



Walking up Lane 183, the raucous rattling and noise leaves one's ears ringing, making it difficult to imagine the kind of determination that has kept Yang Zhen-kun, better known as "Uncle A-kun", enduring the torment of this hot, noisy, dirty and crowded working environment and committed to his welding craft for over 60 years.

A brilliant manipulator of fire:

Welding craftsman Yang Zhen-kun

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

"Do you want the sparks to be more obvious? It's very easy! When it burns, magnesium alloy is the best looking," says Yang Zhen-kun as he begins a simple introduction to his job. He is initially very awkward and hard to understand but, when the photographer asks which metal combustion is the most beautiful, the 74-year-old grandfather immediately goes back into the house and brings back some magnesium alloy with a blowtorch. The glittering, fun and amazing sparks scatter everywhere instantly, more brilliant than a sparkler. The spectacle also seems to have a soothing effect on Yang, who lost of both his parents during childhood but seems to have combined fire and light to forge himself a new life out of the flames of difficult times.

No surrender: Humble origins turned into the power of progress

Regardless of how wealthy a society is or any era, there are ordinary people who will face difficult lives. Welding craftsman "Uncle A-kun" is a good example of perseverance, even in a hard situation.

"It's not a big deal! Doing ironwork is just like being a craftsman. There are no special conditions required for us to pick our work--we do any job when we get a chance and must do everything!" says Yang Zhen-kun. His cheeks are scorched by the high-temperature furnace but are wrinkle-free, as his face is smooth and even a bit rosy. Yang began welding when he was 13 and has never faced any serious physical problems, despite the high temperatures and heavy work. Instead, he always welcomes "emergency patient" cases from all over Taiwan with a warm smile. The "sickness" this "doctor" cures is welding work related to any kind of metal, from car engines and exhaust pipes to Japanese iron pots that the literati admire. After passing through his skilled, blackened hands, all of these items experience a rebirth and renewed love from their owners.



Yang Zhen-kun's excellent Japanese iron teapot repairing skills means that items awaiting fixes now need to wait until the next year to be returned to owners.

"My father and mother died when I was 7, making me an orphan. Fortunately, my uncle kindly adopted me, though one needs to be mature and not cause too many troubles for others. From childhood, I did everything, from selling 'tang hulu' (a traditional Chinese candied fruit snack), ice cream and popcorn, to cleaning shoes before finally getting some direction at 13 and becoming an apprentice," he recalls. Soldering, welding, ironwork and craftsmanship all look like very hard work to the outside observer, but Yang rarely complains about any of this. If it's heavy work, he will take responsibility and do everything on his own; if the tooling equipment is dirty, he will just wash and wipe it clean; if the blowtorch is hard on the eyes, he advises one to just "squint your eyes a little bit". Yang simply smiles at all this and says that he is already used to high temperatures, while also absently patting his knees; since becoming a master welder, he doesn't know how many times his knees have been blistered and burned. Each time, it has happened because he has been so focused on his work that he has forgotten to move his feet. Only later has he felt his skin burning during a shower afterwards and discovered blisters.

Don't give up: An unfamiliar material requires learning from scratch

Yang says that welding work is much like being back-up reinforcements for the military; although he isn't

involved in the work of creation from beginning to end, he's an expert in dealing with things afterwards and repairs. The previously-inexperienced welding master originally did not know much about every kind of metal, temperature control, and techniques and effects of welding. Understanding a metal's weight, strength, ease of processing, malleability, pressure resistance, vibration and melting-point temperatures required an accumulation of experience. An example of this is the magnesium alloy commonly used in aircraft frames. In the past, this material was alien to Yang, although its lightweight nature made it common in imported cars, large motorcycles and gearbox casings. So, when customers came in for help with their cars, Yang initially wasn't quite sure about how to work with it. However, thanks to his dedication and focus, he studied magnesium alloy's melting-point temperature and malleability on a daily basis, learning how to make welds that were attractive and strong through repeated experimentation that helped him gradually understand these alloys. Today, auto buffs with discerning eyes refer any questions relating to equipment and metals to Yang's business, Zhen-kun Welding, because they know that as long as Yang Zhen-kun is in charge "the task will be finished", as this business guarantees.

Yang originally thought welding work would probably be industrial and equipment related. Thus, when he received a package from a postman one day, he didn't

1. Various grinders are Yang's tools for making a living.

2. Tapping and grinding, Yang repairs the iron to give it a vintage appearance and lines consistent with the original teapot.





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1. Welding is strenuous, heavy work, but still has to be handled carefully to achieve perfection.
2. After an iron pot is repaired, tea must be boiled inside as it is brushed at the same time to put color on it and create luster.
3. Yang Zhen-kun's outstanding iron teapot repair skills have earned customer praise that he is better than Japanese masters.

realize that it would reveal the focus of his work during all these years--patches for iron pots. He recalls, "This black iron teapot seemed like nothing, but some expensive ones could cost up to two or three hundred thousand NT dollars!" Accustomed to the simple life, Yang at first couldn't understand why such a high price could be offered for a teapot. However, because customers were asking if it was possible to repair rusty, damaged Japanese teapots, Yang inadvertently began studying ways to repair these items. Most of this education was self-taught, as he carefully studied the features of the pot material and the repairing process, mastering the melting point, linking, methods for creating rust iron lines via point-like tapping and, following repairs, the need to boil tea in the teapot to color over the newly-repaired iron and create a perfectly "seamless" fix.

Unexpected teapot-repair skills despite an ignorance of tea

Yang notes that it is easy for iron teapots to rust, especially around the easily-damaged, thin teapot mouth and at the teapot's frequently-burned bottom. However, collectors are often ignorant of where their teapots are damaged. Therefore, Yang created a "water drop mea-

surement" technique of putting clean water into a teapot and observing it under light. As the water seeps out of the pot, it will permeate the iron, which will then change color. Following with this thin water mark carefully will reveal the damaged area, which is marked with chalk. Then a cut piece of iron is placed on a high-temperature gas forge, and a welding rod is used for detailing, able to create extremely realistic antique-like effects. Such brilliant, specialized skills bring Yang all kinds of business. Iron teapots sent in by customers for repairs normally require a wait of three months for completion. Yang has also had customers who were dissatisfied after sending their iron teapots to Japan for repair, before finally discovering the value of Taiwanese iron work from master craftsman Yang Zhen-kun's hand. "I don't make tea and don't understand tea, but I understand iron and that's enough!" declares the craftsman.

With his down-to-earth approach, Yang utilizes the most simple environment and materials to overcome challenges at work, never complaining about unfortunate life experiences from the past. Rather, he has chosen to seize the opportunities that have been presented to him to become an excellent welder and craftsman, working with fire and other basic elements in a brilliant display of grassroots glory. 🌿