In Pursuit of Antiquities

The Min Chiu Society at Fifty

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IT ALL STARTED in the 1960s in Hong Kong, then a “Cultural Desert”. While Hong Kong was under more than a century of colonial rule with its emphasis on Western culture, traditional Chinese culture never flourished. Little had been done to promote the study and appreciation of Chinese art and cultural heritage. On February 25th, 1960 the foundation stone for the new City Hall complex in Edinburgh Place was laid down by Sir Robert Black, the Governor. The opening of the City Hall to the public two years later after the completion of the HK$20 million project marked a watershed in the cultural scene in the then British Colony. In about the same time, on May 22nd, 1960, a small society for collectors of Chinese art was formed. Since inception the members of this club, the Min Chiu Society, have been working hard to change the “Cultural Desert” image of Hong Kong.

The founders and masterminds of the founding of the society were Chen Kuang Fu (1880–1976) and J.M. Hu (Hu Jen Mou or Hu Hui Chun, 1911–1995). The other thirteen founding members were:

P.C. Wong, 1905–1997, from Taishan, Guangdong, accountant
T.Y. Chao, 1912–1999, from Wuxi, Jiangsu, Wah Kwong Shipping Co.
Hsu Shih-Hao, 1899–1967, from Kunshan, Jiangsu, lawyer
Ip Yee, 1919–1984, from Huiyang, Guangdong, medical doctor
Wong Tung Yuan, from Ningpo, Zhejiang, Hong Kong Spinners
Lin Poh Shou, 1895–1986, from Banqiao, Taiwan, merchant
C.S. Loh, from Greater Shanghai area, Weilun Knitting Factory
K.J. Chu, from Greater Shanghai area, insurance company
C.T. Kwok, from Haining, Zhejiang, Wardard Textile Factory
J.C. Yuan, from Greater Shanghai area, merchant
Huo Pao Tsai, 1909–1987, from Nanhai, Guangdong, Bank of Canton
J.S. Lee, 1915–2007, from Xinhui, Guangdong, Hysan Estate
Liu Hon Tung, from Zhenjiang, Jiangsu, Southeast Textile Factory

Both Chen Kuang Fu and J.M. Hu were bankers. Chen founded the Shanghai Commercial Bank, and Hu was the eldest son of Hu Pih Chiang (1881–1938), founder of China and South Seas Bank (Zhongnan yinhang). The two of them were natives from Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province. They must have attracted the other friends from the same area to join the new society. Hence it is not suprising to see that amongst the fifteen founding members, the majority (nine) were from the Greater Shanghai area and its vicinity (encompassing not only Shanghai, Suzhou, Zhenjiang and Ningpo in Jiangsu province, but also part of Zhe-
Early members of the Min Chiu Society, mid-1960. From left: unknown, Hsu Pao Hua, J.S. Lee, Wong Tung Yuan, Wong Pao Hsie, P.C. Wong, J.M. Hu, Hsu Po Chiao, Chiu Leung Hang, T.Y. Chao, Hsu Shi Hao, Tsumura Tomoji. Note that on the left side-table a large Kangxi beaker was used to hold gladiolas.

jiang province. They all had families, houses and business in Shanghai for decades and all fled to settle in Hong Kong after the liberation of the mainland by the Communist government in 1949. It is also interesting to notice that four of them owned textile or knitting factories, one owned a shipping company, and two of them were bankers. This represents a very typical cross-section of the upper-class elites and merchants coming to Hong Kong from the Shanghai area in the 1950s. The economy in Hong Kong in those days, apart from entrepôt trading, depended very much on textile, knitting, garment, manufacturing and light industry. In contrast, the Cantonese members were a minority of only four, i.e. P.C. Wong, Ip Yee, Huo Pao Tsai and J.S. Lee. Wong and Ip had both spent time before the war in Shanghai and they must have known the two founders long before 1960. J.S. Lee was enrolled into the Yenching University in the old Peking in the mid-1930s. J.M. Hu was his senior there. The two had been old friends since at least the Yenching days in the 1930s.

It was under this background that the new society was founded. The fifteen founding members cherished an aim “to promote Chinese art and to foster connoisseurship in Chinese antiquities”. The name of the Society, “Min Chiu”, most probably coined by J.M. Hu, comes from Book 7 of the Analects of Confucius. The relevant passage from the Analects of Confucius says “I was not born with knowledge but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it” (translation by D.C. Lau)—an excellent and elegant excuse for someone to start a collection and to be immersed in collecting activities.

There are two ways to read the Chinese name of the Society Min-qiū jǐng-shē or Min-qiū-jīng shè (1a, 1b). The former is the more usual reading. The latter, on the other hand, plays a pun on the first three characters read together—literally meaning “quick in the acquiring of refined items”—very applicable to the nature of such a society. The second portion jing-shē or the last character shē alone, has a meaning of a sophisticated dwelling or a studio for scholarly pursuits. It must have been under this vision that from the very first day of inception, the Min Chiu Society had its own clubhouse. This differentiates the Min Chiu from all other similar societies and clubs not only in Hong Kong, Taiwan or China, but in overseas countries as well. The idea must have come from the few fraternity clubs set up by people coming from the Shanghai area, e.g. the Shanghai Fraternity Association, the Ningpo Residents Association, and the Kiangsu and Chekiang Residents Association. They all have clubhouses, maintain in-house cooking teams, serving characteristic home-cooked provincial cuisines. For the Min Chiu, its clubhouse is smaller, but in addition to
all above there is something extra and unique. There is a good reference library of Chinese art books (12), in addition to display cabinets and wall spaces for the exhibition of selected pieces from the members’ art and antique collections. These facilities provide opportunities for the members to perform serious research on their items and also encourage group discussions and exchange of ideas (6, 13). This tradition has continued into recent years with the addition of a small lecture room where visiting scholars may talk to the members, illustrated by either twin Kodak carousels or by PowerPoint slides from a Sony Vaio laptop together with a LCD computer projector. Eminent scholars are invited to lecture during the monthly meetings. On top of that, annually or biannually, an academic tour is organised to visit museums and art galleries both in China and abroad so as to broaden the members’ horizon and to maintain good relationship with relevant academic circles elsewhere.

Initially, the clubhouse of the Society was located at a small rented flat on 1st Floor, 41 Chatham Road, Kowloon (present-day Railway Plaza). Two years later it was considered inconvenient for the members who resided mostly on the Hong Kong Island side. And quite unexpectedly a minor fire broke out at a neighbouring flat. Fortunately damage was not serious and out of excellent foresight, the premises were fully covered by a very comprehensive insurance plan. Probably through the introduction of J.S. Lee, the Society moved to the old Sunning Court, Hoi Ping Road, Causeway Bay, which was opposite to the old Lee Garden Hotel. Two adjoining flats on the top floor were rented and this became the clubhouse of the Society for one and a half decades until 1978, when the Lee Hysan Estate Co. decided to pull the building down for redevelopment (4, 5). Late in that year some of the members raised some funds for the purchase and renovation of a 2650 square feet apartment at Bowen Road, Mid-Levels, owned formerly by the founding member Chen Kuang Fu, who passed away two years previously. Later, those members who contributed funds for the purchase formed a company (called Him Shing, literally humble and sincere) and let the flat to the Min Chiu Society at a monthly rental very much below market value. C.P. Lin was instrumental in the logistics of the transactions and the various procedures. This spacious clubhouse soon proved to be an exceedingly convenient and suitable location for the members. In the following two decades new members had been encouraged to buy some shares from the older members. Subsequently to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Founding of the Society in 1985, J.M. Hu, J.S. Lee and Fan Chai (then Chairman) donated their shares to the Society. Other members followed suit, thus
making the Society the largest shareholders of Him Shing. Not long ago the Society became the sole owner of Him Shing through further voluntary donations of shares from members or through purchases of the few remaining shares from families of members who had passed away. Therefore to date the Society owns its clubhouse at Bowen Road.

The first Chairman of the Min Chiu was J.M. Hu (6). His leadership, meticulous planning and farsighted vision were vital to the development and growth of the Min Chiu Society in the first two decades. J.M. Hu set a record of serving as Chairman for a total of eight years. The inception and initial planning of the activities of the Society were enthusiastically supported by the founding members and new members who joined in the first few
years. They included Wong Pao Hsie (father of Harold Wong), Tang Ping Yuan (also known as Tang Sheng Hai, grandfather of Henry Tang), C.Y. Tung (father of C.H. Tung), Quincy Chuang, Chiu Leung Hang, Ho Iu-Kwong and Philip W.C. Mao (2, 7, 9).

Since inception, twice every month, the members meet, after which a home-cooked dinner or lunch will be served. During the meetings ideas are exchanged on their recent acquisitions or special items from their collections. All types of Chinese antiquities, ranging from painting and calligraphy to ceramics and jade, are passed around the members during the meetings and the objects discussed (6, 13). Members are content to share with each other without reservation their appreciation of Chinese art. The passing round of specimens and discussions of the objects concerned enable knowledge and connoisseurship to be shared. Many members through their shared interest in Chinese art have become close friends. Their generosity and magnanimous spirit has persisted throughout the history of the Society.

During this period a great many important collectors and art lovers have become members of the Society thus joining in promoting and preserving the traditional culture of Chinese art in Hong Kong. These notable collectors who joined the Society prior to 1990 include Hsu Po Chiao, Chiu Chu Tung, Tam Man Long, Tsumura Tomoji, Richard Kilburn, Ng Wai Kai, Hui Po Wah, Ho Tim, Q.W. Lee, Fung Ping Fun, Wong Nan Ping, Brian McElney, Yip Shing Yiu, Shi Man Wei, S.Y. Kwan, Fan Chai, Peter Thompson, C.P. Lin, Robert Yuan, Ronald Poon, Christopher Mok, Harold Wong, K.S. Lo, Joseph Hotung, Richard Hui, Chung Wah Pui, Leung Yee, S.C. Kot, Lee Man Bin, Andrew Lee, Simon Kwan, Wong Kwai Kuen, Liu Yong Ling, T.T. Tsui, Roger Chow, Frank Wu, Kingsley Liu and Robert Tang.

In 1960 when the Society was formed, the early regulations, very probably first drafted by J.M. Hu, were few and simple. J.M. Hu was one of the founding members of the Committee for the Protection of Ancient Monuments and Cultural Relics in Shanghai in September 1949, and he also helped to found the Shanghai Museum. So he had the proper idea, vision and framework in mind for the new club. Two other early members, P.C. Wong and J.S. Lee, helped Hu in devising the rules as well. Wong was a Cambridge trained chartered accountant and Lee had worked for the Bank of China in London during the war. Both joined the London Oriental Ceramic Society in the early 1950s. So, together the three worked out the details.

Membership was eligible for any amateur “lover of art objects” over 21 in age. There was no nationality specification, although the majority was Chinese. There have been foreign members, Westerners and even a Japanese (fortunately all the members are multilingual and speak fluent English). In the very beginning there were three categories of mem-
bership, namely, Founding (or Voting), Ordinary (or Associate, sort of probationary or junior membership—after a certain period and after paying a top-up entry fee they are automatically elected Voting members) and Temporary. The joining fee for a Voting member was ten times that of Associate members. Temporary members, a category reserved for visitors passing through Hong Kong, were not charged a joining fee. But this last type of membership was soon abolished; in its place two new categories, Overseas members and Honorary members, were established. The Honorary members are all internationally renowned scholars and experts in Chinese art. According to the Constitution they need to be nominated and unanimously approved at the Annual General Meetings of the Society.

Although in April 2010 there are 40 Voting members (about slightly more than half of them are really active), 10 Overseas members and 19 Honorary members, it was stated in the first draft of the constitution in 1960 that the 15–20 founding members were to be Voting Members. So since the very beginning the Society has been a very restricted private club. Amongst all regulations the harshest one was, and still is, on the admission of members. Family fortune, size, range and quality of collection and social status have never been the entry qualification for the Min Chiu Society members. It depends rather on the personality and character of the applicants. The purpose of this tradition has been to ensure that the Society will always remain a gathering of like-minded collectors and friends. All of them are serious in the pursuit of knowledge and in their collecting endeavours.

Through collecting and academic exchange, members of the Min Chiu Society refine their “eyes” in the connoisseurship of Chinese art. Individual members as well as the Society have organised important public exhibitions both locally and overseas (3, 8). Many of the members have maintained world-class private collections of Chinese art, mounted solo exhibitions and/or published definitive scholarly catalogues. These members include:

Ceramics:

Painting and calligraphy:

Jade, furniture and other decorative arts:
Joseph Hotung, Yip Shing Yiu, Chung Wah Pui, Simon Kwan, Christopher Mok, Andrew Lee, Humphrey Hui and Roger Chou.

These exhibitions of both the members own private collections, or of the Society as a whole, have never been organised as a “vanity” show-off. The gentlemanly virtue of modesty has always prevailed among the Min Chiu members. A good example has been the 1968 exhibition of Qing porcelain at the clubhouse in Hoi Ping Road. J.M. Hu’s personal collection of Qing imperial wares was of world-class quality. But when we browse the published illustrated catalogue of that exhibition (8), we will notice that only a few of Hu’s second class items were included. Obviously he was very conscious of team contribution from fellow members rather than to dominate the exhibition with his own impeccable pieces. This good tradition in the selection process has continued into the present day for all Min Chiu exhibitions. It has always been the aim of the Min Chiu Society to promote public interest in the study and appreciation of Chinese art and culture. The mounting of public exhibitions will be a most effective education process for the general public in this direction. Over the years many of the Min Chiu members have become not only renowned and respected collectors but also Chinese art experts and scholars in their chosen specialties. Ground-breaking studies in Chinese art by the members like Philip Mao, Ip Yee, Richard Kilburn, Brian McElney, Simon Kwan, Kot See For, Humphrey Hui and Yip Shing Yiu are familiar to students of Chinese art.

While the Min Chiu Society has always been exclusive, from time to time they do accept young museum professionals as Associate members. Over the last fifty years three curators have become Associate members, namely James C.Y. Watt (from 1965, 9), Lawrence C.S. Tam (from 1977, 10, 13) and the present author (from 1981, 10, and in fact I was the last Associate member admitted to the Society, as soon afterwards this category of membership was never activated). The regular meetings, the in-house displays, the handling sessions, discussions and lectures provide an excellent training ground for these museum curators,
who were recently all elected Honorary members of the Society. For myself, I have always been most grateful to the Min Chiu Society, in particular the first generation members, especially J.M. Hu, Ip Yee and J.S. Lee, for their unreserved and selfless advice, guidance, teaching, support and encouragement. They also taught me what is true taste in Chinese art.

All the Min Chiu members, apart from being dedicated collectors, have also been great philanthropists and benefactors to museums worldwide—some of them are museum founders, or have museum galleries bearing their names (10, 11). The following are good examples:
J.M. Hu:
Ceramic collection donated to the Shanghai Museum and the Art Museum, The Chinese Univesity of Hong Kong; Qing zitan furniture to the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

J.S. Lee:
Founder and major benefactor of the Chinese University Art Museum; donations worldwide.

Lin Poh-shou:
Collection of classical paintings and calligraphy on permanent loan to the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Ip Yee:
Bequests of bamboo carvings to the Hong Kong Museum of Art; rhinoceros horn carvings to the Palace Museum, Beijing.
P.C. Wong:
Part of paintings and calligraphy collection bequested to the Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

K.S. Lo:
Collection donated to the Hong Kong Government; founded the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware, Hong Kong.

T.T. Tsui:
Ceramic and art collection donated to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum; funded T.T. Tsui museum galleries in Hong Kong, London, Chicago, Toronto, Shanghai and Canberra.

Joseph Hotung:
Staunch benefactor to the British Museum, supported the renovation of the Hotung Galleries and recently the Hotung Centre for the Studies of Ceramics to house the Percival David Collection of Chinese ceramics.

Brian McElney:
Collection donated to Victoria, British Columbia and Bath, UK; and founded the Museum of East Asian Art at Bath.

Quincy Chuang:
Donated an important furniture collection to the Shanghai Museum.

Group Donation:
The Min Chiu Library at the Shanghai Museum.

The Min Chiu members, over the last half a century, have shared a common goal in the sincere pursuit of knowledge and the aspiration to good taste in Chinese art. They are all serious collectors, generous benefactors and staunch supporters to public museums. Together they have trained museum curators and promoted public interest in the study and appreciation of Chinese art and heritage. Collectively they have reaffirmed the role and achievement of Chinese classical art and culture as an important part of the heritage of world culture as a whole. I am very honoured to have been part of it.

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