

FEATURES

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Chen Cheng-ching's (陳澄清) boss asked him whether he could imitate the decorative motif painted on the National Palace Museum's Ming 100 Deer Vase (百鹿尊). The Chinese like that one, he said. It symbolizes great wealth. Chen worked on the composition, and his co-workers copied it. That was back when Chen worked for China Art (市拿陶藝), the first factory established in Yingge to produce imitation ancient Chinese imperial ware ceramics. "The company was paying me NT\$3,000 a month. They sold the vases for NT\$50,000 each. They never told me," Chen tells the *Taipei Times*, as if that might be perfectly normal.

"The museum's vase doesn't actually have 100 deer on it, but mine does. Even so, the museum's is the better vase," Chen says.

Chen, 92, sits surrounded by his work: paintings, plates and vases, including one of his 100 deer vases. There are hundreds of painted but unglazed and unfired plates and plaques stored around his apartment in New Taipei City. He has his own electric kiln on the balcony. Amassed notes, together with copies of his self-published book about his life and work, lie scattered on the table.

From 1972 to 1985, Chen was part of an assembly line in the factory, painting decorative motifs for imitation wares. Many of these imitations were sold to Hong Kong dealers for tens of thousands of New Taiwan dollars. These dealers would then sell them to unwitting collectors in the West and Japan as authentic Ming and Qing antiques for 10 times that amount.

"The Chinese-style vases Western and Japanese buyers were buying during the 1970s and 1980s were all exported from Taiwan," says Cheng Wen-hung (程文宏), head of the Educational Promotion Department of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

"It was big money for Yingge. At the time, China Art was making the best work," Cheng says. "It was the first factory in Taiwan imitating ancient Chinese ceramics."

The workers, however, were paid low wages.

The market moved on in 1990, when China liberalized its market. People started buying vases from Jingdezhen in China, where official imperial wares for the Chinese court had been produced since the Ming. Imitation wares from there were not only cheaper, they were considered to be more authentic.

BUYER BEWARE

Individually, the imitation wares have an authenticity and intrinsic value of their own. Indeed, the production of imitations of fine pieces from previous dynasties, to replicate antiques favored by the emperors, was common practice in the Qing.

The question of authenticity only arises when the pieces are purported to be, and sold as, something other than they are:

genuine ancient Chinese imperial wares, rather than high quality, authentically-produced imitation wares.

China Art would sometimes even sell pieces painted with the reign marks that were historically added to imperial wares made exclusively for the emperors, such as "Made in the Chenghua Reign of the Great Ming Dynasty" (大明成化年製) or "Made in the Qianlong Reign of the Great Qing Dynasty" (大清乾隆年製).

"Vases don't age," Cheng says. "If you use the same clay, the same pigments, the same painting techniques, glazes, firing techniques, the question of authenticity often just comes down to guess work."

Even experts find it difficult to differentiate authentic from fake. "How would you do that?" says Cheng. "From the decor? The decor is really easy to imitate, you just paint it the same way."

Cheng spoke of one collector who suspected 99 percent of his collection was fake. Even museum curators have to resort to researching the backgrounds of donated Chinese ceramics, he says.

"A vase would be donated by a wealthy family, from their grandfather, who was working in the military during the Qing dynasty, or as an ambassador in China, so they would have to trace the record of the donations," Cheng says.

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Chen was there right from the beginning, when the factory opened in 1972.

Born in Shaanxi Province, China, in 1924, Chen came to Taiwan with the Republic of China air force, retiring at the age of 46 in 1969. He was familiar with watercolor painting, but had no background in the techniques of painting ceramics. He was introduced to China Art's founder, Hsu Tse-jan (許自然), by Ho Wei-hsiao (何維孝), an elementary school classmate following a chance meeting in Taipei in 1969.

At China Art, he was trained in the painting techniques used in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties by ceramics painting expert Zheng Ceru (鄭策如), whom Hsu had recruited from Hong Kong in 1969.

During Chen's stint, he became proficient in the painting techniques. In 1985, he retired, although continued to produce work on commission from former China Art customers. He stopped painting vases in 1988, when he realized that spending all his time creating work for others was little different from what he had left behind at the factory.

Chen then devoted his time to producing a book with examples of his own work, detailing techniques and the correct materials to use. It was published in 2007.

"If I hadn't written that book ... [h]ow would I pass this valuable information on to later generations?" Chen says.

His painting days are now behind him. His hands shake as he signs copies of his book. The electric kiln on the balcony sits idle. He no longer recalls how to use it.

Chen Cheng-ching painted quality ancient Chinese ceramic wares for a Yingge factory in the 1970s and 1980s. Many were sold to the lucrative fake antique market as authentic Chinese imperial wares

BY PAUL COOPER
STAFF REPORTER



Chen Cheng-ching sits surrounded by examples of his work at his home in New Taipei City.

PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

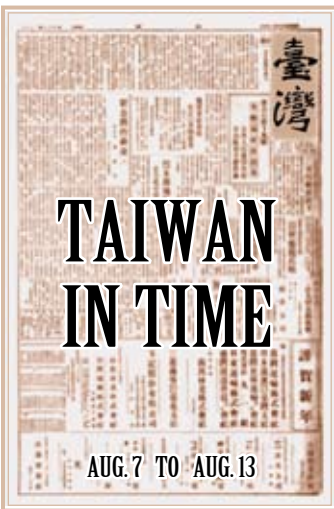
Chen Cheng-ching's version of the National Palace Museum's 100 Deer vase.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEN CHENG-CHING

The genuine article

The resilience of suppressed tunes

Yeh Chun-lin, one of the most prolific Hoklo songwriters in history, persisted despite government attempts to suppress the language



BY HAN CHEUNG
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan in Time, a column about Taiwan's history that is published every Sunday, spotlights important or interesting events around the nation that have anniversaries this week.

BY HAN CHEUNG
STAFF REPORTER

In 1976, Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese) pop music suffered a major blow as the government passed the Radio and Television Act (廣播電視法), limiting programming in the language to one hour and two songs per day. Furthermore, the lyrics were often censored or changed to fit the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) agenda.

The language had been in decline since the KMT started promoting Mandarin as the official language in 1946, punishing schoolchildren who spoke Hoklo and portraying it as a "vulgar" dialect. But Hoklo music continued to persist as it was still commonly spoken at home, and this act was the latest attempt in a long history of government suppression of Hoklo music, dating back to the days of Japanese rule.

However, this attempt at suppression only lasted for a time, as hits such as *One Small Umbrella* (一支小雨傘) started appearing as early as 1982, five years before the end of martial law and the lifting of all oppressive measures.

After the act was passed, Yeh Chun-

lin (葉俊麟), one of the most prolific Hoklo pop song writers in history, went through a period of "hibernation and transition," writes Chen Chi-meng (陳麒盟) in the study, *Yeh Chun-lin and the Study on His Taiwanese Pop Lyrics* (葉俊麟及其閩南語歌詞研究). He did not stop writing, though, and under the suggestion of his children, he embarked on a journey to the major sights of Taiwan, writing 14 songs with titles such as *Bathing in the Hot Springs at Jiaosi by the Sea* (濱海礁溪洗溫泉) and *The Boat Song of Sun Moon Lake* (日月潭船歌).

Even after Yeh's career took off, he continued his *Sketches of Formosa* (寶島風情畫) series, writing 21 additional songs on places such as Taroko Gorge and the rainy port of Keelung. In 1994, he was finally recognized for his efforts and presented a Lifetime Contribution Award at the Golden Melody Awards — which was sponsored by the then-Government Information Office, the very institution that tried to stamp out Yeh's type of music just over a decade earlier.

SUPPRESSION OF A LANGUAGE

It had been a long road for Hoklo pop

music since the localized theme song for the 1932 Chinese movie, *Peach Blossom Weeps Tears of Blood* (桃花泣血記) became the first official "hit" that sent the populace into a craze.

A vibrant Hoklo pop industry blossomed during those years and faded just as quickly. In 1938, Taiwan's colonial masters started their "Japanization" program, banning all Hoklo music in 1939.

Yeh, who was born in 1921 to a wealthy cloth merchant family in Keelung, spent his formative years during this boom. He is said to have shown a talent for literature at a young age, penning his first play at age 18. During the "Japanization" period, Japanese musician Asakuchi Kazuo reportedly took Yeh under his wing after hearing him sing on the balcony of his office after work, and taught him the basics of singing and songwriting.

During World War II, Yeh's family lost everything when their textile business burnt down. Falling on hard times, Yeh worked as a street vendor for several years to make ends meet.

After the arrival of the KMT at the end of the war, Hoklo songs enjoyed another boom as the new govern-



Yeh Chun-lin as a young man.

PHOTO: WENG YU-HUANG, TAIPEI TIMES

ment banned Japanese to erase of the vestiges of colonialism. Several songs became hits during this period, such as *Hot Rice Dumpling* (燒肉粽) and *Mending the Net* (補破網). But soon, the language came under fire as the government started aggressively promoting Mandarin as the official language. Strict censorship laws were enacted after martial law was declared in 1949, and both the aforementioned songs

were banned because the government felt that the lyrics, which alluded to people falling on hard times, were too negative.

Yeh continued to struggle as an aspiring songwriter during this time. His big break came in 1957, when he released his first single, *Autumn Wind and Fallen Leaves* (秋風落葉). He soon began a partnership with the legendary singer Hung Yi-feng (洪一峰), their first hit being *Memories of an Old Love* (舊情綿綿).

This collaboration continued for many years, and Yeh also wrote countless songs for other singers, the subject matter often about love, society, morality, various professions and life of the everyday person.

By 1998, Yeh had fallen gravely ill due to lung disease from a lifetime of smoking. He had one more place he wanted to add to his *Sketches of Formosa* series: the outlying archipelago of Penghu — but he was too sick to visit. Instead, he asked his family for books and material on the scenery, and completed his last song — the 36th in the series — *The Beauty of Penghu* (澎湖之美) that May. He died three months later, on Aug. 12.