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Headline: Ex-gangster boss goes into prison to teach tea appreciation

前黑老大三度坐牢 再入狱不服刑 教泡茶喝茶

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回监狱讲授茶道，是三美光陶艺第三代学徒金怀奇（39岁）三年前开始经营陶瓷茶具生意后萌生的念头。他相信，就如他通

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▼陶瓷让金怀奇悟悟人生，只要放心思，一堆不起眼的泥土也能塑成艺术品。

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▲金怀奇设计的黑白茶具，意喻每个案件背后都有故事，不是非黑即白。（唐振辉面簿）

金怀奇青年时期因参加黑社会和涉毒入狱三次。他出狱前在狱中学习陶艺，出狱后也考获拉萨尔艺术学院艺术学士学位，并开设自己的陶瓷品生意。

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Translation:

Former triad leader incarcerated three times; he re-enters prison not to serve a sentence, but to teach tea appreciation

By Lan Yun Zhou

Last month, Mr Kim Whye Kee stepped into prison again, where he had previously been incarcerated thrice.

Except for this time, the former triad leader was not there to serve a sentence but to introduce a group of inmates who were about to complete their sentence to something even more addictive than drugs: tea.

Going back to prison to teach tea appreciation was something Mr Kim Whye Kee, 39, a third-generation student of Sam Mui Kuang Pottery, always had in mind since he started his own pottery tea sets business three years ago. He believed that just as he turned his life around through learning the art of pottery and tea appreciation, it could bring a similar inspiration to other inmates as well.

Mr Kim said that the art of tea appreciation helped him correct negative thoughts he had in the past, and the passion grew so much that he compared it to "taking drugs".

"From preparing the tea pot to switching on the fire and brewing the tea, there isn't any difference between the process of tea ceremony and drug consumption. Even the feelings of 'high' experience were fairly similar. Hence, I might as well introduce tea appreciation to them instead of drugs, since tea consumption is legal and has much cultural value."

The idea stayed with him but did not materialise due to practical reasons.

"Previously, no one dared to underwrite this idea because tea brewing involves hot water. Imagine if the inmates broke into fights and used the hot water to scald each other – that is a risk that nobody wants to take."

The breakthrough came this year when he ran into a prison officer whom he had previously worked with on other rehabilitation projects. This prison officer was seconded to be the Executive Director at the Industrial & Services Co-Operative Society (ISCOS), an organisation that helps ex-offenders to reintegrate into society. With the support from a familiar friend, what was once considered a taboo idea finally found its way to the space behind the walls of prison.

The 15 students in the tea appreciation class were handpicked by prison officers, identified as those who would need community support the most. Mr Kim and another ex-offender joined hands to teach tea appreciation plus other useful skills over a series of 10 lessons, such as SWOT analysis, financial management skills, social media skills, and the sharing of their reintegration experiences.

Mr Kim said that many turned to alcohol or drugs to “forget the past”. In the contrary, drinking tea is about “remembering the present”, and to “remember who you are”. This makes it easier to have the perseverance to continue living life.

“I hope that the programme would gradually garner more interest among the inmates so that they would understand that to drink a cup of good tea, the foundational work with great care are essential. Life is like making good tea: with adequate preparations at the start, then only you could enjoy the desired positive outcome later.”

Tea sets designs inspired by landscape paintings; symbolic of the story behind every criminal case

The story behind every offence committed is not always black and white – Mr Kim Whye Kee uses abstract landscape designs in his tea sets to symbolise this concept.

In a charity gala dinner last month, the Law Society Pro Bono Services Office gave 16 tea sets to its donors, all designed and crafted by Mr Kim.

Each white cup has a single stroke of black from the inside to the outside, painted in the style of Chinese landscape paintings.

Mr Kim said, “Perhaps in the eyes of the law, the conclusion of a case is black or white, but what I’m trying to show is that it’s beyond a matter of guilty or not guilty. Some people stole food to eat because they were hungry, while others who cannot find jobs join secret societies...there is a unique set of circumstances behind every story, not just a black and white world.”

Mr Kim was imprisoned thrice due to his involvement with secret societies and drugs as a youth. He learned pottery while still in prison, and enrolled into the La Salle College of the Arts for degree studies after his release and set up his own pottery business.

When asked if he had natural artistic talent, Mr Kim answered with a laugh, “Perhaps when I was in the secret society, the gift was already there when I was tasked to scrawl “O\$P\$” on the walls.”

Offering spaces in his pottery studio to allow youth-at-risk to earn extra pocket money

Mr Kim Whye Kee uses the art of pottery to develop himself as well as others he comes across – he took extra effort to look out for youth-at-risk he has helped, and let them work in his studio at Buangkok to earn extra money.

“Sometimes when they don’t have money, I would get them to make vases in the studio and pay them about \$8 to \$10 an hour. If the vases are sold, the profits go to them as well.”

These youth normally come by the studio during the weekends or after school to make pottery pieces, and stay for up to four hours per stint. Mr Kim said that pottery does not require talent; with concentration and practice for two hours every day, the results are evident within a year. “Pottery is like life. It is just a lump of clay if neglected. But with effort and sincerity, it becomes a work of art.”