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World's first Chinese rosewood cello stars in Hong Kong exhibition. How does it sound?

Made over six months from a 200-year-old piece of Chinese rosewood, or huanghuali, the cello is now on show at Sheung Wan's Liang Yi Museum

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Huanghuali, or Chinese rosewood, is one of the most valuable natural materials.

Literally meaning “yellow flowering pear”, *huanghuali* has been prized since the Ming and Qing dynasties for its beautiful honey-gold and reddish-brown colour, distinctive grain patterns and gentle sweet fragrance.

The wood, which is used in high-end furniture and traditional Chinese medicine, has long been the gold standard for luxury in East Asia, historically featuring in the homes of emperors, scholars and wealthy merchants.

Now, for the first time, the material will find a new voice on the global stage in a project that fuses Eastern heritage and Western artistry.



A piece of huanghuali wood is displayed at the exhibition. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The world's first *huanghuali* cello is a collaboration between British violin dealer J & A Beare and Hong Kong's Liang Yi Museum, where it is currently on show until January 28 as part of the ["The World's First Huanghuali Cello"](#) exhibition.

The instrument, crafted by master luthier Robert Brewer Young and his team, is a dream come true for Peter Fung, the Hong Kong businessman and antique collector whose collections have been shown at venues including the Palace Museum in Beijing and Goldsmiths' Hall in London.

Fung is a classical music aficionado and cellist who is fascinated with *huanghuali*; it was only natural that he would be curious about combining these two passions.

The undertaking involved a 200-year-old piece of *huanghuali* in a process fraught with risk. Young, whose instruments have been played by musicians such as Truls Mork and Steven Isserlis, describes the first cut as an incredibly "strong experience", where "there was absolutely no margin for error".

"You have an extremely valuable piece of wood, and the material itself is extremely dense. It is much more challenging than some of the woods that would be used traditionally in Italy ... But oh, was it worth it," Young says.

"When we made the first cut, we just were like, 'Oh, my goodness,' because it smells so beautiful."



Robert Brewer Young of J & A Beare crafted the huanghuali cello with his team. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The aromatic dust has been saved to make incense, in line with the wood's traditional uses in medicine and meditation. "It's a magnificent material, and you don't want to waste any of it," Young says.

Construction, which began a year after the initial sourcing of the wood, took six months. But how does it sound?

"We didn't know how it was going to sound until [the day before its debut]," Young says, admitting that this kept him "up all night".

However, the tension broke when Fung played the first notes. The sound was confirmed to be of high quality.

"[Fung] being the first to play the cello was symbolically quite important," Young says.

"The wood itself, I'm now understanding, is very compelling. It draws you in. It has a certain, I would say, seductive, mystical quality that is quite powerful."



Items on show at the exhibition. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The cello is not yet completed; the final varnish will be applied after its exhibition ends. The instrument is already scheduled to feature in live performances in the following months, and talks of creating a full quartet ensemble with the addition of two violins and a viola are in the works.

For Daniel Engelbach, a member of the team who trained at the International Violin Making School in Cremona, Italy, creating the instrument was a "remarkably rewarding process".

"It was quite moving because of how almost confronting it is, to how we usually go about this craft. It's something that deviates from the norm, but the unusual also proved to work extremely well."



Daniel Engelbach, a craftsman from J & A Beare, tends to an instrument at the Liang Yi Museum. Photo: Jonathan Wong

The exhibition also features *huanghuali* treasures from Liang Yi's coveted collection alongside historic Italian violins from J & A Beare's archives. Rare instruments by legendary luthiers Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) and

Giuseppe Guarneri del Gesu (1698-1744) are also on display.

There will also be a series of workshops under the collective title "The Five Senses of the Violinmaker" that will explore cello-making processes. They will include sessions on tasting and smelling the natural ingredients used in varnishes, and a cellist-led session on sound.

The workshops will be held daily until January 23. Advance registration is required to visit the exhibition.

"The World's First Huanghuali Cello", January 16-28, Monday-Saturday, 10am-6pm, Liang Yi Museum, 181-199 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan.