



In a journey that took him from feelings of inferiority to growing confidence, and from scant knowledge to expertise, Li Yung-chi--known as "MasterGolden-Head"--has lived a life of many twists and turns. His knife-making career, enlivened with slashing swords and machetes, has not only steeled him to embrace wisdom but also polished his life.

# The challenging life of a blade maker finally bears fruit

## The story of knife-making expert Li Yung-chi

Words by Ye Jia-hui Photography by You Jia-huan Translated by Alicia Yu

"**W**hen I was still a kid, I took the wrong medicine during an illness, leaving my head bald ever since! So I used to have very severe inferiority complex about my baldness," says Li, laughing heartily while stroking his bald head and pointing at the wall, where a variety of government-issued licenses and certificates are displayed. Interestingly, the nickname "Master Golden-Head" written on these certificates is in fact inspired by Li's signature bald head.

### A big bald head becomes an unexpected trademark

Fate always makes fun of people. Even though Li Yung-chi once harbored a deep hatred for his bald head, today any adept local knife-maker knows that if someone is looking for a Taiwanese expert with outstanding technical skills for making artistic blades worth treasuring, the bald-headed Master Golden-Head is a must-know name.

In the 1990s, Taiwan's knife-making industry was in an early export stage of development. At that time, 19-year-old Li was starting to learn about knife-making at his cousin's knife manufacturing factory. Perhaps it was because he was born with a special talent, together with his unrivaled diligence and effort, but within just four years, at the age of 23, Li had already become the best blade-maker in the factory and a young hero who could not be overlooked by clients. Factory customers also began relying on his brilliant ideas to design knives and develop new techniques. By meeting all sorts of customer demands, Li successfully took one order after another. As large foreign businesses began seeking suitable Taiwanese OEM partners via sourcing agents, his name also soon rose to prominence. However, no one could have imagined that one of these orders would change Li's entire life, giving him the chance to produce the globally-popular "Rambo knife".



Expert knife maker, "Master Golden-Head" Li Yung-chi has been devoted to his field for over 30 years.





1. The Rambo knife, which created a global sensation, is made by Li. One of the Rambo knives from a limited magnified edition series is still preserved at movie star Sylvester Stallone's house.
2. Having been to a leather-carving class just once, he unexpectedly inspired his wife who in turn started making leather-carved scabbards for his works.

## An OEM start-up gives birth to a global best-seller

Released in 1982, the film "First Blood" took the world by storm, leaving audiences with an unforgettable impression of Vietnam War hero Rambo, as portrayed by Sylvester Stallone. In the movie, Rambo's outstanding combat skills were used to deliver a harsh, but powerful, indictment of society's realities. Thanks to Rambo's brave image, his "Rambo knife" became an iconic symbol and best-seller around the world. Helping to supply the demand for this fad was the behind-the-scenes maker of the Rambo knife, Master Golden-Head himself, Li Yung-chi.

At that key moment, a large foreign client contacted Li via a middleman in the hope that he could produce Rambo knives resembling the original one, which was designed by the U.S. knife-making master Jimmy Lile. With

his supremely mature blade-making techniques and close attention to detail, Li successfully met the foreign firm's expectations and fulfilled this outstanding order with faultless quality. Excluding international sales, nearly 100,000 Rambo knives were sold in Taiwan alone. This successful cooperative experience not only provided Li with fame and money but laid a foundation for him to continue contracting with big European and American customers afterwards. For example, the knives used by the protagonists in movies such as "Raiders of the Lost Ark", "Lord of the Rings" and "Mission Impossible" were all made by Master Golden-Head from Taiwan.

## Artistic creations expand horizons for knives beyond basic purposes

Despite his success at an early age, Li did not lose his career focus and direction and continued to work with caution, conscience and tremendous effort into more recent times when China's low-cost OEM competitors began to have a broad, negative impact on Taiwan. This mainland threat made Li realize that perhaps the time was ripe for a big change. Although he had mostly helped others complete their products in the past, in 2004 he consequently devoted himself to the creation of artistic knives and turned his passion for blades towards more delicate forms of carving.

From the blade to the hilt, from design to final product, he completes these knives step by step, one by one, all on his own. A serial number is marked on each product he has created to indicate his responsibility and provide credit for his work. At the same time, his wife, Wu Li-ching, makes scabbards for his knives with exquisite leather-carving craftsmanship. Working together, Li and Wu resemble Gan Jiang and Mo Ye (famed swordsmith couple from China's Spring and Autumn Period), created an image of diligent commitment to their profession and deep love between a couple.

Because of advances in modern technology and easy access to information, Li thinks that instead of spending more time on the traditional skills of casting and forging, investing additional efforts into blade designs will be more rewarding. Furthermore, with his excellent command of material properties, plus on attention to style, appearance and color, he can always create something unique, based on the material properties when designing a blade. Indeed, it is Li's varied knife designs that break through the stereotype of a hard, violent and bellicose knife-maker, replacing it with a new image of sophistication, ingenuity and versatility.

For example, Li's "Paiwan knife", selected for

2007 National Crafts Achievement Awards, was initially designed at the request of the Hualien County Fire Department. After noting the requirements and requests of the department's mountain rescue team, he based his design on the traditional Paiwan aboriginal hunting knife. Because the rescue team is frequently called required to hack its own pathways, besides a thick, sharp blade, the knife also needs to be carried in different ways--straight, tilted and back-carried--so that it will not become a burden during climbing. In addition, the end of the hilt is triangular-shaped so that it can be used to break rigid materials such as tempered glass. Finally, the line attached to the hilt and scabbard is not just for aesthetic appearance but used as a rescue or stretcher rope, being 5.6 meters long and able to bear a maximum load of 200 kilograms if untied.


## Seeking a successor to keep pioneering techniques rooted in Taiwan

After designing the "Paiwan knife", Li generously donated 15 knives to the Hualien County Fire Department and provided a free lifetime warranty. These special knives also triggered a craze among collectors and won him acclaim via the National Crafts Achievement Awards, uniquely awarded in this case to a relatively-unknown designer specializing in artistic blades. Although Li's craftsmanship and his creations' artistic value have been so appealing to connoisseurs and even led European, American and Japanese knife-making giants to repeatedly attempt to recruit him as a technical consultant, he not only turned them down but even retreated from all forms of craft competitions without hesitation.

"I know how unpopular it is in the field of artistic knife making, but it's really unconvincing to have laymen judge painstakingly-made works!" he explains. His wife cannot help but complain, but Li just smiles and says it's actually worthwhile to dedicate his time to the connoisseurs who truly understand his expertise, as displayed through his complicated rivet-soldering techniques and application of titanium plating, alloying and etching. In reality, behind each step are countless trials and a wealth of accumulated experience. The journey of an artist is a lonely one and specializing in the domain of artistic knife-making is even more lonely than most artistic pursuits. For such artists, perhaps the painstaking effort is just like the blade itself, whose brilliance is hidden within a scabbard.

Enjoying business success at an early stage of life but walking into a tranquility and solitude refined by art in his middle age, Li Yung-chi has wandering between the two extremes, but persisted in an earnest attitude and sin-

gle-mindedness. Yet, there is now something fresh on his mind: There may be no one to succeed him and inherit his techniques. "The Chinese giants have long been asking me to work there but I know that once I do the Taiwanese will have no chance of taking up knife-making as their profession!" he says.

He confesses that he is selfish in some ways and wants to leave his techniques and designs to Taiwanese kids, especially the pioneering skills and creations, because they represent the competitive force of tomorrow's Taiwan. Yet, however anxious he may feel, it seems that the only course is to wait for those truly interested in this profession. Passing his professional skills on to the next generation will perhaps be the very next tremendous accomplishment and source of satisfaction for Li after deciding to enter the realm of artistic creation. 



1. From cutting and pattern carving to dyeing, Li also has skill in making other leather-carving creations.
2. Artistic blades made by Li are all released as limited editions and extremely popular among connoisseurs.
3. The blade cannot simply have a wild design; more detailed ingenuity is required to create a combination of softness and hardness in its appearance.