

# CULTURAL DIVERSITY

## SEEING RED IN CHINESE

### *The Chinese Culture Connection's work in intercultural appreciation*

"Culture is almost like air, we breathe it in, we breathe it out," Mei Hung says.

That pretty much sums up her organization's spirit and mission – to "breathe in" a little Chinese culture through the Chinese Culture Connection (CCC), and "breathe out" intercultural curiosity, understanding, and respect.

The organization is clearly in the right place at the right time. The number of Chinese Americans in Malden grew 200% between 1990-2000, according to U.S. census figures. Today, Ms. Hung says, 14% of Malden is Asian, and of those Asians, 80% are Chinese or Chinese American.

Founded in 1986, CCC was not always in Malden. When it needed to relocate, the CCC entered discussions with Christine DiPietro, then representative of Malden Mayor Ronald Howard's office and still a CCC board member. Both sides agreed on the logical partnership of a Chinese cultural organization in a city with a growing Asian population – a liaison to bridge a gap of understanding between two cultures.

The mainstay of the CCC is its educational programs, for children and adults. Schools and organizations contract CCC's services to offer the workshops. The bulk of the one and two-hour classes are for grade schools, including the Beebe, Salemwood, Linden and Forestdale Schools in Malden, and schools in Milton, Sudbury, and Swampscott, as well as occasional trips to outlying areas. In these hands-on workshops, students are exposed to a number of art forms hundreds to thousands of years old, each with a rich heritage and tradition of its own. The most popular classes are Chinese brush painting, Chinese character/calligraphy, and rice dough sculpture. Others include Chinese cooking, Chinese dance and movement, Chinese knots, Chinese opera mask making, lantern making, paper folding, paper cutting, and name translation, where students' names are translated into Chinese.

Introduction to a workshop may include some historical context that heightens students' curiosity and interest in a cross-cultural connection. Take, for instance, paper folding. Students will be told that the Chinese invented paper in the first century. Knowing such a fact, participants have a far broader appreciation of Chinese culture and will ideally begin new relationships with Chinese schoolmates. A CCC program at the Beebe school in Malden had exactly this positive impact. Students from China, previously neglected by their classmates, were treated differently after the program – there was more curiosity about Chinese classmates, and more communication with them.

Occasionally, CCC offers workshops longer than one or two hours, like the two-week visit of a rice dough sculpture Master invited by the Peabody Essex Museum. These remarkable tiny figures, made of sticky rice, aseptic, honey and pigments, have a long history of religious and secular use. In the CCC workshop, students made simple statues of goldfish and flowers, while the Master displayed twelve impressive statues of the zodiac signs, each with a different animal head attached to a human body.

Besides educational programs, there are performances, demonstrations and workshops in libraries in the Greater Boston area. A broad representation of a rich cultural heritage is available, including mini concerts, arts and crafts, and martial arts.

Along with instructional programs or demonstrations, the CCC produces concerts with traditional Chinese instruments, like the Zheng, or Ghuzheng, which sounds something like the zither, and the Ehru, a rather "nasal" Chinese version of the violin. In 2004, the CCC sponsored the first recital of the Boston Zheng Ensemble at the Beebe School in Malden. The sounds of these ancient instruments bring listeners inside these musical traditions with immediacy and power. Moved by the performance, many Chinese thanked the CCC for bringing the music to life for their children. This year, CCC and MAPAC (Malden Asian Pacific American Coalition) sponsored another free concert of traditional Chinese music in April.

One of the most vibrant of CCC's traditions is its special exhibits of Chinese artifacts in libraries. A continuing project of past president Judith Funkhouser, the exhibits of text, images and artifacts have been shown in libraries at Concord, Newton, Billerica, Wellesley, Lincoln, Sherborn, and Malden. Other special library exhibits have introduced transplanting rice shoots, and the noisy fun of Chinese firecrackers.

In its month-long third bi-annual Fine Art Exhibit at the Malden Library this past April, CCC featured an extraordinary range of international talent and expertise by Chinese calligraphers, brush painters, and musicians. Attended by 100 people, the exhibit closed with a lecture on Chinese chess strategies by Wai-fong Loh, Ph.D., a man "...very serious about not taking himself too seriously."

Under the leadership of Mei Hung since 1999, the CCC has expanded its projects to include workshops for seniors at the Cambridge Community Center and classes for brain trauma victims at the South Cove Health Center. It also developed an acculturation program to help American Asian immigrants adjust to American culture and communicate better with their American-born children.

Life experience groomed Ms. Hung for her work at the CCC. After she immigrated from Taiwan at twenty-five to study at Tufts for her Masters in Education (M.Ed.94), she gravitated toward spreading appreciation for Chinese culture by hungering to learn more about it herself. Through her reading, study, and conversation with other Chinese, she fell in love with Chinese culture, and developed a deeper respect for the role that intercultural understanding plays in intercultural harmony.

The energy and imagination of her organization's programs has made that opportunity available to all of us.

For information on the CCC's programs, consult [www.chinesecultureconnection.org](http://www.chinesecultureconnection.org). The home page is a wash of red – the Chinese color for happiness, or luck.

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