

An Interview with Ms Stella Tan – Thow Kwang Industry Pte Ltd

Thow Kwang Industry Pte Ltd - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award 2020



From Left to Right – Tan Teck Yoke, Stella Tan, Yulianti Tan

Image Credit: National Heritage Board

Culture Academy

Congratulations to Thow Kang industry for receiving the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award! Tell us about Thow Kwang Industry’s history and vision, what do you guys do and what sets you apart?

Stella Tan

My grandfather, Tan Kim Seh back in 1965, founded Thow Kwang. He was from a pottery village in Shatow, China. When he came over to Singapore, he bought the dragon kiln. At that time, Thow Kwang was a cottage industry- mass-producing latex cups for rubber plantations, orchid pots etc to meet market demands. The Dragon kiln was used to fire all the clay wares. In 1980, production decreased, and we started importing and exporting. Gradually, our business also began its slow transformation into an education hub.

Today, our vision is to make Thow Kwang a pottery hub, one that comes to mind instinctively whenever people think about pottery. It’ll be a place where you can shop for pottery, learn the skills of pottery, and learn about an interesting piece of Singapore’s heritage. Like a tapestry that stretches across time, we hope to continue the dragon kiln’s legacy - from my grandfather to my father, Mr Tan

	<p>Teck Yoke, then me, and to future generations.</p> <p>As the third-generation owner of Thow Kwang industry. I'm updating the business through greater involvement in social media, marketing, workshops, and supplying handmade crafts to cafes, restaurants and hotels.</p>
Culture Academy	What are the unique features of the Dragon Kiln and wood-firing?
Stella Tan	The Dragon Kiln is a beautiful structure made of bricks and clay. In order to fire up the Dragon kiln, we require a community, which is the traditional way of firing up clay. Wood is the cornerstone of the magic in the dragon kiln. Pots that are engulfed in the river of fire will react with the ashes in the glaze to produce unpredictable colors and textures. Every piece from the dragon kiln is unique from the blush of its flames. This method is not used in gas and electric kilns.
Culture Academy	There is in fact such a community, the Thow Kwang Clay Artists. Could you tell us about them?
Stella Tan	The Thow Kwang Clay Artists comprises of full-time, as well as, hobbyist-potters from various professions. The TK dragon kiln has become a sanctuary for rekindling the art of wood-fired pottery, and re-connecting us to our roots and multi-cultural history through experimentation with clay.
Culture Academy	Thow Kwang introduced shaping clay as a form of therapy with social service organizations. Can you tell us about your experiences?
Stella Tan	Pottery making helps to improve one's lifestyle and it's a way to heal. It also helps to expand one's interest. Through a hands-on, firsthand experience – pottery provides a different view of life, and also provides new opportunities.
Culture Academy	What do you hope that participants, especially younger participants, would take away from these sessions?
Stella Tan	From pottery making and to the firing of the Dragon Kiln, I hope that they will understand the craft and workmanship behind every pottery item. To make a beautiful piece requires a lot of practice, hard work and perseverance. In Chinese, we have an idiom that says, "good thing doesn't come easy." Younger participants will learn about this first-hand through the tedious work to fire up the dragon kiln. The process can take up to 30-40hours, and more importantly, there are no short cuts around it. All these are part of the process of getting the special dragon kiln touch to pottery items. I believe that after working hard through these processes, our young participants will better appreciate the value of hard work, and also acquire an understanding of the intangible beauty of dragon kiln pottery making. These life lessons will guide them beyond pottery and help build character in them.
Culture Academy	The Covid-19 pandemic have pushed the arts towards digitalization. What are some challenges that you've faced with digitalizing Thow Kwang Industry?
Stella Tan	We are very used to face-to-face lessons and workshops – thus during the covid-19 period, we tried our best to teach via zoom and improve our digital skills.

	<p>During this period, we started our online shop as well to sustain our business. We were very lucky to launch our mini wheel as well. The mini wheel enables our students to do pottery at home. Many have taken up this activity, to help manage the stress of living with Covid-19 measures.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>What does the term 'intangible culture' mean to you and to Thow Kwang?</p>
Stella Tan	<p>Intangible culture is something that is irreplaceable. It's an important element in our lives and a reminder of our forefathers' hard work and perseverance. It's something that we can never take for granted. Be it heritage or skills, it needs to be passed on to our young generations, otherwise they will never know how it is like in the past and how lucky they are today.</p> <p>Besides reading or seeing the dragon kiln from the Internet, firsthand experience is important too. You only really learn through the magical touch of working with the dragon kiln, it's a feeling that you can never put into words.</p>