



After over 40 years as a comforter maker, Ko's biggest worry is that this traditional skill will eventually disappear.

"There are a million choices when it comes to comforters now. You can choose whatever material you want but, in the end, I still prefer a cotton comforter. It's warm and has a special smell that only cotton offers. I don't feel cold as long as I have my cotton comforter in winter," said comforter maker Ko Chui-ken.



A basket of cotton means more than you think:

Good comforters transmit warmth through three generations

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

The sound of cotton fluffing sounds not only like the tightening of a bow, but also like a Taiwanese aboriginal mouth harp—with a beat and power that is hard to relate to soft cotton.

Taiwan is known for producing top-quality fruit that generates income from around the world. However, few people realize that when Taiwan was still an agricultural society, cotton was one of its main products. And Xinshe district's Danan community, which has a cotton farm, was one of central Taiwan's most important cotton-producing regions.

A hard life dependent on light cotton

Ko Chui-ken is only 56, but has been producing handmade comforters for 43 years. "There were seven handmade comforter shops on a short street, and you could the sound of cotton fluffing from morning to evening every day," he says, recalling the heyday of the handmade comforter industry. During this time, every comforter producer was so busy that they had to hire four to five makers to handle the flow of orders.

To help his family make a living, Ko began assisting his father and learning how to make comforters when he was 13. Although he was the shop owner's son, he received no special treatment. Like all the other makers, he had to do everything himself, learning every step by heart and becoming very familiar with the whole process so he could handle any situation without delaying deliveries.

"It's not very hard to make a comforter. To be honest, however, it's tiring and requires patience, and it also damages your health," says a mask-wearing Ko as he demonstrates the treatment of the cotton fibers. It is obvious that the cotton fibers, floating through the air, can actually slowly do damage to a maker's health, as he notes.

Fluffing soft cotton fibers with full effort

Tearing apart the off-white cotton balls, Ko shows what the cotton looks like under the light. "Taiwanese do produce great-quality cotton. However, it's not economically feasible as you can only earn 10 or 20 thousand NT dollars from every one-third of a square meter of cotton farm, so now most of the cotton farms are fruit farms," he says sadly. The cotton now used in Taiwan is mostly from the United States or Egypt and, in Ko's opinion, the quality of Egyptian cotton is better than its American counterpart. Egyptian cotton has longer, flexible fibers that make comforters fluffier and warmer. However, he emphasizes that it takes experience to judge cotton quality so it's hard for customers to tell the difference.

In the past, one had to slit the cotton completely by hand, and it took about three or four hours to do this



Using a stick to hit the cotton fluffer makes the cotton loose and fluffy.



Customers can choose different comforter weights, including 4.8, 6 or 7.2 kilograms.

for a six-foot-long comforter. Today, because there are no longer any young people willing to join this industry because it's too tiring, only slitting machines are used. Cotton must be processed in this way to make it equally fluffy and soft, ensuring that a cotton comforter is light, warming and durable.

Demonstrating the cotton fluffer his father gave him, Ko fastens a waist belt and then connects a bamboo strip sticking over his head from his back to the cotton fluffer. He says that the only key to using the cotton fluffer is to keep your arms straight so you can use your back to keep the cotton fluffer still. Then you use a small hammer in your right hand to hit the string of the fluffer, which will make the cotton equally soft and fluffy. Of course, this all takes some skill and experience.

Comforters exude the fragrance of sunshine

After making the cotton fluffy, it needs to be pressed and compacted with a bamboo strip sieve. "But didn't we just make the cotton fluffy?" observers

may ask. According to Ko, the compacted comforter has some weight so it's warming and comfy, unlike old comforters which absorbed humidity and became stiff.

One good thing about traditional cotton comforters is that when they become heavy and stiff after absorbing humidity from the air or human bodies, all one needs to do is to put them in the sun and pat them a bit, and they will become soft again. In addition, a sun-soaked fragrance is among one of the most comforting aromas for many people, warming and cheering them up.

After layering the cotton, the next step is to attaching cotton gauze. In the past, two workers were needed to make this gauze, but today's ready-made gauze is as good as handmade varieties. The maker now uses a hammer-like tool to press the gauze lightly with a friction that causes the cotton fibers twist around the gauze, stabilizing the cotton.

When carrying out the above steps, one cannot rely solely on sheer strength. Rather, the trick is to move your body from the waist while turning the tool in the same direction, which also affects the quality of the comforter. Normally, when twisting the cotton fibers around the gauze, the shop will use red string to make a label. For example, Ko's Shen-Chin-Hua Comforter Shop uses a gourd as its label logo. If a customer has an old comforter and wants to repair it, they can tell which shop it's from just by looking at the label. In a way, this serves as another kind of product warranty



One of the things Ko learned from his father was using a single red cotton string to make the Chinese "double-happiness" character, which can be seen in celebrations, especially weddings.

A traditional skill in need of transmission

During the best times, the seven comforter shops in Danan community needed to deal with not only locally-produced cotton, but also out-of-town varieties. However, with the passage of time, there are now comforters made of down, silk, fleece and other high-tech fibers, so that cotton comforters are no longer the only option for buyers.

Ko admits that cotton comforters' share of the traditional comforter market is smaller than ever, and that a production rate of two or three comforters per day is not efficient enough. However, these "disadvantages" are actually advantages, as consumers grow to cherish handmade products. Ko says that he will remain in this industry as long as he can and, if there are young people willing to learn these skills, he is more than happy to pass them along so that handmade comforters will continue to provide warmth to future generations. 🌿



It takes skill to use a tool to twist cotton fibers. If it's perfectly done, the remaining steps are easier for the comforter maker.