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Cha - a cup overflowing

A website for budding writers in the English language is full of works by writers of Asian descent and those who love Asia, writes **Adrian Wan**

Tammy Ho Lai-ming took to writing in English like a duck to water when she was at university.

Encouraged by her professor, she began submitting poetry and short stories to online literary journals which, to her dismay, were non-existent in Hong Kong. So she founded *Cha* - the city's only such journal, which aims to publish in hard copy form eventually but at present is a "webzine".

Nearly three years since its launch, the number of contributors is ever-increasing. Ho and co-editor Jeff Zroback edit their works as part of an effort to cultivate fertile ground for quality Asian literature.

"It definitely takes up a good deal of our time," says Ho, who is currently studying for a PhD in London. "But we feel this is something worthwhile and we love doing it, so we don't mind spending time on it."

Dedicated to publishing poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, reviews, essays and photography from and about Asia, the quarterly *Cha* receives on average about 500 contributions per issue.

And, as pieces published in *Cha* have won awards, Ho says she expects the number to continue growing.

Ho and Zroback wanted to pick a title for their journal which resonated with Eastern elements. They decided on *Cha*, meaning tea in many Asian languages including Chinese, Japanese and Korean. The fact that the simple drink which can

offer so many subtle tastes is associated with contemplation also tickled their fancy.

Cha may appear to be brimful of elevated language written for the literati, but a closer look will change your perception: the works published are artistic pieces which anyone can enjoy.

And it is a literary melting pot - the writers have vastly diverse backgrounds. Ho says about half of them live in Asia and the rest are of Asian descent or those who are interested in the East. "We publish writers of all ages," she says. "The youngest we've had was 17 years old and the oldest was over 70." She adds that she hopes *Young Post* readers will send in works.

A highlight of *Cha* is its Cup of Fine Tea section, a critique column for works previously published in the journal, where visitors can sharpen their analytical skills.

"The philosophy behind it is that if something is good enough to be published in *Cha*, then it is good enough to receive critical attention," Ho says.

She says she wrote almost exclusively in Chinese until she studied English literature at the University of Hong Kong where she earned the opportunity to edit an anthology. Her poems have been published in numerous journals.

So what's Ho's secret to writing beautiful English? She puts it down to studying hard and practising, and she deems reading particularly valuable.

"My favourite English author is

Charles Dickens," she says. "All of his books are great, but especially *Great Expectations*."

Aside from reading, writing is a crucial daily ritual. "I can't go one day without reading or writing," she says. "They are part of me and are extremely important to me. Sometimes I get so absorbed in both that I forget to do other things."

Given that *Cha* has limited space but receives hundreds of works from aspiring writers, a sorting process must occur and only the best works are published on the site.

But Ho advises writers wanting to be published not to give up. "Don't get discouraged if your first attempts do not yield success," she says. "You will get there if you persist."

Visit *Cha* at www.asiancha.com

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