

Potters gather to build bridges

By Robin B. Breedlove
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SEAGROVE — More than 7,500 miles separate Seagrove, North Carolina, and Jingdezhen, China. Yet a group of like-minded individuals met Wednesday night over a potluck dinner to begin the process of building a bridge linking the two locations.

Guest of honor for the evening, hosted at the studio of potter Ben Owen, was Jackson Li, an internationally recognized Chinese ceramic artist, and his wife, Ying.

Li, a graduate of Jingdezhen Ceramics Institute, also received a master of fine arts degree at Alfred University in New York. He is the co-founder of Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute in the Jiangxi Province in China. He is an active supporter in promoting international exchange art programs, reaching out as an educator and liaison for ceramic artists.

Thanks to Seagrove's continual tradition of pottery making that goes back to before the American Revolution — something that sets Seagrove apart from most pottery areas in the United States — Li has found Seagrove a unique place to reach out.

"There are a lot of differences between us, but all these commonalities too," said Seagrove potter Fred Johnston, who has been hosting Li and his wife. "We look different, we eat different, but we're still human — we share the love of the art. He's my Chinese cousin."



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The Monkey and the Elephant

Comparing Seagrove with Jingdezhen, Li creates an analogy, using a monkey and an elephant, to compare Seagrove's 200-year tradition in clay with China's astounding 1,000-year history.

"Seagrove is like the monkey and Jingdezhen the elephant," he said. "Monkey is cute and intelligent. Elephant is big and lovely."

According to Johnston, there are about 100 ceramic studios in the Seagrove area and more than 1,000 in Li's area in China, with 15,000 students studying ceramics at the university.

"Seagrove is something

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NEW PERSPECTIVES — Fred Johnston of Johnston and Genithes Art Pottery in Seagrove, above, watches as Jackson Li, a 'treasure' in Chinese on one of Johnston's pottery pieces. Li and his wife, Ying, left, who were visiting from Jingdezhen, China, pose with some of their pottery and beautiful brushes used to decorate it. During his visit, Li suggested a professional artist exchange between the potters of his home and those in the Seagrove area will encourage artists to do things they may never have thought of doing before.'

Potters

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small but very interesting," Li said. "It's unique because everyone is nestled in the countryside."

He described the experience of driving down Potter's Highway (N.C. 705) with potters spread out around the area. "It is like traveling out in the universe — you never know where your next stop will be."

Li spoke of a professional artist exchange, continuing his analogy.

"Monkey never knows how small he is til he meets elephant. Elephant never knows how big or how slow he is til he meets monkey ... I find that an exchange brings about change. It will encourage artists to do things they may never have thought about doing before."

Drunk in pottery

One of the most distinguished differences in the art of pottery between the two areas is the process. In Seagrove, pottery is a start-to-finish process for most. From digging clay and throwing pots to making glazes, designing and firing the pieces, Seagrove potters do it all.

"In China, it is more specialized in one area instead," Johnston said. One person specializes in being a turner, the person

"They have a knowledge of 1,000 years," said Johnston. "With that amazing knowledge they can make clay do whatever they want it to do. Their culture is drunk in pottery."

The potluck gathering was to start building a bridge from east to west, connecting Seagrove to Jingdezhen. Also an award-winning filmmaker, Li shared a 25-minute film he produced about the traditional pottery making of Jingdezhen. The film, that Johnston described as "less of a documentary and more of a poem," tells the story of China's ceramic tradition with no narration — the only soundtrack was the sounds of the art being crafted, Chinese singing and the laughter of those enjoying their work.

Crossing paths

The serendipity of the event could not be ignored. Despite the thousands of miles between them and the differences in techniques, the gathering gave an undeniable feeling of just how small the world really can be.

Johnston and Li met at Alfred University in the early '90s and then went separate directions. When Li arrived for last weekend's N.C. Potter's Conference in Asheboro, he remembered Johnston and the two began catching up.

But Johnston isn't the only Seagrove potter who

has crossed paths with Li. Several years back, potter Ben Owen traveled to China, taking a brief side trip to Jingdezhen, an experience that left a lasting impression.

"I had seen exhibits at the Met and could read about it in textbooks, but it just couldn't really speak to me until I saw it in person."

Cross-pollination of cultures

Li inspired the idea of bridging a gap of thousands of miles, and years of tradition, by forming a "sister city" sort of relationship between the two ceramic meccas, but he also encouraged local potters to look at the potential of their own area.

"I want to invite you to see China from a potter's perspective and not just as a tourist," said Li. "I like to share my knowledge and my resources and my place will touch you."

"But I have only been in Seagrove a few days, and

yet I feel like this is my home. I don't feel strange to be here. Seagrove should be state-recognized and world-recognized because Seagrove has many notable potters ... This place is a heaven not discovered yet."

By the evening's end friendships had been formed, new understandings shared, ideas exchanged, and the foundation of the bridge made, linking the two cultures.

"The impact of this idea of the sister cities could be amazing," said Johnston. "It's a cross-pollination of cultures."

Li said his wish for that cross-pollination is simple.

"My goal is to inspire everybody's heart. We share a passion and a vision and a love. The monkey and the elephant get along easily. They take from the earth and make magic."

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TOOLS IMITATING ART — Brushes made by Chinese potter Ying Li and used to decorate his ceramic works are pieces of art, too.

who makes the pot, and someone else is the designer making the glaze. Another person would be responsible for firing the pieces."

Li explained why.

"That is because long ago when the Emperor wanted a piece made, he wanted the best. You

couldn't expect one person to do it all. It took a team. Sometimes maybe it would be one family — a grandfather, a father, a son or daughter, but everyone has a specific job."

Some Seagrove potters look to reach out to the rich history of pottery in China.