



Li's creations combine tradition with modern humorous creativity.

"I have never doubted the job I chose, and have never regretted it", says doll-head sculptor Li I-mu as he carefully works on his creations in a small room no larger than seven square meters and filled with sculpting tools. This is the story of how he discovered his vocation and skills.



A love for Art

Li I-mu's dedicates his life to hand puppets

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

During this interview, Li's grey unkempt hair can't hide his tired but intelligent eyes. When asked why he is so tired, he responds, "Sorry, I was busy playing fishing video games all night, so I didn't get much sleep. However, I've reached Checkpoint 25!" Unlike the typical image of an artist completely focused on his work each day, Li admits that recently he's been crazy about video games.

An untrammelled, free life

People often say that you can determine a man's attitude toward life based on how he decorates his house. In Li's case, stuffed toys at the home shrine and SpongeBob SquarePants stickers on Chinese calligraphy works would appear to indicate that he lives a free, non-traditional life. Undoubtedly, it is true that Li has never put boundaries on his life and job, with the only thing important to him being doing the things he wants to do.

Li's father, Li Kuan-cheng, painted movie theater signs for a living. After finishing his army service, Li I-mu followed in his father's footsteps and began painting signs for pretty much every theater in Taichung. However, as fewer and fewer theaters needed hand-painted signs, he started painting murals in northern and southern Taiwan to make ends meet.

One thing movie-sign and mural painters have in common is a lack of stable work and rest time. Worse, being a mural painter means you have to travel all over Taiwan to find work. Nevertheless, Li never considered giving up painting. He finally got a new opportunity in 1991. At that time, his younger brother, Li Chun-yang, was serving in the military on Jinmen (Kinmen) island and found out about a Taiwanese hand puppet theater company that was going to disband. The younger Li decided to buy the company's puppets and after discussing this with Li I-mu, who loved hand puppets, the brothers spent NT\$60,000 to purchase all 52 of the company's puppets for their own collection.

'Facelifts' for hand puppets

Although Li I-mu took great care of these puppets, they were already old and had suffered some damage, which Li used his professional artist skills to fix. At the beginning, this was just a hobby of sorts, used to kill time. But, as time went by, Li began to find puppet repairs to be fun and then became interested in making puppets, which he ended up teaching himself to do.

1. The slightly aromatic camphor wood is very suitable for making puppet heads because it's not too hard nor too soft.
2. Traditional-style hand puppet heads are composed of three parts--the head, face and mouth.



According to the artist, the head of a traditional Taiwanese hand puppet has three parts--the head, face and mouth. Each is made separately and designed to allow facial expressions via blinking and opening its mouth. Although Li was talented enough to teach himself traditional hand puppet head-making, he was eager to learn even more and improve. By making use of the theory of torque, the puppet head can have even more facial expressions and a more delicate look, so that audiences won't see the link between each part when the head is not moving.

Although he has improved on traditional techniques, Li still follows other traditional puppet-head making methods. He only uses camphor wood and is very careful to complete every step perfectly, from sculpting, applying base clay, polishing, applying a base coat, painting the puppet face and applying lacquer, to





From a movie sign painter to a puppet maker, Li has never left the arts.

adding wigs and/or facial hair. When painting the puppet head, his concentration is so intense and work so precise that it's hard to picture him talking about the fun of video games.

Creating new characters

Most of Li's puppets are based on traditional characters from Chinese folk or historical stories, and he uses his outstanding skills to make these creations even more vivid in a way that attracts many collectors. Because, like many artists, Li loves to challenge himself, 10 years ago he decided to create original characters in order to give his creativity greater freedom. Not only did he achieve this, but he also wrote all-new scripts that gave personalities to his fresh characters. Influenced by his latest video game-playing pastime, his newest creative characters include One Eyed Shellfish, Two Faced Crab, Fish Elf and General Squid.

Not a rich, but happy, life

"I have never regretted choosing this job, because I chose what I wanted. However, my family kind of became the victims of my job," Li notes. Whether it has been working as a movie-sign painter, mural painter or a puppet head sculptor, the more dedicated he has become, the less stable the life he has given to his family has been. "Everyone knows that fame brings money but, for me, I care about the artistic value, not the price tag," he explains seriously, talking about the dilemma of living a prosperous life versus insisting on pursuing his dreams. In the end, he has decided to follow his father's life motto of "being humble and sincere; moving away from vanity and materialism".

Perhaps wanting to express his feelings in the moment, Li picks up a Chinese "erhu" fiddle he made and plays the theme song from "Laputa: Castle in the Sky", a famous Japanese animated film by Studio Ghibli. This gentle, but somehow sad, music may help capture a life dedicated to art. 🎨

Li's puppet-head creations are not just props, but have been collected by many traditional Taiwanese hand puppet aficionados.

