



Education

Weathering the change

Katie Hung

NOW IN HIS late 60s, Lee Boon-ying, the former director of the Hong Kong Observatory, has gone back to school. He is now a student at Hong Kong Art School after retiring from the Observatory seven years ago where he served for three decades.

The meteorology expert is in the second year of the school's bachelor degree program in fine art.

Lee has been an art and literature fan since he was a kid when his works were always posted in primary school. While science tends to be restricted by rules, art allows him to do whatever he likes.

"Suddenly, the spaces open up," he said. "You're thinking about what you can do and I think that opens up quite a lot of possibilities."

Lee has been active in learning new things such as Spanish and Chinese calligraphy during his retirement. "I thought it was easy-going enrolling in a degree course like this one for three years, and then you have a target. I maintain my interest in science and write a blog on science, on everything. But you need to do other things," he said.

"The average age for men now would be 80. In my generation, it would be 85 or 90. In that 10 years before you die, you have to do something."

The holder of a PhD degree in physics, who studied for a master's degree in business administration in the 90s, said: "I tell myself that I've been a student all my life."

But Lee quipped that he didn't expect the Hong Kong Art School course work to be demanding enough to keep his hands full.

His teacher, lecturer Ivy Ma King-chu, finds that mature students have more stories to tell as they have richer life experiences. "Stories are important. It's

like material for you to work on something," she said.

One of Lee's artworks

portrays a local open-air food stall from the old days with just a few seats, in perspective by cutting and pasting cardboard. He recalled "that's the life before McDonald's. That is the fast food at that time."

The mature students Ma has met are very humble even though they are already professionals or have a high status in society.

"They're very open-minded, always. When we're introducing new ideas, concepts about contemporary art, especially modern art, they find it very inspiring."

"But at the same time, it might be difficult for them. They have their whole life, like 20 to 30 years, believing in something else," she said.

"This kind of knowledge is so new and fresh to them. So in the process, I believe they need to 'unlearn' a lot. It's like you have to 'unequip' yourself in order to receive something never seen or thought before."

Lee Boon-ying and his teacher Ivy Ma, with some of his works, including a self-portrait, inset.



Moses Chan shows the crocodile toy he built using micro:bit.



Ma, who is also an artist, quit her job as a programmer to study her second bachelor in fine arts years ago in the Hong Kong Art School.

"At that time, the internet was booming. It had just got started in Hong Kong. After I got the degree about information technology, it was really easy to find a job in an internet-service provider company, mainly doing web-programming."

"After a few years, I realized I needed some change. I couldn't put up with the repetitive work, just looking at the coding. It seems I have a lot of questions on what kind of life I want. And, absolutely, the answer is not that."

Her life has since changed. She devotes her second career to art after pursuing a master's degree in Britain with the support of a scholarship she received in the last year of study at school.

Ma enjoyed her class with a mixture of students coming from diverse backgrounds and age groups.

The school's bachelor program in fine art this year, for example, has 70 percent of the students aged 30 or above.

It is also built for working adults and high-school leavers.

Students are exposed to different art learning experiences ranging from theory to practical techniques and have classes only at weekends and in the evening on weekdays.

Hong Kong Art School's bachelor and master programs in fine art are in collaboration with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, better known as RMIT.

Both degrees are awarded by RMIT.

Hong Kong Art School's academic head, Jaffa Lam-laam, said it has been recruiting mature students for a long while.

"In the first year [of working at the school], I already saw some of the mature students. Some of them are mummies, retired people," said Lam, who has been on the staff since 2002.

She believes it is always good to include them, showing the right study attitude to those who are younger. "They always stay behind to work. I'm always impressed by them because they have their own career."

"Some of them are even the owners of companies and they are professionals," said Lam.

"But they still come here and spend the rest of the spare time just making art. I think there's energy in there."

She added even though some of them will not quit their jobs to be an artist after graduation, they will recommend art pieces and introduce artists to their companies, which contributes to the city environment.

katie.hung@singtaonews.com