



Chang demonstrates how to use molds to shape the wires.

As the wind blows, a whole row of red lanterns hanging under the eaves begin swinging, each like small fireball heating up the cold winter day. "Making lanterns is definitely not as easy as people think; when we're busy, we won't stop working until it's done," said Chang Chia-yen, while drying his lanterns.



Big, high-hanging red lanterns:

Chang Chia-yen conveys lantern-making skills to the next generation

Words by Ye Jia-hui Photography by You Jia-huan Translated by Angel Pu

The Chinese have used lanterns for hundreds of years. From as early as the Han dynasty, the invention of paper turned lanterns into a daily necessity for every household. Today, although lanterns have already been replaced by light bulbs, they are still found at many religious ceremonies, weddings or funerals.

Beauty in the light of lanterns

Common Taiwanese lanterns include Quanzhou lanterns, Fuzhou lanterns and wired lanterns. The first two are mostly handmade while the latter one usually requires both manpower and machine to create. Lanterns used in religious ceremonies need to be changed every year, so lantern makers developed wired lanterns that are cheaper and less time-intensive to create, as labor is more expensive nowadays. However, nothing can exceed the beauty of handmade lanterns.

The major difference between Quanzhou and Fuzhou lanterns is structure. A crisscrossed, basket-like bamboo frame typifies Quanzhou lanterns, which are mostly made in Lukang in Taiwan. Fuzhou lanterns, on the other hand, have an egg-like framework made from thin bamboo strips that allow its shape to be adjusted. However, neither Quanzhou nor Fuzhou lantern makers can resist the cut-rate pricing of their mainland Chinese counterparts. "Lantern makers are harder and harder to find these days," said

Chang, who inherited skills from his beloved grandfather Liu Tzu-to. "This job requires patience and carefulness; it's hard for us to find young people who have the above traits and are willing to inherit the business."

For the Central Taiwan Lantern Festival organized by the Taichung City Government's Tourism Bureau in 2011, Chang made a lantern over six meters high with a diameter of 3.3 meters, not only setting a new Guinness World Record but also creating an unforgettable spectacle for tourists and other visitors. Although Chang is only 40, he is willing to dedicate the rest of his life to this traditional craft.

Outstanding ancestral skills passed along

Chang's grandfather was a police officer during the Japanese colonial period, but was forced to retire when the Japanese lost the war and left Taiwan. At that time, he bumped into a lantern maker from Fuzhou by chance. The two were almost the same age and became good friends. Furthermore, because the lantern maker was childless, he decided to teach Chang's grandfather his skills.

Chang lived with his grandparents because his parents were busy with their company, and he used to watch his grandfather making one lantern after another. From weaving lantern frames with thin bamboo strips to tying string, sticking on paper and writing characters on the lantern, every step of production became so familiar to Chang, who felt a sense of peace as he watched this process. Today, he retains a great affection for this traditional industry, considering lantern-making not only a skill that requires exquisite technique, attention to each detail and creativity, but also is reminiscent of his beloved late grandfather.

A beautiful Fuzhou lantern must have a perfectly-rounded shape.



Slipping a cover onto a Fuzhou lantern is easier because its size is adjustable.

When talking about his grandfather, Chang is happy and effusive, telling little stories about the two of them. Because lantern-making is a job requiring repetitive steps, makers not only tire easily but also find it tough when unexpected problems arise and can't be fixed immediately. When this happens, Chang usually tries to get some sleep and deals with it later. When he was young and still unfamiliar with tying up the thin bamboo strips, he often became stressed, as a single mistake can greatly affect the finished product. If he couldn't achieve this perfectly, he would not only fail as a lantern maker but might also harm the reputation of his late grandfather. With all this on his mind, Chang decided to sleep on it. Surprisingly, he dreamt of his grandfather, who began teaching him the correct way to tie the bamboo strips.

Following his dream, Chang immediately returned to work and continued tying up the strips. Just as he expected, his problem of controlling the distance between and angle of the strips and strings was solved by his dream, where his grandfather reminded him to use his palm and fingertips as a ruler to ensure the distance between every bamboo strip would be exactly the same. Thus, the lantern maker doesn't have to grab for measuring tools and change the frame's position as he uses his hands as a measuring tool.

Chang takes some thin bamboo strips, places them on the base for making a lantern and shows us how to tie the cotton strings. He notes that the procedure for making Fuzhou lanterns includes putting up the frame, tying up the strips, gluing, drying it in the shade, covering the lantern with cloth, soaking it in agar water, drying it again, and packaging. The frames for Fuzhou lanterns are usually made of soft, flexible Makino bamboo. Good-quality Taiwanese Makino bamboo helps ensure that such lanterns last 10-20 years. Whether the frame needs to be tied up or not depends on the lantern's size. Chang usually only ties up the bamboo strips of lanterns over 26 inches in diameter in order to maintain their shape. For smaller ones, he only heats up the frame to maintain their curve and shape. After the shape of the frame is fixed and glued, it is packaged in a pre-made lantern cover.

Special techniques passed down by ancestors

Back when printing technique were not as developed as they are today, painting lantern covers was a time-consuming task. "In my grandfather's time, a pair of big lanterns usually took him over a month to finish. But now that we have printing technology, lantern makers don't have to spend so much time on painting today," says Chang. However, being a perfectionist, he still insists on

According to Chang, his grandfather appeared in a dream to teach him how to tie up the strings for the frame.



Lantern-making requires care and patience. Chang says he usually makes lanterns by himself without anyone assisting him.

designing the patterns himself. First he draws the designs on paper, decides color, size and fabric, and then sends it to a tailor. The most interesting part of lantern-making is when Chang takes out bundles and bundles of agar and melts them in water. While most people have no idea what lantern-making has to do with agar, Chang gladly shares its role, in an impressive portrayal of ancestral intelligence and creativity.

When dyeing fabric, the colors usually spread out, hindering lantern makers from creating precise and elaborate paintings or writing. Traditionally, to overcome this problem, lantern makers stuck a sheet of gauze on the frame and glued on a sheet of one-sided, glazed paper so that they could write on the fabric. However, such traditional methods not very effective in Taiwan's humid climate, forcing later generations to seek a new technique. Finally, they discovered that soaking the fabric in agar water prevented colors from spreading out. Thus, when the fabric is dried, makers can smoothly write whatever they want, using this exclusive method that has been passed down.

Traditional industry continues to shine in modern times

Ever since entering this business at the age of 25, Chang hasn't seen a day that he hasn't followed his grandfather's instructions, while he has also become more open-minded towards Chinese traditional culture and religious arts. He notes that although lantern-making techniques originated in China, it is the Taiwanese who have preserved related traditional techniques and culture. He remains unsure about whether or not there are others similarly willing to dedicate their lives to this disappearing craft but, as long as he's available, he will continue making lanterns that not only light up his own life, but also help illuminate Taiwan's artistic and cultural scene. 🌟