

# Showcase of Quixotic Chivalry



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**Ir. Chin Mee Poon** is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

**W**hen Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra published his book, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* in 1605, he probably did not foresee that the fictitious character he had created in the book, would one day surpass him in popularity.

My first contact with *Don Quixote* was during my secondary school days when I came across a copy of an abridged Chinese translation of Cervantes' famous book in a local bookshop. I was very much amused and fascinated by the many heroic adventures of the protagonist that verged on insanity. So you can imagine how excited I was when I learnt that there was a museum in the city of Guanajuato dedicated to this idiosyncratic character when my wife and I arrived in central Mexico in March 2011. We had then just started our 4-month backpacking trip in Central America and West Caribbean.

Founded at about the same time as the release of Cervantes' book and situated in a narrow ravine, Guanajuato is a beautiful city. It once produced large quantities of silver and was the richest city in Mexico. Its historic centre became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988.

The little Quixote Iconographic Museum is located in the eastern part of the city, close to the pretty pink Church Of San Francisco. The museum exhibits were the personal collection of a Spaniard who fled the Franco-era oppression to Mexico. There were paintings, drawings, prints, engravings, murals, tapestries, sculptures, busts, miniatures, medals, plates, glassware, chess sets, playing cards, pipes and cutlery; some were works of great masters like Pedro, Rafael Coronel, Dali and Picasso. I found the museum extremely interesting and we spent two hours there. Fortunately photography was allowed and I was able to capture many of the exquisite exhibits with my camera.

Cervantes (1547-1616) was also a poet and playwright, but his most important work was obviously the two-volume novel on *Don Quixote*. He published the sequel of the novel in 1615, 10 years after the publication of Part One and just one year before his demise. The novel is a classic of Western literature and is considered one of the best works of fiction ever written.

The 50-something *Don Quixote* read so many books of chivalry that he decided to do something to revive the virtues of chivalry. He went to an inn, imagining it to be a castle, and pestered the innkeeper, whom he regarded as lord of the castle, to dub him a knight.

Then, wearing an old armour, with a lance in hand and his neighbour Sancho Panza beside him as his squire, *Don Quixote* set off as a knight-errant riding an old horse named Rocinante, to rid society of injustices and other evils, but alas, all his adventures invariably ended as misadventures. The most hilarious episode was probably when *Don Quixote* tried to tilt (attack) at windmills which he believed to be giants, with disastrous consequences of course.

Four centuries after *Don Quixote* was first published, Cervantes lives on, as evidenced by the annual International Cervantes Festival held in autumn in Guanajuato. This important cultural event on the international scene was started in 1953 when short plays written by Cervantes were staged in Guanajuato. The city had always shone culturally despite its relatively small size.

*Don Quixote*, the eccentric knight-errant, has almost become a household name and has found his way into the English dictionary in several forms: Quixote, quixotic, quixotism and quixotry. We say "tilting at windmills" to mean attacking imaginary enemies. And the popular phrase, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating", comes from this novel too.

Now you understand why I was so pleased to meet an old friend in a city so far from his birthplace. ■

