

# FEATURES

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2016



Composite photo of Yingge potter Wu Cheng-hung throwing on a traditional kick wheel at his studio in Yingge, New Taipei City. PHOTO: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

**W**u Cheng-hung (吳正宏), 77, is the 23rd generation of a line of potters that started in Cizao Township (磁灶鎮) in 5th century China. His grandfather, Wu Ji (吳及, 1878 to 1949), left Cizao at the end of the Qing dynasty to make a living in Taiwan, bringing the coiling technique and kick wheel technology practiced in Cizao with him. When Wu visited his ancestral town in 1999, he discovered that traditional pottery industry there had all but disappeared.

Wu's daughter-in-law Lai Hsiu-tao (賴秀桃) — a potter in her own right — says that in the past, almost every household in Cizao was involved in producing pottery.

"When [Wu] returned, nobody was making pottery there" Lai says. "Times change," she adds.

Wu has lived in Yingge (鶯歌), a pottery producing area in New Taipei City, since he was three. He continues to use the Cizao practices. Even after the invention of the electric potter's wheel made the kick wheel obsolete, Wu still finds value in passing on the method to future generations.

Lai says that Wu is unusual in that he is skilled in both coiling and the kick wheel.

"Factories have simplified the process. He hasn't, and that is very rare," she says.

## WHERE IT ALL STARTED

Wu's ancestors started making pottery in the late Song Dynasty in Cizao, a town full of small family-owned kilns making functional wares. The town was located at the southern end of the maritime silk road, and wares from there were exported via the port of nearby Quanzhou (泉州) to Japan, Korea, Penghu, the Philippines, Burma, Thailand, India and Indonesia.

When Wu's grandfather emigrated to Taiwan, he introduced the kick wheel to Shalu District (沙鹿) in Taichung County, and soon it was adopted throughout the nation. He was originally reluctant to teach the technique to his son, Wu Wen-sheng (吳文生), but he eventually conceded, and Wen-sheng later passed them on to Wu Cheng-hung who, in turn, has passed



## 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.

BY PAUL COOPER  
STAFF REPORTER

them on to his own son, Wu Ming-yi (吳明儀).

Before the invention of the electric potter's wheel, potters employed other ways to keep the wheel spinning fast enough, consistently and for long enough, to throw pots. This was done either by "kicking" it or operating a lever.

In Korea, where they made large urns, they would dig a hole and set a wheel into the ground. The Japanese, who made small tea bowls, elevated the wheel to the height of the seated potter.

The kick-wheel method used in southern China employed a heavy wheel, roughly a meter in diameter, formed of fired clay held together with matted plant material and set on an axis on the floor.

Wu places the clay in the center of the wheel. Then, supported on one leg, he sets his free foot on the outer rim and starts to turn the wheel, building a momentum that is maintained by the wheel's sheer weight. He then sits down and starts throwing the pot. When the momentum fades and the wheel slows down, he stands again and repeats the

"kicking" process.

He completes a medium-sized pot in two minutes. He hasn't broken a sweat.

That's not to say the technique isn't hard work.

"In the past, potters would be using the kick wheel like that, all day, every day. It was very laborious, exhausting work," Lai says.

Technological advances drive progress. All innovations are eventually superseded. The energy-intensive nature of the work aside, there are many other reasons to doubt the need to pass on these old methods.

## OBsolete TECHNOLOGY

Wu himself admits the technology is obsolete.

"It's not like everything I make is thrown on the kick wheel. It's too tiring. Times have changed. We have electric wheels now," he says.

Wu answers in the negative when I ask if using the kick wheel method gives a potter a competitive edge?

"Business people aren't interested in whether an object is beautiful. You only make money from pots if you can make them in bulk," he says.

Wu thinks that it is about more than commercial viability, however.

"The old ways do have an artistry about them," he says, and, while nowadays many wares are made using prepared molds, "they just don't have the same kind of feeling."

Wu is well aware of how Yingge itself has changed — he saw his own father's work evolve, and now sees his son making art, not functional wares. He has seen how commercial realities have transformed the industry of his own ancestral town. As a businessman himself, he knows full well the importance of keeping production costs down and output up.

So why keep it alive? And why pass it on to his son?

"It's the culture of the past," he says. "You cannot throw that away."

Lower left: Yingge potter Wu Cheng-hung prepares clay at his studio in Yingge, New Taipei City. Lower right: Yingge potter Wu Cheng-hung leans back to look at a pot he has just thrown at his studio in Yingge.

PHOTOS: PAUL COOPER, TAIPEI TIMES

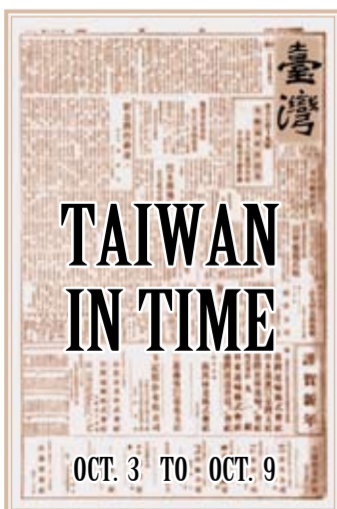
Wu Cheng-hung, a 23rd generation potter with a line going back to the Song Dynasty, still sees the value in keeping obsolete methods alive.



# Ancient line and spinning wheel fading fast

## A leftist under three regimes

Hsieh Hsueh-hung dedicated her life to communism and Taiwanese political autonomy, and was persecuted for her actions by the Japanese, the Chinese



### TAIWAN IN TIME

OCT. 3 TO OCT. 9

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.

**I**N May of 1968, Hsieh Hsueh-hung (謝雪紅) was held down by two red guards who forced her to bow her head and admit her wrongdoings. Two years later, before she died in Beijing, she wrote in her will, "I'm not a rightist. I support the Communist Party and socialism."

Ironically, the two previous regimes that she had lived under, she was persecuted for being a leftist, serving eight years in jail during Japanese rule. The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) tried to suppress her activities, and she fled to China after leading an armed resistance against KMT troops during the violent suppression of the 228 Incident.

Hsieh was born in 1901 to a poor family in Changhua. At six years old, she would have to hawk bananas in the street and started working in a factory at age 10. When she was 12, she was adopted into a family in Taichung to be their son's future wife. She ran away due to severe abuse and in 1918 married Chang Shu-min (張樹敏), with whom she traveled to Japan, where she witnessed the "Taisho democracy" period and the aftermath of the rice riots. That was her first time seeing the poor rise up against the wealthy.

Later, they moved to China, where Hsieh's thinking was further influenced by the May Fourth Movement, a student-

led protest against the government. After learning that she was Chang's concubine, she left him and found a job teaching people how to use sewing machines. She also learned how to read and eventually became involved with Chiang Wei-shui's (蔣渭水) Taiwan Cultural Association (台灣文化協會), which aimed to passively counter Japanese rule by fostering an awareness of Taiwanese nationalism.

Due to her painful past, she also started championing women's rights and established herself as an independent woman who ran her own clothing shop. Later, she traveled to China again and enrolled in Shanghai University as a sociology major — the first time she received any type of formal education. During this time, she participated in the May Thirtieth Movement, a labor and anti-imperialist protest that culminated in bloodshed.

## JOINING THE CAUSE

Her actions caught the attention of the Chinese Communist Party, who convinced her to join and sent her to further her studies in Moscow. Hsieh was persuaded by the Communist International, an organization to promote communism around the globe, to eventually return to Taiwan and further their cause.

In 1927, she returned to Shanghai to help form the short-lived Taiwanese



This photo of Hsieh Hsueh-hung was taken in Taichung in 1944. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Communist Party. In addition to the standard communist values, the party also called for an independent Taiwan and denounced Japanese rule as well as

emphasizing women's rights.

Hsieh was soon arrested with several others after the party's anti-Japanese fliers were discovered by the Japanese police and deported back to Taiwan. After being acquitted, party activities continued under Hsieh's leadership, eventually taking control of the Taiwanese Peasants' Union (台灣農民組合) and even trained farmers for an armed rebellion, which never took place.

Hsieh also managed to take control of the Taiwan Cultural Association, turning it into an openly leftist organization. She did the same with Chiang's Taiwan People's Party, which by 1931 also had become leftist. During this time, she continued to call for Taiwanese independence.

The group eventually split into factions due to differences in ideology, with Hsieh supporting a Taiwanese identity and involving the bourgeoisie in the revolution, while others were pro-China and called for straight up class struggle. Hsieh was forced out of the party in 1931, and later that year she was arrested in a mass raid of Taiwanese communists and sentenced to 13 years in jail.

In 1939, Hsieh was released due to tuberculosis. She tried to resume her mission, but this was Japan's expansionist period and all political activities were banned.

## TAIWANESE AUTONOMY

After the Nationalist takeover in 1945, Hsieh organized in early October the Taiwan People's Association (台灣人民協會) along with a number of other leftist organizations, which were eventually forcefully disbanded by the government.

She continued to call for political autonomy for Taiwan, calling for popular elections from governor to township mayor.

"Taiwan must be ruled by Taiwanese," she declared.

After the 228 Incident broke out, Hsieh was named leader of the resistance in Taichung. They denounced the government's actions, called for democracy and disarmed the local police. The next day, Hsieh issued a call to arms, stating that Taiwanese should declare war against the dictatorship while warning people not to hurt the recent arrivals from China and not to destroy property.

The resistance eventually failed, and Hsieh fled to Xiamen on March 21, never to return to Taiwan again. During the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, she was painted as a rightist partially due to her insistence on Taiwanese political autonomy, and she was purged repeatedly during the Cultural Revolution. She died in 1970, and was not rehabilitated by the party until 1986.