



Folk-toy expert Chang's youthful attitude makes him very popular among the kids.

"Crackle, crackle, crackle"-- a rattling sound is suddenly heard as an elderly man swings the bamboo toy cicada around. Children immediately rush up to him upon hearing the noise, knowing that Papa Chang is going to surprise them with another trick. This is Chang Wen-hsiung, 71 years of age, but well-known as the "oldest child" in the village.



The 'King of Kids': Chang Wen-hsiung

A Child At Heart Builds A Toy Kingdom

Words by Ye Jia-hui Photography by You Jia-huan Translated by Erica Lin

Chang Wen-hsiung, well-known by his nickname "Papa Chang", is very popular among youngsters who know him. Despite his 70 years of knowledge and experience, Chang does not demand extreme respect or possess an air of superiority as many elders do. Instead, he is easy-going, optimistic and the holder of some very advanced concepts. However, he has been a bit distressed as of late because the neighborhood mothers are always scolding their children, saying, "What are you doing at Papa Chang's? What can you possibly talk about with such a large age difference?" Chang responds to such comments with a hurt smile.

Years of hardship develop an experimental spirit

In 1942, the year Chang was born, Taiwan was still under Japanese rule. At that time, most people lived in poverty and after Chang's family was forced off its land by the Japanese government they were even more pressed for money. Understanding his family's condition and compelled by such realities, Chang went into the gold casting industry as an apprentice immediately after graduating from elementary school.

At that time, not many people could afford to buy gold accessories and naturally only some basic styles were cast without much variation. However, Chang loved to try new things and liked to experiment by nature, causing him to lose passion in a job without any real challenges. Consequently, he turned instead to a textile factory to learn machinery maintenance. Although this job ended shortly afterwards, it seemed to have established a foundation for Chang, providing his first encounters with machinery composition and mechanics. Furthermore, he discovered an evident talent in the field.

After finishing his required military service, Chang started his entrepreneurial career, beginning with the founding of an iron factory that mainly designed various manufacturing machinery for its clients. As owner, Chang was literally a jack of all trades--like "both the principal and the janitor at a school"; not only was he the head of the factory, but he was also responsible for development, design, marketing, sales and all kinds of jobs.

During this time of his flourishing business, he also became president of the Feng Yuan District Pigeon Racing Association as a result of his outspoken personality and vast network of friends.



1



2

1. The wood factory Chang founded also produces some interesting carpentry products that users can finish making at home.
2. Bamboo cicadas Chang Wen-hsiung make not only truly resemble the insect, but are also eco-friendly toys that are completely safe to play with.

He was so popular that he couldn't quit. "Everyone was very supportive of me and I was very touched. But sometimes the people who go in and out of this place are too complicated, I don't like that; that's why I moved to Shigang," he explains, scratching his clean, crewcut head with a smile. Although he received only an elementary-level education and is unable to recognize many words, he displays the spirit of "Meng's Mother Moving Three Times" (an allusion to Chinese sage Mencius' mother moving three times to prevent him from growing up in a negative environment). He thus hopes that children will get in touch with a more simple, healthy lifestyle, so they will not follow bad examples and go down the wrong path.

Migrating to a Hakka village: A hobby becomes a profession

Hakka people are known for their tight bonds with each other but, when Chang moved his whole family to Hakka-dominant Shigang in then Taichung county, thoughts of the broad gap between the Hakka people and Minnan people during that period did not cross his mind. Fortunately, his friendly personality allowed him to easily make new friends and although the Chang family were aliens in the village the villagers were over time won over by Chang's true nature. His yard even became a favored spot for village meetings and chats. Then, after reuniting with a friend from the China Youth Corps by chance, Chang's talent for making traditional Taiwanese folk toys was discovered by the man. From then on, Chang Wen-hsiung became the famous "Folk Toy Expert" of Shigang.

Nowadays, children are very blessed. Because there aren't many children in most households, every child is considered a precious gem and receives whatever they

want. Chang, however, grew up in a different era: "Toys from childhood? No such thing! If you wanted a toy, then you had to make it yourself!" Although a deficiency of toys and material wealth might have made life seem difficult, it also helped to stimulate one's imagination and creativity. During his childhood, characterized by making toys for himself if he really wanted them, both Chang's observations regarding Mother Nature and his familiarity with materials were greatly polished. As a result, when friends had a meeting at his house, he used bamboo, metallic hoops and wood to make little toys as a form of entertainment for the children and the grandchildren that his friends brought along. These fun creations meant that instead of disturbing their parents and crying to go home, the kids didn't want to leave so that they could play with "the coolest granddad".

'Hum hum' bamboo cicadas: A good, easily-made idea

Ever since his friend unexpectedly discovered Chang's skills, he has been invited to teach folk toy-making everywhere, from community colleges to students on field trips to Shigang. Among these creations, the "bamboo cicada" is not only easy to learn, but also can trigger a child's interest in basic physics and resonance. Chang picks up a bamboo cicada and rotates it continuously. "Listen---now it's making cicada noises, but it's going to turn into the water-holding frog's (a type of frog) noise!" As he holds the bamboo tube with his left hand and rotates the bamboo stick slowly with his right hand, the croaking noise indeed resembles the sound of a choir of frogs in a lake on a summer night. "Actually, you don't have to use a bamboo tube, but I tried everything, and this one most closely resembles the sound, is the most charming and eco-friendly."

Chang saws the bamboo into tubes that are three-centimeters long, cuts paper tape into squares, then puts the bamboo tube onto the paper tape and presses hard with his fingers to allow the tube to completely stick to the tape. After securing the rest of the fold with rubber tape, he pokes a small hole in the middle of the tape with a bamboo toothpick, pulling previously prepared fishing string through the hole and tying the string on a disposable chopstick. With this, a bamboo cicada that makes remarkably true-to-life noises is born.

Chang says that the materials required for folk toys can be found throughout daily life, making them easy to prepare. In addition, their structure is also simple. However, to make a toy better than others, one must remember that the "devil is in the details". For instance, how long should the fishing string be? How do you tell how tight the knot on the chopstick should be? How to tie it? These are all things he has worked through many times to produce lifelike cicada sound effects.

In addition, as these toys are intended for kids to play with, Chang pays special attention to safety issues. For example, the end of the chopstick and the side of the bamboo tubes are all curved into circular arcs to prevent kids from accidentally hurting themselves and, if the bamboo cicada is intended for even younger children, he replaces the bamboo tubes with plastic cups, ensuring that no harm will come to anyone accidentally hitting themselves on the head or body.

A stubborn, eternally-young child: The coolest grandpa in Shigang

Because of his close attention to detail, Chang's traditional folk toys are very popular. In addition to being safe, eco-friendly, interesting, easy to play with, the "rabbet joint" puzzle he created also serves to test a player's logics and 3-D concepts. Chang's version of a Rubik's Cube was developed with traditional Chinese "rabbet joint" construction techniques and this series of folk toy has even seen second and third editions of development. With every improvement, it has challenged players' brains even further, while raising expectations by Chang for further upgrades. "It is only fun if there is progress!" he notes with a smile. Having endured a lot of hardship in his childhood, he has recaptured the happiness of being a child in his 60s and 70s--a happiness fully expressed in his smile.

Today, Chang has passed his carpentry factory into the supervision of his son. Besides fully dedicating himself to the world of folk toys, he also gives toy-making instruction at various organizations and schools. But his favorite pastime remains playing with bamboo guns and metallic hoops with his grandchildren. Living at 70 as if he's only 7 years old, Chang Wen-hsiung is really having a blast "living his life in reverse". 🌿

1. This toymaker can even make a children's tops.
2. As a great promoter of Taiwanese folk-toy culture, Chang was invited to the President's Office and was greeted by Ma Ying-jeou himself.
3. Chang is very religious and even his folk toy sizes follow the "lucky number" rule.

