COUNCILLORS
OPPOSITE PAGE
A WORK BIKE BUILT BY CHENG WING CHUN WHO WON A MUSES FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP TO STUDY IN DENMARK





reward, they did this for their artist friends, to promote artists whom they admired for their enormous talent. As children we moved in circles with artists and musicians, movie stars and media people. We had this atmosphere around us. My sister spent her career in the arts. With the Muses foundation I have made a return to that world.”

The Foundation devotes its energies to supporting creative people who are not obvious candidates for support from conventional funding. An excellent example is their support of soprano Yuki Ip, a graduate of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. Ip was introduced to the Muses Foundation by a member of its Board of Councillors, Dr Betty Wei. Ip was already performing, singing operas in English, French and Italian, but German seemed to have eluded her.

The angelic muses stepped in. They provided funding for Ip to spend a year in Germany, gaining proficiency in the language, having voice lessons and attending auditions. When Ip returned and performed the German language opera *The Creation* by Haydn in Hong Kong, she received critical acclaim. The notoriously difficult oratorio features, appropriately, three angels and Ip played Gabriel, the soprano role.

“Yuki Ip typifies our initiatives to help artists who aspire to advance to the next stage of their development,” says Koon. “We provide them with a financial award to go for an opportunity that hopefully will open new doors for them.”

The Muses Foundation devotes resources to individual scholarships and programmes that enable educators to give a more rounded education to their students and emerging artists. It has sponsored exhibitions of students from the Fine Arts Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and from the Academy of Visual Arts, the Baptist University of Hong Kong.

The Foundation’s relationship with HKDI was further developed through the work of another Councillor, Sandra Lee Suk-ye. Through the scholarships for Cheng and Wong, the Foundation was able to provide access to a world class programme and the chance to study overseas, which is invaluable for developing creative talents. Both students say they returned with a deeper understanding of design.

“Meeting and seeing people working on a different

《THE MOST IMPORTANT THING I DISCOVERED IS TO TREASURE EVERY CHANCE TO LEARN.》

scale of works with very diverse dimensions was very inspiring and encouraging for me,” says Cheng, who was enrolled in the Academy’s design school. “For every project we did I had to prepare a report and I realized how important writing is for the design process. It’s a new discipline for me and helps to organise my mind.”

During his time at the Academy, Cheng collaborated on designing an exhibition and a bike and he was able to work with a design collective in the city centre, where he perfected his bike project and learned the benefits of an “open source” approach that allows other users to modify the bike to suit their own needs.

“The bike was a start from scratch project,” he says. “I learned how to build a cargo bike from anodised aluminium tube using the xyz-system. The properties and details really determine how it looks and how it works. It was a great experience of how materials and construction influence the design process.”

During her time in Copenhagen, Wong was able to find an internship with the jewellery designer Karen Fly. She learned about the Danish sense of humour, experimented with 3D printing and attended lectures that were outside her main field of study.

“The most important thing I discovered is to treasure every chance to learn,” she says. “The Academy has a lot of lectures that everyone can join. I attended one about lighting and architecture that I found very inspirational. Expanding the scope of your learning is fun.”

Both Wong and Cheng returned from their time in Copenhagen with enhanced skills and a more profound devotion to their careers. In the future both students plan to launch their own businesses. Their successes in Denmark are precisely the kind of result that the Muses Foundation is looking for.

“We want to attract the smartest and most eligible candidates, those who have the most to offer and will make the best use of our awards,” says Kao. “We then want them to share their experiences.”

The Foundation makes sharing experiences with other students a condition of the award. This is designed to inspire other students to apply and encourage more people to follow the foundation’s example and support emerging talent in Hong Kong, where the creative industry is becoming increasingly important.

In recent years Chinese design has seen a revival and the Muses Foundation sees it has a role to play in rejuvenating China’s reputation as a place where craftsmanship and creativity are beyond compare.

“There was a rush to learn about western things when China reopened its doors in 1978 but that passion is slowing down,” says Kao. “The creativity of the Chinese people is being stimulated by new things and knowledge, giving birth to new Chinese brands and ideas, but it’s important for people to be reconnected to their own traditions.”

Kao sees China going through a process of double discovery, exploring foreign cultures and

rediscovering its own.

“This is opening new channels to propagate creativity, and when creative efforts are recognised there is a strong possibility of becoming successful,” she says. “This is a broad field in which to prosper and emerge.”

There are other large foundations and institutions that recognise these trends. The Foundation’s goal is not to compete with them, but to occupy a niche, helping to make a creative career something that parents look at more favourably and providing artists with a ladder that takes their careers higher. They have plans for future growth, including continuing to fund HKDI programmes and increasing the number of international exchange programmes they support.

“We have a personal approach and find people who need a push but would not get conventional funding,” says Koon. “We hope to be there at the right time, to help emerging or aspiring young artists or designers realise their full potential.”

As Ip, Cheng and Wong can testify, making the best use of a talent sometimes requires a muse and an angel. In May Koon and Mayching Kao they found both. ☺

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP
WONGTSZ WAI'S CLAY STOOL
THIS PAGE FROM TOP
CHENG WING CHUN WORKING ON
EXHIBITION PRODUCTS AT THE ROYAL
ACADEMY
WONGTSZ WAI MAKING
A STOOL WITH A 3D PRINTER

