

PORTRAITS OF MASTERY

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* The Portraits of Mastery YouTube channel from which the book is adapted has over 200,000 subscribers

A Taoist priest, a puppeteer, a spirit medium, and a builder of replica lightsabers – these are just a few of the masters profiled in this catalog of gifted workers from every corner of Taiwan. Read the stories of the men and women who have dedicated their lives to attaining mastery in their chosen occupation.

In nondescript buildings on unassuming streets, they quietly build their knowledge and hone their skills with single-minded purpose. They aren't interested in fame or wealth, only the unending pursuit of perfection. They are the masters.

Some found their calling through religion, such as the Taoist priest, the ritual corpse exhumers, and the spirit medium who delivers messages from the gods while in a trance. Some work in the traditional arts carving name chops, performing puppetry, and crafting the ink used in calligraphy and ink painting. Others are more modern in outlook, such as the baseball umpire and the builder of replica lightsabers.

The stories of over 30 masters are told in these pages, delivering insight into what drives people to pursue the highest levels of attainment in their field. In many cases, they describe the confusion and youthful folly that preceded the dawning of clarity and purpose. Nearly all contain astonishing revelations concerning the execution of their crafts. The carver of name chops, for example, was once so highly in demand that he had to complete a hand-carved name chop every 90 seconds to fulfill all of his orders. On a lighter note, the builder of lightsabers demands that every customer complete a questionnaire to demonstrate that they are competent in the ways of the Force.



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Developed from a web video series produced by Movingtaipei, *Portraits of Mastery* delivers readers into the homes and workshops of the masters who live among us, celebrating their crafts, and telling life stories as varied as the careers they pursue. This smorgasbord of human achievement is by turns humorous, surprising, edifying, and mysterious, but most of all readers will be left with a deep respect for the personal sacrifices made in the pursuit of perfection.

Movingtaipei 目映 · 台北

Established in 2017, Movingtaipei provides graphic design, video production, magazine advertising, and online marketing services. In 2019 the firm began producing the *Portraits of Mastery* video series to document Taiwan's masters of unique and unusual trades. From disappearing traditional arts, to folk religion, to modern crafts, the series celebrates human achievement in all domains, while documenting the authentic life stories of these highly dedicated individuals.

PORTRAITS OF MASTERY

By Movingtaipei

Translated by Shanna Tan

The Bone Collector

“Nobody in the family dares to eat my tang yuan.” — Confession of an indignant bone collector.

“My mother didn’t let me make *tang yuan*. She said the kids would be too scared to eat my sweet glutinous rice balls. But they sure aren’t scared of spending my money.”

Uncle Kun-Mu’s confession speaks to the bitter reality faced by bone collectors. They do important work; everyone wants their loved ones to rest in peace. Yet people recoil in fear at the sight of their hands.

It’s filming day and we’re meeting Uncle Kun-Mu for the first time. We imagined him to be a typical middle-aged man about the neighborhood – outspoken, boisterous, talking loudly as he chews a betel nut. It’s a stereotypical image, but we’re surprised by how different Uncle Kun-Mu is. As he stops his scooter and approaches the team, he looks so unassuming in his long-sleeved polo shirt that we almost mistake him for a curious onlooker from the nearby farms. Uncle Kun-Mu’s son tells us later that his father got a fresh haircut to look good that day.

The cemetery’s uneven ground is a challenge even for the young and fit filming team. We have to watch our feet carefully to avoid taking a tumble with our equipment in tow. Meanwhile, the sprightly Uncle Kun-Mu appears undeterred by the terrain and obstacles. He hops down high steps, landing lightly on his feet. We’re on edge with worry for his eighty-two-year-old knees, but he doesn’t even break a sweat.

Uncle Kun-Mu’s family has plied this trade for generations. His grandfather and father were both bone collectors, and he too has passed his expertise on to his son – the fourth generation. As a child, Uncle Kun-Mu started following his grandfather to work. “There was always lots of food prepared by the bereaved family. We were poor back then, so I tagged along to work and eat.” No fear can deter a child from the lure of food, and they always have a healthy appetite for adventure. Frequenting cemeteries gave the young Kun-Mu exposure to the work, and he became his grandfather’s assistant before turning fifteen. By eighteen, he was already handling clients on his own.

In the past, burials were very common, and this creates a demand for bone collection services that persists today. Kun-Mu works on two or three graves per day on average, and his current record stands at eight sets of bones in a day’s work. Each bone collection assignment earns him a few thousand New Taiwan Dollars, and the work adds up to a respectable living. It has been his first and only job to date.

Over at the cemetery, the ground-breaking rite is about to begin. Spirit money burn to ashes as Uncle Kun-Mu's younger brother stands in front of the grave and calls out: "We mean no disrespect, bless the ground-breaking!" This signals the end of the rite, and the workers begins shoveling. When the coffin is lifted, the daughter of the bereaved family holds out an open black umbrella to shade the skull as she calls out to her father to "wake up". It's time for the bone collector to get to work.

Right away, Uncle Kun-Mu starts to do a count of the bones. Many dishonest bone collectors who have their eyes on valuable burial items would often ask the family members to take their leave at this point, using the excuse that the negative energy of the otherworld harms the living, Uncle Kun-Mu tells us. "These people are clearly up to no good. Think about it: why would your ancestors harm you?"

Observing the exhumation and seeing human bones in person isn't as shocking or frightening as we had imagined. If anything, it inspires us to reflect on the meaning of life. In death, we're naught but bones and dust. If we can take nothing with us, perhaps the value of life lies in leaving something meaningful behind.

Once the bones are collected, the next step is to rebury them in an urn, which is usually then placed in a columbarium. There are two reburial methods, which differ according to the size of the urn. A small urn reburial is relatively straightforward: the collected bones are cremated, and the ashes placed in the urn. When big urns are used, bones are not cremated. Instead, the skull is first wrapped in a cloth onto which the funeral director or the bone collector paints facial features according to the deceased's gender. The bones are then arranged inside the big urn in a sitting position. Black charcoal is sometimes used to secure the bones in place, but care must be taken not to obscure any of the facial features. For body parts with many small pieces, the bones are wrapped in a red cloth before going into the urn.

For the reburial which we're filming, the bereaved family has chosen the big urn. According to Uncle Kun-Mu, nine out of ten bone collection assignments are cremations, so we are lucky to film the complete process of bone collection and subsequent reburial. The deceased is also an "exemplary" case, as his remains are fully skeletonized. If the decomposition process is incomplete, or when there are bits of flesh like tofu dregs stuck to the bones, bone collectors have to spend more time and effort to strip down the bones of these "damp bodies". Damp bodies are especially common in places like Beigang, where the lowlands cause water seepage or flooding in burial grounds, which slows the decomposition process.

"I've seen it all. Eyes still wide open, wispy hair stuck on the bones, the overwhelming stench of decay that attacks your senses. The first few times, I was scared, but after a while, I learned to deal with it no matter how bad the smell hits," Uncle Kun-Mu tells us with a shrug. Years of training in cemeteries since he was a child wasn't for naught. Nothing in these grounds can scare him now.

Over his long career, Uncle Kun-Mu has also had to collect the remains of friends and family. Although speaking about it must be hard, his countenance remains calm as he tells us the

stories, stating matter-of-factly that work is work. Never take advantage of others, Uncle Kun-Mu says, emphasizing the importance of handling every set of bones that passes through his hands with honesty and care. On a couple of occasions, he had to comfort clients who were stricken with grief at the burial site. “A reburial is a good thing,” he would tell them. “Don’t cry, otherwise the deceased can’t leave in peace.” But then, he lets us in on what he was really thinking at those times. “To tell the truth, they cry so badly it makes my head hurt. How can I focus on my work?” Spoken with honesty indeed.

Uncle Kun-Mu married in his forties, which was considered late in those days. The neighbors knew him as the “bone lad” back then and once, they enthusiastically greeted a lady headed to his house, thinking that she was a potential client of his. “Ya, you’ve found the right place. He’s the bone lad! You’re looking for someone to collect bones, aren’t you?” It turned out that the lady was no potential client, but a matchmaker for Uncle Kun-Mu. Kun-Mu’s local accent slips out as he cusses. “Dammit. She was here to matchmake la!”

Supernatural encounters have been few and far between during his many years as a bone collector, but one incident stood out. An animal bone – likely deposited by a passing stray – was collected with the other bones and placed into the urn. That night, the deceased’s grandson started to bark uncontrollably. When he was called back, Uncle Kun-Mu opened the urn; his bone expertise allowed him to fish out quickly the non-human bone. Only then did the grandson quiet down and peace returned.

Another time, Uncle Kun-Mu took on a job for a poor family. When the coffin was opened, they discovered the body was badly waterlogged and required additional work. Uncle Kun-Mu had to quote a higher fee, which the family agreed to on the spot, but during his nap that day, he dreamed of the bereaved family passing him a much lower fee than the agreed amount. Uncle Kun-Mu wasn’t quite sure what to make of the odd dream. Later, the strangest thing happened. When the job was done, the family couldn’t afford to pay in full and the amount they could cough up was the same as in his dreams, down to the exact cent. Till today, this remains as the most bizarre incident in his long career.

Uncle Kun-Mu supports his whole family with his earnings from bone collecting. Contrary to what some may think, he doesn’t make a fortune, but it’s enough to provide his family a comfortable life. He makes a living with his hands, but those hands are also weighed down by the burden of his profession. People avoid his handshakes, and he has never experienced the joy of making *tang yuan* – spherical dumplings rolled from glutinous rice flour – with his family, a winter solstice tradition. He shares these details as if they are simply part and parcel of his work, but his disappointment is clear.

Still, someone has to do what nobody else dares. Uncle Kun-Mu can only try to stomach the bitterness. Over and over again, he tries to manage his emotions so that he can focus on his work – to lay bones to rest.

Master of Movable Type

"I was nearly executed by a firing squad during the White Terror." — The man who picks out words for a living, though it almost cost him his life.

One by one, the character blocks are carefully picked out and meticulously lined up in the chase. A layer of ink is brushed across the blocks before the frame is carefully pressed onto white paper, printing a page of history. This is the world that Su Ming-Tang knows so well and cannot leave.

The seventy-six-year-old master of movable type owns Hua Hsing Printing. His father ran the letterpress business for more than 30 years before Su took over in 1970. Since then, his life has revolved around movable type. Every day, he busies himself with the type blocks – repeating the cycle of filling, arranging, printing, and emptying.

As Su shows us the overlapping wall panels where the lead characters are stored, it's almost like we're watching him peel back the pages of time. He takes out an antiquated box which he says he used to hand-print business cards years ago. It was some of his most important work, he tells us as he demonstrates how to insert the lead characters and slot in wooden blocks to create spacing. Once he checks that the blank card is clipped securely in place, he spreads the ink and snaps the box shut with a loud crack.

"It's very slow work, isn't it?" Su picks up the freshly printed card and scrutinizes it. This small card once occupied center stage in his life; now, it is relegated to a lingering memory of the past. Today, such a laborious printing method is neither cost- nor time-efficient, but it's also what made hand-printed business cards a coveted possession.

In the past, only the well-heeled could afford business cards. Su's finger trails inked entries on the yellowed pages of an old account book. "Look at these records. One card is about 80 cents to a dollar, so a box will easily set you back by 60 dollars. A shocking sum of money." In 1930s Taiwan, the average person earned about twenty dollars a month – just enough to feed a family, Su tells us. Only those with well-lined pockets could afford to spend 60 dollars on cards. It was hence no surprise that hand-printed business cards became a mark of status and class, and even today, their importance is still ingrained in the minds of the older generation. Anyone who could hand out business cards then was no ordinary man on the street; even being the recipient of one was an honor.

In those days, Su's hands flitted among type pieces, his ink-stained fingers picking out and arranging characters in different font sizes. Township offices, farmers' associations and schools were the bigwigs in his clientele, and their requests were often complex, with specific formatting requirements. Being able to pick out the right characters was not enough; he also had to make sure the font was the correct size. It was thus no mean feat, in the era before computers, to print even a simple form.

Besides the work he did for schools, printing the fortune-telling poetry slips used in temples also gave Su many headaches. The typesetting for the ocean goddess Mazu's Sixty Divine Poems (as its name suggests) was a huge task. The temples' request for sixty sets of accompanying

descriptions to be printed alongside the poems raised the level of complexity by several notches. Su was aware of the heavy responsibility on his shoulders. “If I didn’t convey the deity’s words of wisdom accurately, I would cause great harm.”

However, mistakes are almost unavoidable. At the character level, he already has to deal with variations in type-heights for tens of thousands of characters. To zero in on the correct piece among a sea of blocks requires a keen eye and patience. “Look. This is 好,” Su notes as he holds out a block he has just picked out. “The blocks are carved as a mirror image so that they will print correctly on paper. Identifying backwards characters is probably the hardest part of my work.” Even staring at a normal character a few seconds too long would result in the brain temporarily parsing it as “weird”, not to mention having to look at backward characters all the time. Thus, movable type printing is highly counter-intuitive work, especially for Su, who spends a copious amount of time looking at the reversed blocks. Since humans are not infallible, mistakes are inevitable. But in Su’s case, a single mistake can be costly.

The 1950s, the period of White Terror. Those were dark times in Taiwan, in which political dissidents and anti-government intellectuals were being rounded up and prosecuted. Su was accused of being a dissident and almost executed all because of a single mistake in his printing. “I was working on a job to print envelopes for St. Vincent High School.” Fear clouds Su’s expression as he recalls the fraught political atmosphere of the time. In those days, it was common for public institutions to print anti-Communist slogans on their official stationery, and the school envelope he was tasked to print was no different.

“I was supposed to print 人民公社就是奴工營 (People’s Communes are labor camps).” Nothing could have prepared him to deal with the careless mistake that turned the message into 人民公社就是好工營 (People’s Communes are good camps).

Mixing up the characters for *slave* (奴) and *good* (好) was no small matter; it was brazen publicity for the other camp. It quickly caught the attention of the Taiwan Garrison Command, the secret police of the time, whose very name instilled fear. Many who were “invited” to their headquarters never made it out. Su was terrified but he could only submit to the interrogation.

“The people from the secret police walked in just like that to take me away for interrogation. I almost died of fear.” Even now, the memories still haunt Su. It was as if the grim reaper had come knocking. His family fell into panic and the whole street buzzed with rumors. Some of the neighbors even distanced themselves to avoid being implicated.

“That was how things were. No choice. I kept telling the secret police that it was just a careless mistake.” Su describes showing the two type pieces to the investigator as he tried to explain: “We really cannot prevent such mistakes from happening sometimes. The blocks are blackened with ink, and the words are all in mirror image. When two very similar-looking characters are next to each other, sometimes we pick the wrong ones.”

Perhaps Su’s explanation was earnest, and the investigator also saw for himself the challenges which made mistakes an inevitable part of his work. Miraculously, the secret police didn’t give him a hard time; they accepted his explanation, and the episode blew over with a letter of repentance.

In the aftermath of White Terror, the world Su spent a lifetime constructing also came crumbling down. The wall of lead characters was forced out by the advent of computers and digital technology. Movable type stepped down from the glory of center stage and disappeared into the shadows of history.

In an age where speed is gold, movable type cannot hope to survive. Su knows this. The labor costs are too high, the process too slow. Su looks fondly at the wall of type and copies of documents dated from the Japanese occupation. He can't bear to abandon these important assets. "They're treasures, much more valuable than anything the computer can print." These days, Su concentrates his efforts on working with history and cultural societies to organize seminars and hands-on activities to educate and showcase the value of movable type.

Su's relationship to movable type has also evolved with the times. It's no longer simply a job, it's his vocation. He strongly believes in the importance of preserving Taiwan's history. The slow but steady movable type is something that digital technology can never hope to fully replace.

The Pearling Guru

"Quit being an asshole and saying the valley is too wide. Maybe your ship is too small." — The pearling guru, who will help you gain confidence and happiness.

Men who've completed military service are no strangers to the term "pearling", more commonly known as genital beading – after all, 70% of their time in the military was spent cracking crude jokes about each other's "little brother". Most Taiwanese men will first hear of the term in the two meccas of pearling – the military and prison. In the military, bored soldiers on sentry duty pass the time bragging about their "achievements", and if any of it is to be believed, then every soldier is an Ip Man, who can take down a dozen at a time. Bedroom prowess remains the perennial favorite topic of conversation among soldiers.

On the other hand, the prison is where the real action happens. With no lack of time, inmates pick up an assortment of unexpected skills. Some brew their own alcohol, while others learn pearling behind bars. Instead of a scalpel, the inmates make do with a sharpened toothbrush. We heard that pearling is a much sought-after service by fellow inmates despite the deplorable hygiene standards. Armed with the skill, many of them go on to open their own shop combining pearling and tattooing, a genius move to kill two birds with one stone.

Driving along Sanchong Interchange, no one can miss the striking sign that reads 'PEARLING' in bold lettering, attracting second looks from even those unfamiliar with the term. Before starting his own studio, pearling master Chen An-Chuang was a fortune teller operating out of a makeshift stall in the market. He specialized in questions about careers, relationships, and health. But even a skilled fortune teller like himself couldn't have predicted that the misfortunes of others would one day trigger his career change. Chen tells us that people going to

him with relationship problems usually complain about a less-than-satisfactory bedroom life. Almost half the women who asked about relationships had affairs, and 90% of the foreign wives who came to him ended up leaving their husbands. “It got me thinking, *how can I help?* Good sex can settle a lot of other problems. Many relationship issues stem from bad sex.”

To advertise his new business, Chen custom-made a huge signboard using money from a loan his mother took out. He didn’t care if others thought him a fool; he believed there was demand and that clients would find their way to him. His daring vision led him down a path less traveled. Not only was he able to solve many couple’s most intimate issues, but he also repaid his mother’s loan in no time, to the surprise of those who had sneered at him. He didn’t stop there. He successfully patented the specially-designed beads he uses. Today, Chen owns pearling studios in the north, central, and southern regions of Taiwan, including one in mountainous Hualien County. He travels around Taiwan helping men rediscover their masculinity and pride.

Chen has no physical ailments or pain but tends to favor one side while walking, giving him a swagger. His piercing gaze loses none of its intensity behind glasses. Though a man of few words, Chen has a knack for hitting the nail on the head, a skill he has perhaps picked up from the years of fortune-telling. He also has a unique way of greeting men – with his gaze trained on their crotch, silently sizing the other person up. Some have CEO-level endowments, while those with smaller jewels are special assistants. Chen doesn’t stop there; he reaches out to touch and examine the shape. When you see his hand stretch out...Got to suck it up if you’re a man! As Chen greets us one by one, our male crewmembers take an anxious breath, afraid of being placed on the lowest rungs of the ladder of masculinity.

Master Chen tries to get us to do the procedure too. “Just get it done today!” His sales pitch is so good we almost pull our pants down right then. Chen’s clients run the gamut in terms of age; today, we’re filming an eighteen-year-old (his friend’s son), but we’ve heard that his oldest client was over seventy years old. To date, Chen has served more than twenty thousand men. In between the filming, a couple comes in. They’ve travelled a long way, from Miaoli County in the West. They are in good spirits, chatting and laughing in the corner. We later learn that the girlfriend had encouraged her partner to come, a breath of fresh air compared to the conservative society of the past.

Being a fortune teller didn’t give Chen a head start in life. As with everyone else, he had to start from the bottom. He learnt pearling from a friend who’d picked up the skill in prison and later set up his own shop. For the first three years as an apprentice, Chen did nothing except polish the pearling beads, which was how he learned the importance of using good beads in pearling. At 0.5cm in diameter, Chen’s beads might look insignificant, but just one alone will set you back between four and six thousand NTD. Chen doesn’t just serve clients in Taiwan; word of his prodigious skills naturally spread through client recommendations, and he has been flown overseas to serve clients in Dubai and Australia. He has become Taiwan’s pride – however unusual – as he expands his business footprint across the globe.

A metal tray on Chen's worktable catches the attention of the film crew. It holds multiple pieces of jade, agate, crystal, and glass – very much like trinkets displayed in a jewelry box. We stretch out our hands in curiosity, but Chen stops us. "Don't touch! These were removed from penises." What we thought were "gemstones" turn out to be expired genital beads. Imagine the huge ruckus we'd have caused had we touch them with our bare hands! Chen doesn't just insert beads for his clients; he also removes expired beads. Traditional beads only last about three to twenty years, depending on the material used, and when they cause lesions or pain due to incorrect insertion, they must also be removed. As we listen to Chen's explanations, we can't help but wonder why these boba-sized beads have men opening their wallets in a heartbeat.

The space Chen uses for the procedure is small, about 10 square meters. Squeezing several burly men squeezed inside to film makes it hot and stuffy, and it looks like we're creating adult content. "Men are like this, complaining about a wide valley when it's their ship that's too small. What's the point of blaming the situation while ignoring their own incompetence? It's just about finding the right solution!" Chen says as he deftly carries out the procedure. His patented beads are shaped to a precisely calculated radius. To get the best results, the bead can't be too big, nor should it damage the erectile tissues. Chen had to hire experts to work on the precise calculations in line with ergonomic principles. For his material, he opted for a manmade diamond crystal which can emulate a massaging sensation during penetration.

"We make use of the concept of relativity in kinematics. When the beads rub against the vaginal wall, the girl gets the impression that the penis is thick, and the guy feels her tightness. The in-and-out thrusting then creates a rolling motion that massages the erectile tissues, which allows him to remain hard for a long time." In the time it takes for Chen to tell us this – not even five minutes – he has finished inserting the beads for the young client. We got to admit that Master Chen does have top-notch skills.

Even though pearling is increasingly accepted, it's still seen as a shady business, and many doubt the technique. Can it really improve sex? When marriage is on the rocks, it's common for couples to visit a marriage counselor for extremely pricey one-hour sessions. If we see pearling as an alternative remedy to solve bedroom problems, with the only difference being that counseling focuses on the mental, and pearling the physical, perhaps the shift in mentality can moderate criticism of this "traditional folk remedy".

In some cases, the married couple becomes more loving after getting the procedure done. Seated in front of the camera, Chen recounts an incident from just a couple of days back: his client, a deliveryman, had done one round of pearling at Chen's, but came back to ask for another two rings. Concerned, Chen asked if there were any issues. "He told me that before coming here for the first time, life had been terrible for him. He was servicing a loan and worried daily about whether he could provide for his wife and kid. But after pearling, the couple enjoyed the sex so much that it became like therapy. It brings them a lot of happiness and relaxation." Moments like this are when Chen gets the greatest satisfaction out of his work. He doesn't just stop at solving

couples' intimate issues, he also indirectly gives men a confidence boost. "If the sex is good, you become more confident when you go out to meet people and do business."

If there's a job in the world that brings people happiness and confidence at the same time, even if it's something as unusual as pearling, where's the harm in that?

The Tattoo Artist

"Working with tattoos doesn't make me a bad guy." — The tattoo artist, exploring the human condition with needle and ink.

If your skin were a canvas, what would you paint on it?

For some, it might be a portrait of a loved one, to keep them close forever; for others, it might be an aspiration, or a self-reminder of a lesson learned. The tattoo artist takes on a heavy responsibility: to weave uniquely personal stories into art and then transfer it from paper to skin.

"Clients these days are different. They don't ask for dragons and phoenixes. They come in with a story." The low hum of the tattoo gun fills the space in the studio. On the chair, a client is getting inked. Perhaps it's her first tattoo; her expression is solemn, her teeth clenched. Beside her, the artist maintains a relaxed stance even as he concentrates on inking and coloring the stenciled design. Petal by petal, a flower blooms atop her arm.

Tiao-Chin, the broad-shouldered owner of the tattoo studio, is a well-known tattoo artist in southern Taiwan. Tiao-Chin started to explore his craft while Taiwanese society was still highly conservative, and has been working professionally at it for almost twenty years. During the past two decades, he has worked continuously to perfect his skills, and even showcased his work at several overseas tattoo conventions. Despite his achievements, the negative comments – whether about his own body tattoos or his profession – have never stopped. Dipping a toe into the craft invites judgmental looks and assumptions about being a bad seed, while those who get inked are easily branded as gangsters or criminals.

Tiao-Chin's interest in tattoos started early in life and soon developed into a passion. In elementary school, he loved looking at the tattoos on people on the streets, and "really wanted to know how they colored their skin". Even though he knew that a tattooing is an easily misunderstood profession, he still wanted to try. When we ask Tiao-chin if he remembers his first client, he replies with a laugh, "I think it was me."

As a child he brimmed with curiosity about tattoo artistry, but there was no one to consult, so little Tiao-Chin's instinct was to experiment on himself. He dipped the tip of a box cutter into pen ink and pushed the pointed end into his skin, again and again. Needless to say, it was a complete disaster. Worse, his choice to conduct the experiment on his hand left nowhere to hide his botched attempt. His angry father soon discovered what he'd done and threatened to skin him alive. "I was scared to death," said Tiao-Chin.

Although his first tattooing attempt ended with a beating from his dad, he wasn't deterred. He started researching famous artists and apprenticing at different tattoo shops. But it was only in his twenties that he met his first mentor – Master Tiao-An – who made a significant impact on his life. Master Tiao-An's work was unlikely anything he had seen; the exceptionally clean and fine lines dispelled all Tiao-Chin's misconceptions about tattoos. Thus, Master Tiao-An became the first artist to paint on Tiao-Chin's canvas, and was also the one to bring Tiao-Chin into the professional world of tattooing.

Master Tiao-An didn't just teach Tiao-Chin tattooing techniques; he also taught communication skills. He frequently reminded Tiao-Chin not to get into heated arguments with clients. But most have a fairly quick temper in our younger days, and Tiao-Chin was no different. Some clients walked out in a huff at times when he couldn't rein in his temper or explain patiently. Only as he matured did he realize that such behavior not only made it more difficult to create work that satisfied both parties, but also tarnished the reputation of tattoo artists. Eventually he learned to take a softer approach.

Tattooing is a different ball game from drawing and painting. Unlike paint on paper, tattoo ink spreads on the human canvas; moreover, the perfect design on a smooth flat surface may not look good on the skin. When drafting the design, Tiao-Chin takes special care to work with the client's unique musculature to ensure that the lines he draws flow with the curves. He'll patiently explain the draft to the client, and only when both sides are happy will he start to ink and color. It took ten years to hone his skills at inking and coloring; after that, his reputation started to grow.

These days, clients travel specially from far-flung places to get tattooed by Tiao-Chin. Some even come with photos of his previous work and request a similar design. One of his clients, Uncle Lien, is a regular guest at Tiao-Chin's workspace. Uncle Lien is seventy-four years old now, but got his first tattoo in his twenties when he saw all his friends getting inked. He was young and reckless, so he didn't think too hard before filling his back with tattoos. Back then, the tattoo needle was secured to a thin piece of bamboo and the tip was dipped into ink before inserting into the skin repeatedly. It hurt like mad but Uncle Lien, not wanting to look weak in front of his friends, clenched his teeth and endured it. Half a century later, the ink has all but faded. Because it was done on the spur of the moment, it wasn't a design Uncle Lien was happy with. Having heard about Tiao-Chin's work, he came all the way down to his studio to rework the tattoos, a little at a time. In the process, the two men formed a tight friendship. Even now, long after the modifications were completed, Uncle Lien still frequents the studio to regale people with tales of his past.

Tiao-Chin's studio attracts clients from all walks of life. Some are getting their first tattoo, and a mix of trepidation and anticipation shows clearly on their face. Others ink life milestones all over their body. To them, tattoos are trophies, each one inscribing a part of their life's journey. Tiao-Chin also counts several fierce-looking gangsters as his clients. In their younger days, when they wished to flaunt their affiliation, they had covered their bodies with the traditional gang motifs of dragons, cars, and deities. Now retired, they flock to Tiao-Chin's studio after hearing

about his prodigious skills at transforming and covering up old tattoos. Mellowed with age, their self-deprecation brings much laughter to the studio.

We ask Tiao-Chin about clients who left a strong impression. He tells of a particularly long-winded and picky middle-aged lady who just happened to pass by the studio. Walking in, she insisted that Tiao-chin design a tattoo for her on the spot, but when he gave her a quote, she complained about that it was too expensive, and she didn't have the money. Before Tiao-Chin could react, she stood up and left the studio. Tiao-Chin thought he'd just wasted time on a design, and it would be the last he would see of her. Then, one day, she came back. He stood up to send her away politely, but this time she was prepared. It turned out that she'd gotten a part-time job just to earn enough money for the tattoo. She changed how Tiao-Chin views clients. Getting a tattoo is a big decision, and a permanent one. Tiao-Chin believes that he should step into his clients' shoes and think from their perspective. Now, he frequently advises clients not to compromise on a simplified design just because of a lack of funds. Instead, he suggests that they take time to save up and get a section done each time, slowly completing their ideal tattoo.

Unlike others in his profession, Tiao-Chin doesn't stay cooped up in the studio working on tattoos. He places importance on developing creativity. Even though the studio keeps him busy, he still carves out time to participate in overseas tattoo conventions. Those experiences help him get a better sense of his own shortcomings while absorbing the know-how of artists from around the world and learning about tattoo styles and cultures from their countries.

The character 彫 "Tiao" in his name means *vulture* in Chinese and *tattoo* in Japanese. Only those with widely acknowledged skills can use it in their artist name and it also embodies the hope that he has for himself to soar to greater heights. Stereotypes about tattooists and their craft have caused Tiao-Chin to be misunderstood at times, and even his family members were not spared. Now, as an established tattoo artist, Tiao-Chin hopes to spread the culture of tattooing and change the public's perception of the art.

The Taoist Priest

"We worship deities not because they are almighty." —The translator between the worlds of humans, deities, and spirits.

The silvery moon casts an eerie glow on the dense fog. Out of nowhere, a fluttering of paper talismans and a silhouette appear from behind a yellow. Slowly, a headdress and red- and-black Taoist robes come into focus as the silhouette's features sharpens. One of his hands hold a spiritual instrument, while the fingers on the other hand form a Taoist hand sign. As he steps into the seven-star formation, he murmurs an incantation in a low voice, crossing the realm....

You're probably thinking: *It's a Taoist priest!*

The Taoist priest is a character shrouded in mystery. He seems to travel freely between the worlds of men, deities, and spirits. He chants and casts spells to subdue demons, exorcise evil spirits, and cleanse bad energy. To Tsai Shang-Kun, these impressions likely stem from the colorful caricatures portrayed in movies and do little justice to what his role as a Taoist priest really is: a person who serves the deities. More specifically, he sees himself as a translator between the human, spiritual, and divine realms.

Tsai's weathered face makes him look older than his forty-two years. Perhaps it's the time spent in between the three realms that gives him an air of having been through many changes. He has straddled the realms for more than thirty years, dedicating his life to serving deities and spirits. "This is my calling," Tsai tells us, and he has no regrets about it. He strongly believes that the heavens meant for him to become an envoy between the three worlds, and that's why his life was spared.

"I used to be a stubborn person who didn't believe in spirits or deities," Tsai says. He shakes his head, as if regretting his foolish past. "When I was young, I was extremely against all this supernatural stuff. But a major car accident changed my worldview, and I became a Taoist priest to serve the deities." Tsai smiles as he describes the accident which almost claimed his life. He was in critical condition, his family trying everything to save him. Only when they sought help from the Taoist temple of the King of Wu did Tsai find his way back from the gates of hell. After the incident, he willingly dedicates his life to serve the deities.

Mention Taoist priests and the first things that comes to mind are mystic rituals and ghostly legends. Tsai can understand the curiosity surrounding his work, but stresses that being a Taoist priest doesn't mean that he's any different, nor does he particularly attract spiritual energy. Once he takes off his priestly robes, he's just another regular person. That said, Tsai has met his share of the strange and supernatural during the course of his work.

"That's a given," Tsai laughs. He brings up the horror movie *The Rope Curse* as an example, noting: "I conducted a similar ritual before, and something really scary happened."

A villager had hanged himself. Although everyone had wanted Tsai to conduct the send-off rites for the "dumpling" hanging on the rope, the job was given to a young *priest*. Though Tsai wasn't conducting the rites, he still went to observe. Halfway through, the old woman who lived next door to the deceased started to go crazy. Tsai immediately realized that she was possessed, but he couldn't just step in and interfere with the rites. All he could do was to tell the others to "keep an eye on the old lady." It came as a shock to learn that three days later, the old woman also hanged herself. Two consecutive hangings sent the usually peaceful village into a frenzy, and it was only after Tsai took charge of the 'meat dumpling' send-off rites that peace finally returned.

Another memorable incident happened in the Sanchong district of New Taipei City. Tsai received a call from a man who wanted him to come to Sanchong to conduct funeral rites for his wife. Tsai wondered if this might be a scam call; though he might be known locally to residents of Beigang, he definitely didn't think he was famous enough to get calls from as far as Sanchong. So he decided to ignore it, but three days later, he got another call from the same man, imploring him

to come. The man's wife had appeared in a dream and specifically asked for Tsai to conduct the funeral rites. Only then was Tsai convinced to make the northwards trip to Sanchong.

During the rites, a banner (used for calling back the dead soul) which had been hung in front of the mourning hall suddenly flew up and landed on the feet of the man's younger brother. Tsai knew that something was up: the deceased was calling out for her grievances to be addressed. He told the bereaved family to search for suspicious clues back home, and indeed, they discovered something hidden in her bedside table: a paper cut-out doll and a talisman curse. It turned out that the client had wanted his younger brother to take charge of their factory in mainland China but changed his mind after strong objections from his wife. Enraged, the younger brother decided to use a curse to take revenge against his sister-in-law.

"He must have thought he was being discrete, but Heaven is always watching," Tsai sighs. Is it the spirit world or humanity which should be feared?

Tsai isn't particularly interested in talking about supernatural encounters; it's part and parcel of his work. He has his share of such incidents, but doesn't think it warrants special emphasis, nor does he feel a need to add more mystique to the profession. "Yeah, we serve the deities, but we're more like therapists. We do rituals and exorcisms, but our primary role is bringing people peace of mind."

Tsai cares more about humanity. He believes that spirits are also human, and we shouldn't over-emphasize taboos about spirits. "I'm only a bridge between humans and the realms of deities and spirits. I help them to communicate." When he conducts exhumation and bone collection rites, he always tells the bereaved families, "This is your Grandpa. He won't harm you, there's nothing to be scared of. Come, come take a look at him." All the so-called taboos – how certain zodiac signs will attract bad energy, how the living should avoid the dead – are, in Tsai's view, unimportant compared to family bonds.

Tsai also values tradition. "These days, people are overly focused on ostentatious display in religious rites – the more extravagant, the better. But that's not true," says Tsai, worry etched on his face. He firmly believes that Taoism emphasizes kindness toward humanity and reverence to the deities, not competing displays of power or scale.

"People worship Taoist deities not because they are almighty, but because they are filial, loyal, chaste and righteous." This is the core of Taoism, according to Tsai. "Their accomplishments are worthy of the people's respect, so they're role models for us and that's how they become deities." Tsai believes that we worship a deity for their filiality toward their parents and their contributions to mankind. When Mazu was a mortal, she was a filial daughter, which is why people came to worship her as a deity. Tsai gives his utmost to serve the deities. When he's performing the consecration ceremony for deity statues, he follows each step carefully. He puts in the "five grains" and the silver dragon coin. He dots the eyes, both of the deity and their animal familiar. He skips no details when performing his role as a communicator and translator between realms.

He accords the same respect to the deceased. Although Tsai upholds tradition, he doesn't close himself off to science and technology. When dealing with "damp bodies", he doesn't jump to the conclusion that their condition is caused by spiritual interference. Instead, he analyzes the situation carefully, considering the terrain and burial method which could affect the decomposition process.

Because of his pragmatic and humble approach, many older folks insist to their children and grandchildren: "When I pass away, I want Kun to take charge of my funeral rites." They believe that with Tsai around, they can rest in peace.

While the elderly can entrust their funeral to Tsai, Tsai himself worries about passing down Taoist teachings.

When asked about it, Tsai appears to be at a loss. "When I was learning, I could only rely on cassette tapes or observe experienced priests. I looked at what my teacher did and asked him any questions I had." But youngsters these days no longer have that mindset. "Their focus is on making the ceremonies lively and loud. It's about looking good. The respect for the heavens and earth is slowly disappearing."

These days, as Tsai points out, people only ever link Taoist priests with ostentatious ceremonies. Many young people don't even care about what it means to be a priest, and only try to imitate what they see on YouTube videos. Tsai worries that the increased focus on ostentatious ceremony is at odds with the essence of Taoism, and in time to come, religion in Taiwan will be a shadow of itself as it veers further away from tradition.

Tsai quietly turns to the statues of the deities sitting on the altar, as if seeking an answer.