

# FEATURES

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## YINGGE TOWN Artisan

Yingge Town Artisan is a monthly photographic and historical exploration of the artists and potters linked to New Taipei City's Yingge Town.

Master potter Wu Yao-cheng brought the eggshell porcelain trimming skills he learned as a young boy to Taiwan with him at the end of the Chinese Civil War, and he's still going strong

BY PAUL COOPER  
STAFF REPORTER

# Working on eggshells

Wu Yao-cheng (吳要城), 84, holds up a white porcelain bowl to the window in his studio home in Yingge District (鶯歌), New Taipei City. On the inside, it is painted with auspicious symbols; on the outside, there is a scene of monkeys. Wu didn't paint it; his specialty is making the eggshell porcelain (薄胎瓷) bodies. Held to the light, you can clearly see the symbols through the thin porcelain, superimposed upon the monkey scene.

The *Taipei Times* is at Wu's home with ceramic artist Wang Shu-ling (王淑玲). Wang, who has been working with ceramics for 20 years, is currently focusing on ink brush painting on pure white porcelain, and regularly commissions Wu to make the thin hand-thrown porcelains she needs for her work. When he retires, she will have to move in a new direction: she knows of no one else in Taiwan with Wu's skill set.

Porcelain clay is finickily difficult to work with, says Wang, and nowadays porcelain bodies are produced using molds and slip casting, as results are easily replicable and with a much higher success rate. She says it is impossible to master throwing porcelain — and in particular, achieving eggshell porcelain — in a short time.

"It's like mastering the violin or the cello. It's something that you have to work at for eight hours every day for 10 years," Wang says.

Wu has been doing it for 70 years. He mastered the skill as a small child in China, and has worked in Yingge since he left the army in 1973. Accord-

ing to Cheng Wen-hung (程文宏), head of the Educational Promotion Department of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum, he was a pioneer of these techniques when he first arrived in Yingge, and is still one of very few, maybe the only one, still capable of producing eggshell porcelains with traditional techniques in Taiwan. When he dies, the tradition will probably die with him.

### THE OLD COUNTRY

Wu was born in 1932 to a family of potters going back at least three generations, in Chaozhou (潮州), Guangdong, a city with a tradition of porcelain production dating back to the Song dynasty. He was a boy of 11 when the Japanese invaded his town, Fengxi (楓溪鎮), during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

His family fled to Dapu (大埔), another town in the same province, where his

father got work and accommodation in a local ceramics factory.

Wu started helping to produce ceramics at the age of 12. The factory produced functional wares, but some of the more highly skilled workers were also making imitations of sought-after Song, Ming and Qing dynasty ceramics, including eggshell porcelains, on commission. He would observe them during the day and practice on his own after work. In two years he had mastered the fundamentals of the technique.

"You can't do that unless you are gifted," says Wang.

### THE PROBLEM WITH PORCELAIN

Porcelain is prized for its translucent, sonorous quality, and the pure white that cannot be achieved with the lower-fired earthenware or stoneware clays. But every step of the process demands excel-

lent technique.

Wang says that unlike other clays, porcelain clay has no "bone," or structure, making it very difficult to throw.

But achieving the extreme thinness for eggshell pieces also requires manually trimming the unfired porcelain pieces with steel trimming blades, on a rapidly rotating potter's wheel. This means the artisan has to be totally familiar with the exact cross-section, throughout the entire piece. Otherwise, he will trim it down to nothing.

"He has to know every form intimately. There is absolutely no room for error," Wang says.

The unfired, trimmed body is extremely fragile, and must be fired with the correct technique, too.

"Generally speaking, you have to fire things yourself. If you get other people to fire them for you, they may well break," Wu says.

### ARRIVING IN YINGGE

Wu came to Taiwan at the end of World War II with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) army. He left the army in 1973 and found work with Tsai Hsiao-fang (蔡曉芳), now based in Beitou (北投), who has made a name for himself producing high-fired imitations of ancient Chinese ceramics.

Tsai took him to the National Palace Museum to look at the ancient ceramics from the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties, and asked him if he could make them.

"I specialized in throwing, working there from 1974 to 1980. I made a lot of porcelain bodies for [Tsai]," Wu says. In 1980, he felt it was time to strike out on



Top: Wu Yao-cheng holds up one of his eggshell porcelain bowls to the window of his studio home in Yingge District, New Taipei City. Above: Wu Yao-cheng speaks in his studio home in Yingge District, New Taipei City. PHOTOS: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

his own.

He made a success of producing his own wares in a factory, but when it was sold after two years he moved operations into his house, which of course was not set up to fire a kiln to 1,300 degrees. He has focused on making eggshell porcelain bodies on commission since 1983, and now lets other people worry about the success or failure of the other steps of the process.

"If they fire it well, then they get the money, and if they don't, then it's a problem with their technique," he shrugs, before offering, "although I will give them advice on how to do it."

Wu is still going strong, and says he has no plans to retire. But he cannot go on forever, and when he stops, there is no one to replace him. Will the loss of this skill have a huge impact on ceramic art in Yingge? Probably not. But for some — Wang included — it will be a huge loss.



Master potter Wu Yao-cheng trims a stoneware pot in his studio home in Yingge District, New Taipei City. PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

## A true tiger who was unafraid of jackals

Chang Chin-lan broke many gender barriers en route to becoming Taiwan's first female grand justice at the Constitutional Court,

During an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1972, Chang Chin-lan (張金蘭) called out then-US president Richard Nixon for not appointing a woman to the Supreme Court.

"I was very happy when I heard President Nixon was thinking of appointing a woman to the Supreme Court," she said. "Then I read in the paper that he did not appoint a woman and I was disappointed. Maybe next time."

"Women judges are generally more conscientious and hard-working than [male] judges," Chang added.

Chang, who had been breaking gender barriers since she became Taiwan's first female presiding judge of an appellate court at the Taiwan High Court's Tainan Branch Court in 1948, had already made it to the Supreme Court in 1956. It would take the US nine more years after the interview and a new president before Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor.

Chang's career did not stop there. In August 1967, she reached another milestone when then-president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) nominated her as one of the 15 grand justices of the Constitutional

Court. Her main task was to interpret the constitution and national laws, but she also had the power to provide rulings over impeachment of the president and vice president as well as dissolve a political party violating the constitution.

Finally, Chang's career was recognized internationally on Sept. 5, 1973, when the US-based World Peace Through Law Center (today's World Jurist Association) presented her with the Pax Orbis Ex Jure Award during its biennial conference in the Ivory Coast.

In addition to her judicial duties, Chang was also a tireless educator and served on a team to research and amend the Criminal Code. She died of cancer in 1976.

### LITTLE KNOWN MILESTONE

Unfortunately, despite her achievements, very little can be found about Chang's life and career. Only two official sources are available — the *Los Angeles Times* article and an entry in the book, *Women Who Challenge the Times* (向時代挑戰的女性) by Lu Shen-fang (盧申芳).

A native of China's Shandong Province, Chang received her law degree in



A portrait of Chang Chin-lan found in the book *Women Who Challenge the Times*. PHOTO: HAN CHEUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

1940 from Northwest University in Xian. She was not only the only female in her graduating class, but finished with top honors.

Chang was working as a judge in Nanjing when the Chinese Nationalist Party

(KMT) lost the Chinese Civil War, and she retreated to Taiwan with them, continuing her judicial career upon arrival.

Lu writes that Chang "would release the innocent and reduce the sentenced for those with extenuating circumstances — but for the unrepentant with solid evidence of their crimes, she would have them executed without hesitation."

Lu provides the example of a kidnapping case when Chang was still in China that involved a notorious criminal so powerful that no judges dared touch the case. Chang took it on, and despite repeated threats from the criminal's associates, she personally presided over the execution.

"They had no idea that even though she was a young woman, she was a true tiger who was not afraid of jackals," Lu writes.

During her time in Tainan, Lu writes that Chang employed females and provided them with opportunities for advancement. She also presided over several high-profile cases, including a mass bribery scandal at the Kaohsiung pier that bolstered her reputation.

Lu also details Chang's family life,

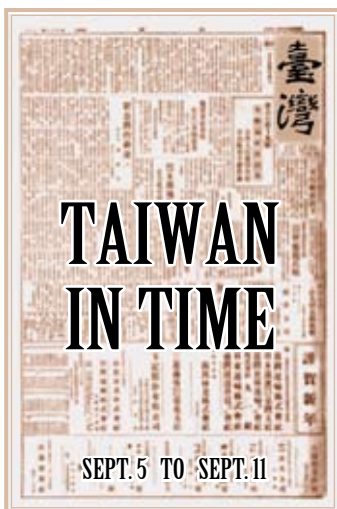
stating that she believed that women had the ability to not only be "successful both at home and at work but also govern a nation."

Despite her confidence, there presumably were still challenges as one of the few women working in the government at Chang's level. Former Examination Yuan member Jia Fu-ming (賈復茗) tells *Academia Sinica* in an oral history interview, "There were only three female appointed officials in those days — us two Examination Yuan members and grand justice Chang Chin-lan. Even though we held high positions and had great reputations, we still encountered many frustrations that would not be understood by outsiders."

However, Chang told the *Los Angeles Times* that she encountered no discrimination.

"I've had complete respect from men, even when I started at the age of 23," she said. "If I had any problems, I wouldn't have kept at it for 30 years."

"It's easier for women to become judges since others have done it," she continued. "There is no longer the excuse that women can't do it."



## TAIWAN IN TIME

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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.