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Chungwen Li, Dean of Ming-Ai (London) Institute

Bringing extra value to Chinese British lives

Having been involved in Chinese business and cultural projects for many years, I was surprised to only recently discover the well-established Ming-Ai (London) Institute. Its culture-related programmes and MA course in Chinese cultural heritage management are attracting great attention from the Anglo-Chinese community, and I have certainly benefited from the learning and connections I have made there for my business.

Origins

I was delighted therefore to meet the institute's Dean, Chungwen Li, and learn that its origins lie in the Ming Ai Association, set up in London in 1992 by Dr Therese Shak, a Hong Kong philanthropist. Its roots though can be traced to Caritas – Hong Kong, a charity established in 1953 which helped refugees fleeing there after the Second World War. To help these newcomers reskill and make a living in a new environment, Caritas' work covers hospitals, social workers, adult education and the hospitality industry. Over 20 years Dr Shak built it up from a shared desk in an office to a total of 14 schools. She left to go to the UK in the late 1980s and set up the Ming-Ai Association in north London.

Thriving

In 1999, Chungwen Li joined, and took over its management in 2010. Twenty years on, the now Ming-Ai (London) Institute is not just surviving but thriving. I want to know more about Li and how she managed to develop the organisation to progress from providing traditional courses such as learning the Chinese language, Chinese cooking and Tai Chi to become an academy with an accredited degree course and many projects on the go, ultimately creating an impact on the society and becoming a landmark in the Anglo-Chinese community.

Li's parents were Taiwanese but she was brought up in Hong Kong with spells of education in Taiwan and the UK. Work experience for



the charity turned into a full-time job. When she took on the top role she first ensured its survival before looking to secure innovative projects. Consequently, in 2011, Ming-Ai won Heritage Lottery Funding for the East West Festive Cultures project: *How do traditional Chinese festivals differ from their British counterparts and why?*

A further grant was given to Ming-Ai the following year to set up the British Chinese Workforce Heritage project. Although many thousands of Chinese workers have contributed to British society over the last century and a half, their history has never been properly documented. Ming-Ai spent three years completing the project, managing volunteers to research the role of Chinese workers in a range of employment sectors including seafaring, laundry and catering. To learn more about the history of the Chinese in the UK I recommend that readers consult the British Chinese Heritage Centre website.

Intelligence

The results of its studies were obviously well-received and satisfactory to the funding organisation but I wonder why the UK government should be interested in ethnic groups promoting their own culture? "It is not easy to reach pockets of ethnic groups throughout the country so organisations such as ours are encouraged to participate in gathering intelligence so that the government is able to provide the necessary support to the immigrants efficiently", Li tells me.

Meanwhile, the institute's reputation has also developed commercial interests. Two years ago, Ming-Ai worked on a British Airway project to help celebrate 80 years of flying between Hong Kong and London – as well as marking the airline's 100-year anniversary. Li worked with the institute's Hong Kong counterpart to deliver a series of seminars and exhibitions. "The learning process has been tremendous. These projects create a healthy cycle to provide learning opportunities for

"We shall continue to champion the integration and understanding of the two cultures, bringing real value to British Chinese lives."

the students with hands-on practice as the deliverables are very suitable for their learning. The income feeds back into further development of our education programmes, enabling us to employ more staff."

Value

As a result of these projects, the institute was accredited to run an MA course, validated by Middlesex University, on Chinese cultural heritage. Now in its fifth year it will soon be opened up to welcome Chinese students directly from China.

"We shall continue to maintain the legacy Dr Shak has left and to champion the integration and understanding of the two cultures, bringing real value to British Chinese lives," says Li. Dr Shak's legacy is clearly in very safe hands. I have no doubt that she would be very proud of what the Ming-Ai Institute under Chungwen Li has achieved. Moreover, in these current times of division in society, the institute's efforts in bringing people of different cultures together seem to be more important than ever.

www.ming-ai.org.uk
www.britishchineseheritagecentre.org.uk

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