

The labor of a lifetime:

Jiang A-ben's love for traditional basket weaving

Words by Ye Jia-hui Photography by You Jia-huan Translated by Compass Magazine

Jiang A-ben started learning basket weaving from his father at the tender age of 10. Despite the passage of over 70 years and a stroke, this artisan continues his lifelong passion and does what he can to pass along these traditional Taiwanese handicraft skills.



1. To make the base, you must carefully remember to use the proper number of bamboo strips, arranged in a specific way.
2. Weaving bamboo requires strong hands to shape and bend the strips.

Using a knife, Jiang A-ben skillfully splits bamboo into 0.1-centimeter-thick strips and then trims off any protruding splinters. Fortunately for him, there is some sunshine, as it would otherwise be freezing cold sitting in front of the gate, doing such work on a winter day.

A life-long passion starts at 10

At the age of 10, Jiang A-ben began to study basket weaving with his father and became a professional basket-maker only a few years later, thanks to his love for this handicraft and commitment to learning the necessary skills. Over 70 years have passed since then, leaving this once-young master among a handful of remaining experienced Dongshi district basket weavers. Like many of his peers in their eighties, 83-year-old Jiang had a stroke just this year, although fortunately it was not too severe. While he doesn't have the strength he once had, this skilled craftsman still insists on doing the work he has been doing most of his life. "I won't stop if there are still people who want to buy them," said Jiang of his baskets while carefully cutting the bamboo strips.

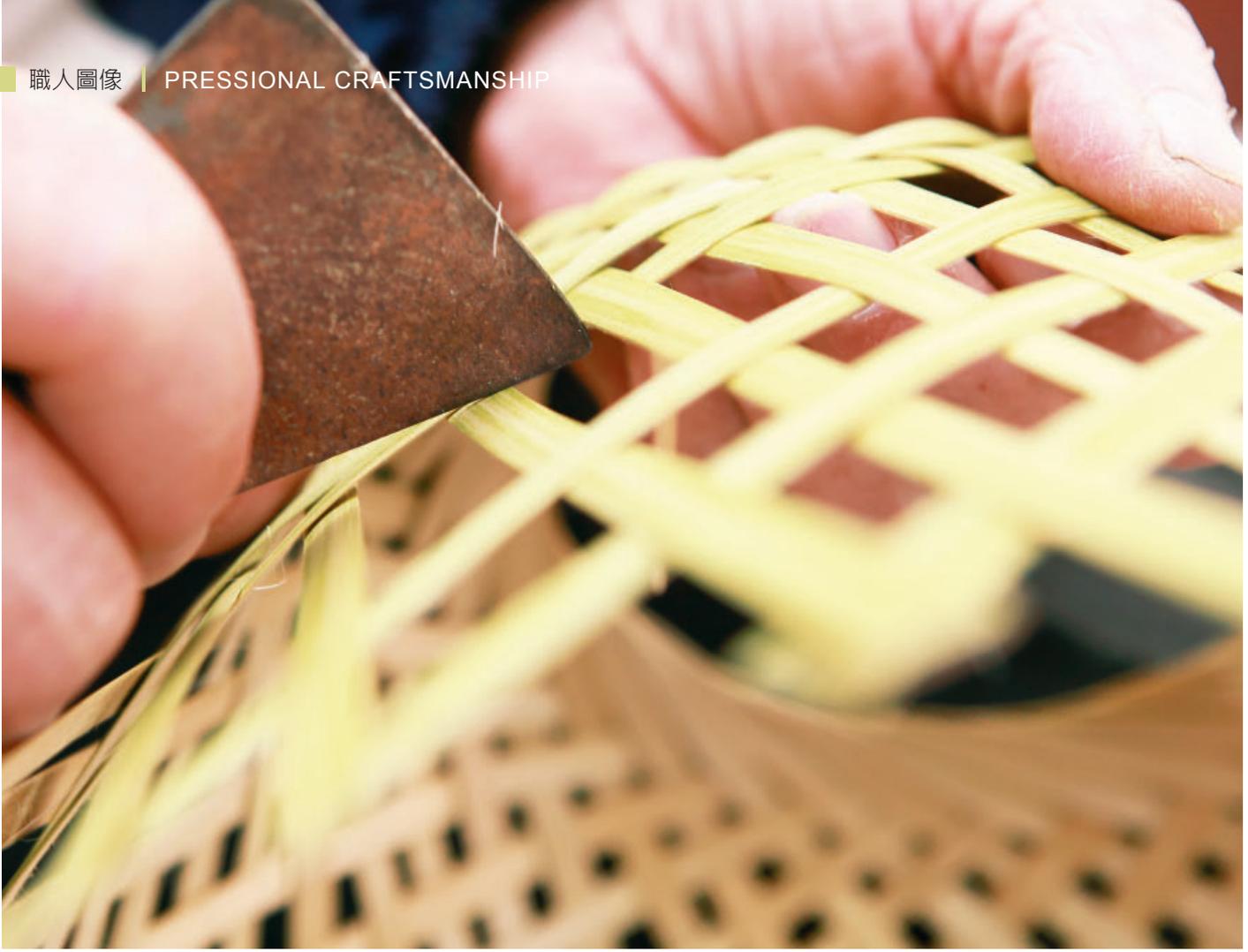
The Shicheng area of Dongshi district is known for its bamboo cultivation, so local residents produce various daily-use products from this material, including rice hats, baskets and dustpans, sold in every corner of Taiwan. The golden era for Shicheng area bamboo-product makers was between 1960 and 1980. In order to keep everyone in business, each village focused



on just one kind of product. For example, one village produced rice hats and while another made fish baskets, and yet another sold "huo chong" bamboo basket warmers (see Note 1 below). At that time, bamboo weaving earned good money, so women were commonly seen happily chatting in front of their homes while weaving bamboo.

Traditional products replaced by plastic ones

However, as more Taiwanese began using plastic products, and with more mainland Chinese products imported into Taiwan, this traditional handicraft was superseded by mass-produced plastic items and cheaply-priced Chinese imports. As people stopped using bamboo raincoats, umbrellas and hats, Jiang had no choice but to give up his favorite job and move



Jiang A-ben concentrates on his bamboo-weaving work.

on to other employment, like being a construction worker and janitor, in order to support his family. It wasn't until five or six years ago that he started weaving bamboo again in order to pass along these traditional techniques. Today, he takes orders from his old customers and holds workshops at schools and other local places.

For bamboo weaving, the first priority is learning how pick the right materials. Despite his age, Jiang is surprisingly adept at distinguishing almost every species of bamboo from a distance. Asked about this skill, he bashfully smiles and says, "Well, it's one of my jobs to tell the difference between bamboo and, you know what, I still don't need to wear glasses when reading the newspapers."

There are so many kinds of bamboo and, of course, each species has its own strengths. For example, pliable but strong varieties such as "hei yezi" bamboo and "zhang zhizhu" bamboo are suitable for dustpans; thorny bamboo is best for making shoulder poles; makino bamboo can resist humidity so it's ideal for making "cha ji" raincoats (see Note 2) and rice hats.

Only the experienced cut bamboo like shredding paper

To cut bamboo, Jiang says he always uses a saw, avoids bamboo joints, and pulls the saw back and forth a few times to cut off sections. Next, he uses another kind of knife to scrape the green skin of the bamboo off, giving the final product a better appearance. He then splits each bamboo stem length-wise into a half, a quarter and an eighth, with it being most important to keep these strips as uniform as possible. Watching Jiang at work, it seems like a pretty easy job but, according to him, it takes a lot of experience to do it properly, and it's very easy to injure yourself. That is why the most important requirements for becoming a professional bamboo weaver are experience, carefulness and artistic hands, with the training process normally taking about three and a half years.

After preparing the bamboo strips, Jiang begins weaving them. The first step is to weave the base, which varies in style with each bamboo product. To weave a round basket, as Jiang was doing during

this interview, work is first done on the basket's sides. Since this is the most important step, he stopped chatting and fully concentrated on his weaving. He uses both hands and feet to weave and keep the strips organized, in a complicated process that hurts his feet and back so much that he can only weave two or three hours per day at most, not surprising given the fact he's an 83-year-old man now.

After finishing the base, he starts making the basket lid by bending and shaping the bamboo strips. He continually adjusts the density and direction of each strip and, being a perfectionist, always ensures the strips look smooth, beautiful and orderly.

Continuous improvements and new products

Because it was over 70 years ago that Jiang first learned bamboo-weaving techniques, he is always trying to improve old products and develop new ones in order to keep up with the times. For example, he discovered that spraying some water on the bamboo strips while weaving baskets made the finished products more durable and more beautiful. Although

this added yet another production step for him, he only he cares about making quality products as a way of showing respect to his customers.

Although woven bamboo products will never be as common as they used to be, nothing can stop Jiang A-ben from doing his favorite work. Not only does he produce traditional items like flower baskets, "huo chong", and "gui jia li" (see Note 3), he also takes special orders. For instance, he once made a specially-designed bamboo weaving cradle all by himself, although he had never done so before, and the customer really loved the final product.

Noting that bamboo weaving might become a lost traditional art, Jiang says that although it is a pity that no one will inherit his work, he knows that it is a normal challenge faced by all traditional handicrafts, and his sole wish is that it be "remembered". Many people have evidently heard his wish, as there are still plenty of customers calling to place orders, despite the fact his products are four or fives times more expensive than Chinese ones. "It's the best reward for me as long as there are people like my products," says Jiang. 🌿



Weaving bamboo requires patient and care from the weavers.



Although he has done many jobs over his lifetime, bamboo weaving has always been Jiang's favorite.