

Bartering business brings home treasures

Collector of agarwood shares her wares at a dedicated museum, hoping to help her city become renowned for its aroma culture, as **Chen Meiling** reports

Agarwood statues stand in front of the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art in Nantong Binjiang Park, sculpted into mermaids, Confucius and giant beasts. Walking into the museum, lines of thick agarwood emit a strong fragrance.

For Lu Yaping, owner of the museum and president of Jiangsu Yaping Group, developing the agarwood industry means realizing the dream of helping Nantong become world renowned for its aroma culture.

Born in the suburban area of Nantong, Lu has been known by locals as the queen of cotton prints, selling cloth to 16 countries and regions including Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and many African countries. Her business reports annual revenue of more than 300 million yuan (\$43.2 million) since 1993.

She recalled that one day, a client from Taiwan told her: "If they have difficulty in paying for the prints, why not ask them to pay with their rare resources?" After that, she began to exchange her prints for agarwood with Indonesian clients.

Lu said most of her friends and family members disagreed with her decision, because the value of agarwood was not well-known by the public at that time.

"They said making a profit is the nature of business people. But I think since I have already earned plenty of money, could I do something for the society and country?" Lu said. "If I can collect agarwood as much as I can, isn't it also a valuable resource for Nantong and China?"

Lu said the aroma of agarwood is formed by the joint effect of resin, mold and external environmental factors during the infection process of the wood, which takes years, even centuries, to complete.

"I fell for this unique aroma instantly," Lu said. "I began to collect agarwood since 1993 and finally took up a related business, even though my family has shown discontent for more than ten years."

She said now her collection is extensive. She sells agarwood products to the global market and has opened three agarwood museums to introduce people to it.

"I turned myself into a crazy agarwood fan," she said. "I think what I got back was more than an economic benefit."

Lu has invited professional sculptors from home and abroad to engrave her agarwood since 1997.

"Every carving is my favorite," Lu said. "Sculptors give the agarwood cultural and artistic meaning that makes every piece of wood unique and even more priceless."

Lu established production bases in Cambodia, Brunei and Indonesia to cultivate agarwood. Various products containing the material were produced, including cigarettes, wines, teas, soaps, and skincare.

"The agarwood business has formed a sustainable industrial chain. I constructed a foreign industrial base not only for the company to go global, but also to bring lots of working opportunities for workers in those developing countries," said Lu.

The People's Daily Overseas Edition reported in 2014 that Nantong boasts eight city brands, which are longevity, cotton pinning, cultural museums, architecture, overseas Chinese businesspeople, high social security, primary education, and being the home of many sports celebrities.

"I want to make agarwood the ninth brand of this city," Lu said.

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Agarwood lovers from around China visit the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art in June. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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Lu Yaping, president of Jiangsu Yaping Group, agarwood collector

\$43.2

billion

the annual revenue of Jiangsu Yaping Group

3

museums

of agarwood built by Lu Yaping, containing tens of thousands of her collections



Lu Yaping introduces one of the exhibits in her museum to visitors on May 21.



Part of Lu Yaping's collections in the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art.



The Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art, founded in 2013, is home to about 4,000 agarwood products and many artworks made from other woods.



A sculpture made of 1,000-year-old ebony is displayed in the courtyard of the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art.

What is agarwood?

Agarwood is formed when Aquilaria and Gyrinops trees become infected with mold and began to produce a dark aromatic resin to defend against the attack. It takes dozens, even thousands, of years for agarwood to form, which makes it rare and expensive.

The aroma of agarwood differs according to the temperature, humidity level, mold type and resin in which it was formed.

Agarwood is mainly found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Brunei and South China, including Guangdong and Hainan provinces and Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

It is used to produce bracelets, necklaces, pendants, perfumes, essential oils, soaps, chopsticks, pens, pillows, combs, wines, teas, and carvings in the shape of humans, plants or animals.

Historical written records describing agarwood can be dated back to *Compendium of Materia Medica* written by Li Shizhen, a medical scientist during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). He wrote: "Agarwood helps to ease heartache, stomachache and skin itches. It can warm the body and refresh the mind."

Experts say to distinguish real agarwood, the most simple way is to burn a small piece of the wood and smell the smoke. Real pieces emit a clear and pleasant aroma, while fake ones smell pungent. Also, the aroma of real agarwood will get stronger as time passes, while the smell of the fake pieces will gradually disappear.

CHEN MEILING



Three pieces of 2,000-year-old rosewood stand at the gate of the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art.



Collections in the Jiangsu Yaping International Museum of Art form a forest of wooden artworks.