



Sign of the Times

by Andrew Choi Tsz-hong

Flower plaques, known as *Fa Pai* in Cantonese, are the forerunners of today's neon billboards and advertising light boxes. Standing as high as a three-storey building, these traditional billboards are supported by a bamboo frame and decorated with colourful papercrafts. They announce the opening of a new business, or are used to convey

auspicious messages during traditional Chinese festivals and celebrations.

But this traditional and iconic craft is in danger of disappearing in a city where space is limited, everybody is in a hurry and fashions are fleeting. One master of the craft, however, is giving *Fa Pai* a new lease of life – by shrinking them down to size, palm size to be more precise. Under the tutelage of Wong Lai-chung, a 51-year-old *Fa Pai* master and the in-school craft artist of the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity, a group of Form Five students made a series of original mini plaques last year.

For example, one student made a *Fa Pai* bearing the wish “eat candies every day without getting fat”. In keeping with the theme, the plaque was covered in different kinds of candy wrappers. Chocolate and biscuit bars were used as the frame for the structure.

Another student wrote the characters for “stop hunting seals immediately” on his *Fa Pai*. He included the name of a local animal protection group and pictures of animals.

In fact, the students conveyed a whole range of non-traditional messages in

their mini *Fa Pai*, such as those related to current affairs, political issues and environmental protection.

Traditional *Fa Pai* use red, gold and green as their main colours. Paper craft of dragons and phoenixes, auspicious creatures in Chinese folklore, are placed on the plaques, while artificial flowers and features found in Chinese architecture are used as decoration. In order to express to their messages, students tried materials that are not traditionally used in *Fa Pai*, such as cloth and candy wrappers. .

Wong believes in bringing in new ideas to his age-old craft but he also insists on respecting the essential elements of *Fa Pai*. “The basic requirements about constructing a *Fa Pai* should be followed, and the soul of the plaque has to be brought out,” he says.

The basic requirements are that the plaque has to be regular in shape, symmetrical as a whole, and supported by a bamboo frame. The soul of a *Fa Pai* is the message it conveys, which must be presented in an eye-catching and clear way. It can take anything from two days to two weeks to finish a standard *Fa Pai*, depending on its size.

In shrinking the *Fa Pai* to a size that could be handled in an art lesson,



Wong Lai-chung was painting a plaque for the exhibition at the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity.

Wong was amazed by the students' creativity in bringing out the “souls” of their *Fa Pai*, while still keeping their traditional features.

“To keep the craft alive, we need to first understand the essence of the tradition, and enrich it with new ideas,” he says.

Wong learned his craft from his father. He started helping out in his father's shop the late 1970s. He started his own business about 10 years later in 1987. Having worked in the industry for over 20 years, he has witnessed not just its glory days, but also its decline.

Back in the 1960s and through the 1980s, when the



Mini *Fa Pai* were created by the Form Five students of the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity.

industry was at its peak, Fa Pai shops lined the main streets and even spilled into small lanes. “Fa Pai were just a must to the opening of every new shop,” Wong says.

He explains that people in the past generally expected their businesses to last. To bring in more customers, they placed Fa Pai outside their shops when they opened to attract as much attention from the locals as possible. When most of the buildings were only four to five storeys tall, installing a huge and colourful Fa Pai on the outside of the building could be very catchy and any passerby could easily tell which shop it belonged to.

Starting a business nowadays, however, involves more uncertainties and risks than in the past. Lease contracts are shorter, without any guarantee of how much the rent may increase by in the future. Fa Pai, which cost a minimum of more than a thousand dollars each, may be seen as an unnecessary expense. Apart from cost, there are other factors that have led to the demise of Fa Pai. With the

advent of modern skyscrapers and shopping malls built with glass walls in recent decades, Fa Pai can no longer be installed on the exterior of buildings.

Then, there is the growing competition from a large variety of advertising tools, such as banners, television and internet advertisements. The market for Fa Pai has narrowed to such an extent that Wong estimates there are fewer than 10 shops in the whole of Hong Kong still making them.

In addition, the huge Fa Pai need a lot of space to produce and store; it is hard to sustain the business when rents are so high.

In 2009, Wong was forced to close down his shop in Sham Shui Po under the redevelopment scheme of the district. He became the in-school artist of HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity between September and December last year. The school also lent him space for temporary storage of the Fa Pai from his old shop.

Apart from teaching the Form Five students to make mini Fa Pai, Wong also instructed a group of 17 Form Six students, who took Environment and Spatial Studies at HKICC Lee Shau

Kee School of Creativity, to complete their art project by building a standard Fa Pai.

“Other advertising tools such as banners can hardly compare with Fa Pai,” says Chan Hiu-tung, one of the students who took part in the project. “Making a Fa Pai is a grand event. The completion of a Fa Pai is the collective effort of many people.”

Students chopped bamboo sticks themselves and tied them into a scaffold, accidentally cutting their hands every so often. They redid the fastenings of the bamboo sticks numerous times, as it was hard to make the structure stable.

Chan says the students strived to perfect every detail, because even a tiny defect could spoil the aesthetics of the entire Fa Pai, and any misstep would have a knock-on effect. The group detailed every step of the process in their art report, in the hope that readers would be able to make their own Fa Pai by following their illustrations. Their Fa Pai was shown to the public in an exhibition at the school.

“We want to introduce the art of Fa Pai to more people,” says Lai Ka-hang, another student in the art project.

Though Fa Pai are not as popular as they used to be for shop openings, they are still important in other occasions, including temple fairs, festivities, and in rites or celebrations in rural villages in the New Territories.

“Fa Pai will exist, just in another form,” Wong says.

Wong still holds workshops in schools and neighbourhoods to promote the craft. Last December, he held one for the Conservancy Association, a local environmental and heritage conservation group. At the workshop, Wong taught Sheung Wan residents to make mini Fa Pai.

“The residents found the craft to be very interesting. Many people know what Fa Pai are, but have never tried making one themselves.”

It dawned on Wong that “minimising” Fa Pai could broaden the space for the craft to continue. “People would find the tiny Fa Pai cute,” he says. Wong has come up with some suggestions to promote the tradition, such as Fa Pai model sets and miniatures for tourists.

“The way to keep the craft alive is to generate something new out of it,” Wong says. “It’s only by turning Fa Pai into miniatures that they can really become a part of daily life.”

STEPS OF MAKING A WORD PLAQUE

1. Measure and mark the bamboo.
2. Chop the bamboo.
3. Sharpen the bamboo.
4. Fasten the bamboo to make a structure for the plaque.
5. Make round-shaped bamboo structures to put Chinese characters on.
6. Make flower decorations that are placed around the plaque.
7. The plaque is complete.



COURTESY OF HKICC LEE SHAU KEE SCHOOL OF CREATIVITY



Two of the students helped make Fa Pai for the exhibition at HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity.