



'Mubian' wooden placards with golden engraving sayings/slogans, artistic sculptures, wooden foundry molds...these are among a variety of services noted on the business card for "Chen's Carving Place". While most of these products have been created to praise and highlight the achievements and attributes of others, they also underline the fact that Chen Wen-cai's work over four decades has made him the "gold standard" for his craft.

A lifetime 'gold standard' for excellence:

Woodcarving craftsman Chen Wen-cai

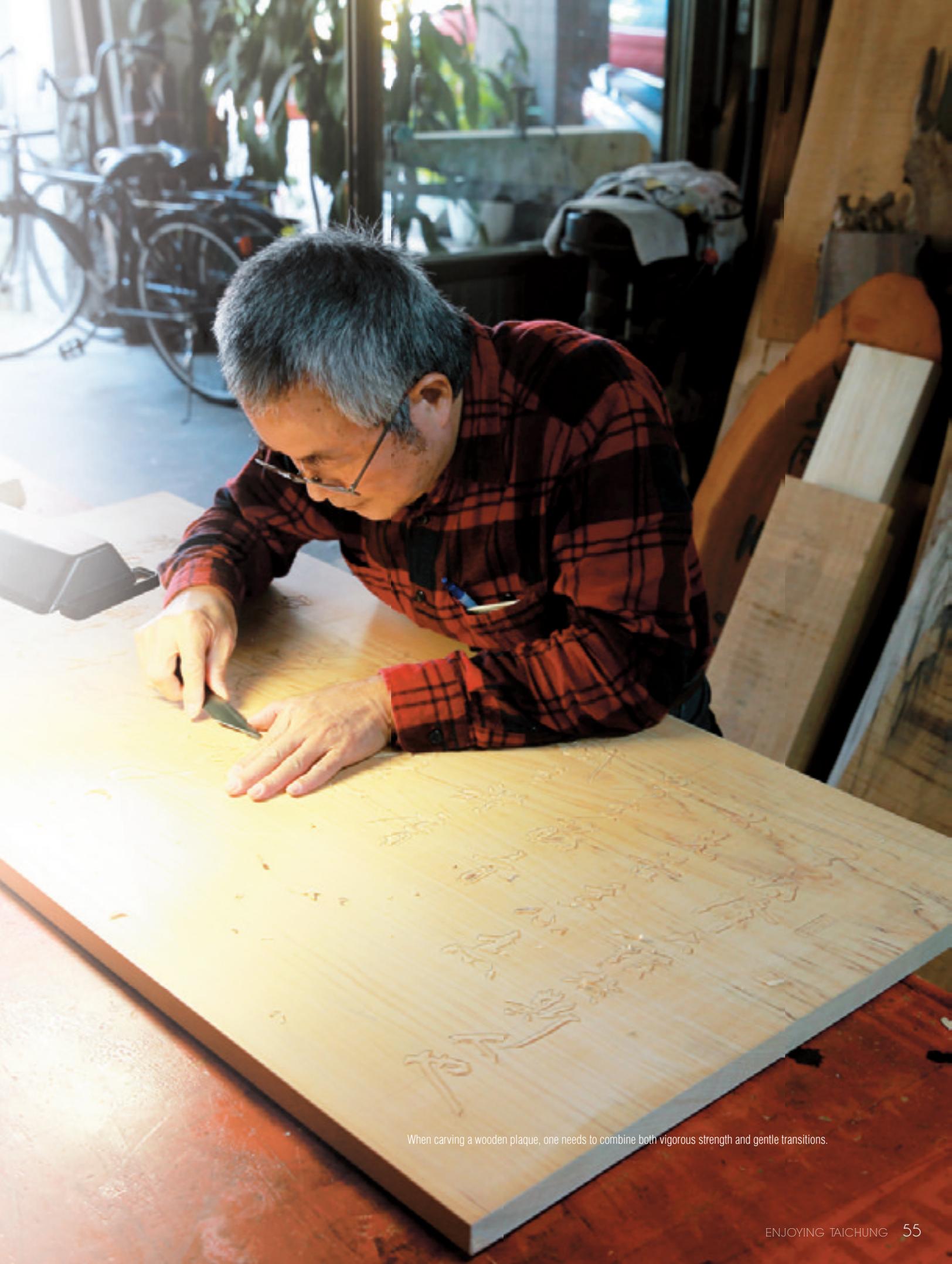
Words by Ye Jia-hui Photography by You Jia-huan Translated by Angela Cheng

Chen Wen-cai sits by the entrance to Chen's Carving Place, concentrating on carving a large engraved plaque sitting on a table. The wood's hues and warm texture are reflected in Chen's focused, but calm, expression as he is surrounded by a peaceful, enduring, timeless-feeling atmosphere that seems to jump back decades in the past.

An 80-year-old store and custom-work pioneer

Without his glasses on, Chen, 64, doesn't look that old. However, with a 40-plus-year career behind him, it's natural to refer to him as "Teacher Chen". As the second-generation proprietor of Chen's Carving Place, he hasn't claimed any prestige and glory for himself but, rather, refers to his ancestors, specifically his grandfather's generation.

Looking back through his family history, Chen's grandfather Chen Bo-qiao was a famous local Lukang poet who taught private literature and history classes and published some poetry books. This perhaps laid an artistic/cultural foundation for the Chen family, as Chen's father, Chen Gao-feng, chose the vocation of a woodcarving master and opened Chen's Carving Place in Taichung city. Its products and services included carved flowers, statues, wooden fish, plaques and just about any carved product imaginable. A



When carving a wooden plaque, one needs to combine both vigorous strength and gentle transitions.



1. Chen Wen-cai always likes to work quietly alone, focusing solely on his sculpting.
2. Chen's persistent focus on carving has led to opportunities to cooperate with international business customers.
3. An Italian missionary appreciated Chen's carving and has sent his customized Jesus statues to the other side of the world.

combination of personal interest and natural talent led the owner's youngest son, Chen Wen-cai, to follow in his father's woodcarving footsteps from the time he was young and to eventually become the elder Chen's natural successor.

The variety of business that comes in means that Chen Wen-cai has the knowledge and ability to deal with all sorts of matters, such as selecting wood, wood-working, laser-engraving applications, packaging design, and cutting. From flat to three-dimensional, from traditional handiwork to modern mechanics, Chen can deal with any kind of problem and has used the principle of "customization" to make his business popular.

Re-focusing on traditional Skills after 'Comma'

Despite its reputation for high quality, Chen's business--Taichung's oldest hand-carving store--has not been immune to changes in the greater environment, including a global wood shortage, innovative alternatives to traditional woodcarving, rising costs, and other dilemmas the world is facing, plus the innovation of traditional woodcarving alternatives, cost considerations, and industrial downturns. In more recent years, besides mainstay 'mubian' carvings that old customers order,

Chen's son and his daughter-in-law have founded the cultural creative brand "COMMA" despite their own busy lives because they were concerned about their father's craft and the loss of traditional skills. In this way, they hope to combine classic handicrafts with innovative designs in order to introduce "softer, gentler" natural handicrafts for modern life. The name "COMMA" symbolizes everyone's expectation of enjoying a brief respite from life and gaining the energy for the next step. It is also an extension of their father's handicrafts, the gold sign for Chen's Carving Place, and the spirit of craftsmanship.

Color, printing, carving and words

"The fine-arts artists look down on daily-life handicraft makers while statue sculptors do not understand our 'mubian' sculptures...the techniques and concepts are all different," Chen says with a sigh. Plaque-making is among the most unique Chinese art forms, bringing together characters, printing, carving, color and other elements. The text on a plaque not only requires concise, meaningful wording, but also calligraphy and seal carving skills. Therefore, a master must have cultural awareness when evaluating a plaque's quality, at the risk of simply "watching the shape and not the concept".



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1. Besides carving, Chen has a unique vision for wood appreciation and collecting.
2. As long as the skills are related to wood, from hand-carving to use of scroll saws and CNC laser carving, Chen is a master.
3. Wood coloring needs time and patience to present good detail and color saturation.

Chen notes that although he has carved countless plaques and will carve whatever customers want, he rarely asks what a plaque is commemorating, where it will be hung, or who it will be presented to, lest these details lead him into certain attitudes, such as being more careful for big clients but being too hasty for small ones. All works coming out of Chen's Carving Place are absolutely the best, made with the utmost attention. Chen's biggest, most touching encouragement to continue working in this traditional craft comes from experiences like the time he discovered that the "Taiwan's First School" plaque at the Tainan Confucius Temple came from his shop, or an acquaintance with an Italian missionary who liked Chen's special interpretation of Jesus on the cross so much that he ordered several for shipping back to Italy to display in churches there.

Embracing old skills and new designs

"My father has worked hard in his professional field his entire life. We really don't want this traditional craft to disappear and changing lifestyles means that we need to change ourselves first to give old skills a new life," says Chen's daughter-in-law, Han Hui-jing. Understanding that the early stage of launching a

new brand is the most difficult part, and lacking great financial support, she and her husband decided to continue working in other jobs and using after-work hours to run the new "COMMA" brand. Despite the usual related difficulties and challenges, "COMMA" has started to emerge and gain recognition, winning big awards in various design boutique contests. This has been followed by good sales of products, as well as overseas interest in Chen's Carving Place's designs and skills, with an international business asking Chen Wen-cai to create special anniversary products. This long-awaited "return to the battlefield" has been a great source of pride for Chen.

The creation of valuable things requires experience, time and training to shine, whether this is traditional woodcarving skills or Chen's inherited family business. His poet great-grandfather Chen Bo-qiao's literary achievements were an inspiration to second-generation Chen Gao-feng's practical training, while Chen Wen-cai's combination of the old and new has opened the doors to "COMMA" and Chen Xi-yan in the fourth generation. Though this heritage of art and crafts continues to face many challenges, every "comma", or pause, along the way has set the stage for more magnificent works and greater expectations. 