



Originating in Fuzhou, coil pottery has become an endangered handicraft.

Like a spinning potter's wheel, the unconventional life of pottery artist Chen Jin-cheng made a big turn that eventually returned to his life's passion, as nothing calms him like the smell and feel of potter's clay.



An utter focus on pottery:

Chen Jin-cheng's life takes a positive turn on the potter's wheel

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

"What do you want to ask?" "I don't have anything to say." "I really don't know what to say; making pottery is just like this."

Sometimes journalists conducting interviews encounter subjects that have an "artist's personality". That's not to say they are unfriendly or silent, although sometimes they will pose some difficult questions in reply to the writer's questions. Simply, they are just being themselves, which can be rather fascinating. Chen Jin-cheng, a professional coil pot artist, falls into this category.

Coiled-up clay turned into large pottery works

The next question readers might be asking is, "What is a coil pot? Before the invention of plastic, we all know that common materials included glass, porcelain, wood, stone and metal. In addition, small pottery works like cups and bowls could be made with pottery wheels or molds. However, larger pottery such as water tanks, jars and heaters couldn't be made by throwing clay on a wheel but, rather, needed to be made with a technique known as "coiling".

As the name of this technique suggests, artists need to roll the clay into a long roll and coil it, layer by layer, into a desired shape and height before using tools to pat the surface of the pottery to make it firmer. This is the most basic technique for "coiling".



1. Patting makes the surface of the pottery firmer, denser and more even.
2. Some of Chen's works are designed for daily use and some are just for art.

Dajia East Village: Home of Taiwanese pottery

In Waipu district's Dajia East Village, over half of the residents were once involved in pottery-making, earning the community the name "Taiwan's Jingdezhen" (porcelain capital). It earned this status because the East Village produced clay that contained large amounts of iron and was high in viscosity. It was also heat-proof and suitable for making large, hard porcelain ware.

Dajia East Village's history of earthenware can be traced back to late Qing dynasty. During the 1950s and 1960s, many U.S. military servicemen and their families began buying and collecting Dajia East pottery as gifts before returning to America because this village was located near Ching Chuan Kang (CCK) Air Force Base. However, as plastic products become increasingly common in the 1970s, the once-famous Dajia East pottery industry was slowly forgotten by Taiwanese, with pottery makers having to retire or find another source of livelihood.

The worst period for the pottery industry was, unfortunately, just when Chen was just about to get started as a professional potter after being a trainee for three years and four months. Although he loved making pottery, the reality of being unemployed forced him to leave his hometown and go to Beitou, where he became an employee in a relative's illegal casino.

Thanks to Chen's casual, straightforward personality, his career in northern Taiwan blossomed and he eventually became a "big shot" in the casino business. However, easy money also easily disappears. While he could earn enough to buy the houses on a street in a single night, he could also blow an entire year's income in one night. When Chen eventually got tired of his extravagant and loose lifestyle, he began yearning after a time when he was just a potter. Everything moved at a slower pace when he was coiling the clay rolls, but life was stable and sure.

In 1992, Chen returned to Taichung and the skills he once was good at and enjoyed. Only this time around he wasn't only creating pottery for a living; he was doing it for himself.

A brand-new life making new pottery

Chen grabs a handful of sand, sprinkles it evenly on the worktable and begins making the base of a jar. To throw pottery, the artist only needs to sit tight and use the potter's wheel to shape it, but coiling pottery is totally different: The maker himself has to revolve around the work. In bare feet, Chen steadily moves around the pottery, his hands slowly twirling the clay rolls. This process requires that the maker coordinates his fingers, palms and the part between thumb and index finger. Chen makes it look easy but it took him thousands of hours, creating over a thousand works, to learn this technique.



Whether one is making the pottery "tanks", "jaws" or tripods, the standard procedure includes making a base, trimming, coiling and flattening the surface. Sometimes different pottery styles may require creating a texture, glazing and painting, which all require time and different skills. Knowing that handmade earthenware is never going to replace plastic products and will never be as popular as it was before, Chen sighs and notes, "I may not find a younger trainee to pass down the skills of coiling to." It's understandable that the possibility his favorite craft, which took years to learn, might disappear in the future fills him with regret.

Achieving a higher level of art via life experiences

Looking back on his journey from a down-to-earth potter to casino business VIP and, once again, to an experienced pottery artist, Chen has tried to blend his extraordinary life experiences and vision into his coil pottery. "Free-spirited", "bold", and

1. Chen's strong skills, which took him dozens of years to learn, can be seen even as he makes a base.
2. To meet his own special requirements, Chen even develops and produces tools.
3. The potter's personality is also reflected in a finished work, so his full concentration and focus is required during its creation.
4. Pottery makers need to be very careful while perfecting their works.

"unconventional" are critics' most common comments regarding Chen's works, and he never fails to push new boundaries. Although asymmetrically-shaped earthenware might sometimes lead to failed firing processes, he loves challenges, just as he loves to challenge himself and continues following his own rules. 🌿