



With a lifetime's worth of hard work, Chen Lian-yuan didn't have any connection with "creativity" before the age of 70. This all changed one day when he happened to pick up a loofah plant and scissors in what would be the unexpected beginning to grandpa Chen's creative life.

Chen Lian-yuan's handmade loofah artworks

Recreating rural life from memories

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

The car drove onto the small meandering path, just large enough for two vehicles to pass but lined with large green fields, inspiring passers-by to forget their busy lives for a moment. A couple of lush longan trees grew on the roadside, a Bougainvillea vine stretched up from the second floor balcony and bright loofah (luffa) flowers climbed a high cultivation platform for these plants. In addition, there was a stream opposite Chen's home where some local women were washing clothes in the cool water.

"I'm a typical country child. Everything I have seen, heard or have been involved with are country-related, so that's all I do!" says a smiling grandpa Chen Lian-yuan, who just turned 80 this year.

A birthplace nurtures creativity

Chen followed his parents into farming from childhood, inheriting the hardworking genes of a farmer's family to serve his entire family. However, changes to his situation following the opening of a plastic injection molding factory left him with no choice but to gradually pay less attention to farming, up until he reached retirement age, when he returned to more enjoyable agricultural pursuits. Loving and caring for



Even at the age of 80, Chen possesses a passion for creativity.

things becomes ingrained in the personalities of farming kids. One year, an abundant loofah harvest left an enormous pile of leftover loofah in the warehouse, despite efforts to give it away, eat it and even make it into sponges. Seeing this "loofah mountain", Chen felt a bit of sadness and suddenly thought of southern-central Taiwan's hot summers and the idea of using a loofah's ventilating features, perfect for creating hats.

This led him to cut up the loofah plants while trying to explore and experiment with hat styles and shapes. He first created a lady's hat with wide brim for his wife and made a cap for himself--a first effort that, surprisingly, won plenty of praise from those who hadn't thought of using loofah sponge in this way. Chen not only enjoyed this new headgear, but his wife regularly used hers while playing ball and shopping.

With the encouragement of friends, Chen then used loofah to make reusable shopping bags, winning recognition when this product was designated the 2006 Mazu Cultural Festival Environmental Bag. He also earned the title of "loofah expert" and began to receive frequent invitations from various organizations to participate in lantern creations, creative art competitions and other events. His enthusiasm and artistic talent has meant that he is willing to cooperate with anyone who likes his works or invites him to create or participate in something. Consequently, he not only used up all of the "loofah mountain" at home, but even needed to rush-order additional loofah supplies to provide adequate material during the off-season for his endless inspirations and new works.

A built-in 'database', creating without blueprints

Because each loofah plant is a bit different--some with a fat head and tiny end, and some with a clear, dense texture--Chen uses each plant's unique characteristics when selecting them for creations. For example, when making an animal's head, he will try to use an entire similarly sized and shaped loofah that doesn't need to be changed much. If he wants to show an animal's strong muscles, he chooses a loofah with a clear texture that reveals more natural lines.

"I don't know how to draw, so I don't do any [prior] sketches. I just make it when I get the idea," says grandpa Chen. His variety of loofah works instead come from a built-in "database" in his brain, accumulated from growing up in the countryside. His great familiarity with the appearance of cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens and other animals means that he doesn't have to refer to animal pictures, instead simply cutting and molding loofah into vivid representations of various animals. If he wants to portray a fairy tale creature such as a dragon or phoenix, he will take traveling opportunities to observe murals of flying dragons and phoenixes by other master artists to seek out details, such as where a dragon's beard grows, or the proportions of its body and feet. While others might just glance at these wall paintings, Chen carefully takes in all the details as any incorrect features might completely change their appearance, like a tiger that ends up resembling a dog.

Without any sketches, Chen masters the proportions of the animal's head first, helping ensure that the positioning and scale of its body and limbs are not wrong. He then selects the appropriate loofah, avoiding the stem section and getting rid of the rough inside fibers, enabling



1. Chen Lian-yuan's loofah creations started with the making of a loofah hat for his wife.
2. A reliance on inside metal wire supports results in dynamic-feeling loofah works.



This farm is a source of Chen Lian-yuan's inspirations.

easy size adjustments via a bit of pressure to create the proper size and shape. In order to strengthen the stability of his artworks, Chen adds metal wire to the inside of the loofah and then uses hot glue for bonding. This metal support ensures a proper posture for vivid works such as a curled snake or walking sheep.

Besides dragons and phoenixes, a cute loofah duck

In addition to various loofah creatures, Chen has also transformed Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman's famed "Rubber Duck" into his own very interesting "Loofah Duck". However, his most unique and meaningful work has been a "cattle market", composed of several heads of cattle. Chen explains that regular outdoor cattle-trading markets were a unique cultural feature from the agricultural era of his youth, and he usually went to these events with his uncle to watch people bargain. There was once a cattle

market in central Fengyuan and Beigang, but this unique scene has gradually disappeared with the the passage of time. With those memories deeply ingrained in Chen's mind, he recreated the market from his memories with loofah cattle, helping the public to relive every scene from an earlier agricultural age.

Although Chen Lian-yuan is already around 80 years old, his passion for creative art has continued to grow even stronger, and he has produced some works for next year's Lantern Festival. Every time he has new ideas and new artworks, he always generously contributes these to those who love them. "I'm very happy if someone appreciates them, which means that I am still useful!" he says with a smile. It is truly more of a blessing to give than to receive. After experiencing the many vistas of life, this elderly' creator's hopes are very simple, as he has come to understand that the other side of the ordinary is, in fact, that which is eternal. ㄟ