

Hotel quilt origami a dying art

艋舺「棉被花」幾近失傳

In the olden days in the red-light zone of Taipei City's Wanhua District, a special art form evolved. Instead of spreading **quilts** on hotel beds, housekeepers would fold them into different shapes, as waiters do with napkins. 64-year-old Ho Hsin-i, known to her friends as Ho Hsien-ku after the Taoist deity, is perhaps the only remaining person who has fully mastered the art of quilt folding. Ho has invented 42 different ways of folding quilts, including morning glory flowers, pretty girl's legs and swans, which she can make in 20 seconds or less. These are known as the "42 techniques of Wanhua."

Ho, who has been working in hotel service for more than 30 years, once worked as a bus conductress. She also applied to a record company to be singer. At the audition, she did better than Chen Fen-lan, who went on to be a star. She once took part in a quilt-folding contest laid on by a big hotel, winning the title of champion quilt folder by setting a record with her 42 different folding styles.

Today's new-style hotels usually have their bedspreads neatly laid out flat on the bed, which looks tidy but lacks variety. Ho says that in the old days hotel owners required housekeepers to know how to fold quilts. "You didn't just have to be quick and clean, you had to make them look pretty, too," she says.

Ho says the first hotel she worked in had three floors with a dozen or more rooms on each floor. As she remembers, there was an elderly cleaning lady who taught her one way of folding the bedcovers, but she thought that it would be a bit **monotonous** if the quilts in every room were all folded in the same way. So, by gradual **trial and error**, she developed more and more bedspread techniques.

Ho says that there is no fixed quilt style for each room. "It all depends on how I feel," she says. Some quilts come out looking like sushi rice balls, some like bamboo shoots and some like flowers. Different people prefer different styles. One of the designs is round and contains the shape of a pretty girl's nice legs. It also looks a bit like a woman's private parts. Apparently this used to be the favorite style for guests who were looking for a bit of pleasure. Laying their heads in the folded quilt, they could let their dreams run wild.

Ho says thick quilts are better because then the folded shapes will stand up firm and pretty. Some guests think it would be a pity to unfold their quilts, so they go to sleep hugging them instead, she says.

For anyone who wants to learn the full set of folding styles, there is no secret book to refer to, because all the steps are stored in Ho's own mind. She admits that, now she's getting older, she is beginning to forget quite a lot of the styles.

Over the years, fewer and fewer people have kept up this unusual skill. Ho is **loath** to see it disappear entirely. The owner of the Gushanyuan Hotel, where she works,



A quilt folded to look like a triangular rice snack, left, and a quilt folded to look like a crane, right, are pictured in rooms at the Gu-shanyuan Hotel in Taipei City's Wanhua District on Jan. 1.

元月一日攝於台北市萬華區「古山園旅社」的這些照片中，分別是像御飯糰（左圖）和鶴（右圖）的棉被花樣。



PHOTOS: CHIU SHAO-WEN, LIBERTY TIMES

照片：自由時報記者邱紹雯攝

has it in mind to find an illustrator to make step-by-step drawings of all her moves and publish it as a "Quilt Folder's Guidebook" with CD included. In future the plan is to offer lessons and invite bed-and-breakfast owners to learn the techniques, so that this gem of plebeian culture can be preserved.

(LIBERTY TIMES, TRANSLATED BY JULIAN CLEGG)

早年台北市萬華花街內流傳著一種特殊技藝，旅社服務生不鋪棉被，而是把棉被像餐巾一樣摺出花樣。六十四歲的何欣怡，外號「何仙姑」，是僅存精通「棉被花」的人，自創四十二種棉被摺法，從喇叭花、美人腿到天鵝，二十秒內可以變出花樣，也被稱為「艋舺四十二招」。

擁有三十多年旅館服務資歷的何欣怡早年當過車掌小姐，也應徵過唱片公司歌星，徵選試唱時打敗過老牌歌星陳芬蘭；她還參加過某場大飯店舉辦的摺棉被大賽，擁有摺棉被冠軍的頭銜，當時的得獎紀錄便是摺出四十二種不同造型的棉被花樣。

現在新型旅館內的床鋪被單大多拉齊鋪平，整齊之餘卻也欠缺變化。何欣怡說，早年旅館老闆要求服務生一定要會摺棉被，

「不僅動作要快，要乾淨，也要漂亮」。

她說，最早服務的旅社有三層樓，每層樓有十幾個房間，印象中曾有位打掃阿婆教過她一種摺法，但她覺得如果每間房都是相同的棉被樣式未免太單調，慢慢摸索，在床上也越變越多花樣。

她說，每個房間的棉被樣式沒有固定，「一切看心情」。從飯糰、竹筍到花朵，各有所好，其中圓形的美人腿，又像是女性的生殖器，據說是早年尋歡客最愛的樣式，將頭埋入棉被中，令人想入非非。

何欣怡說，棉被要厚的摺起來比較挺，才會漂亮，還曾有客人因為捨不得攤開睡，整晚都抱著它入眠。

要學會整套棉被摺法沒有「武功秘笈」，因為所有的步驟都在仙姑的腦袋裡，她也坦承，隨著年紀越來越大，很多樣式已經慢慢遺忘了。

面對幾近失傳的技藝，何欣怡也覺得不捨，她工作的「古山園旅社」，老闆計畫找插畫家將每個分解動作畫下來，搭配光碟，製作成「棉被花魁花寶典」，未來也將開班授課，邀請民宿業者學習，讓這項庶民文化得以繼續保存。

(自由時報記者邱紹雯)

TODAY'S WORDS

今日單字

1. **quilt** /kwilt/ n.
被褥 (bei4 ru4)

例: Martha still has an old patchwork quilt her grandmother made for her.
(瑪莎還留著她祖母做給她的老舊手工拼布被。)

2. **monotonous** /məˈnɒtənəs/ adj.
單調乏味的 (dan1 diao4 fa2 wei4 de5)

例: Working in the call center was monotonous, soul-destroying work.
(在客服中心上班單調乏味又枯燥。)

3. **loath** /loθ/ adj.
不情願的 (bu4 qing2 yuan4 de5)

例: I was loath to give Dan a key to the storeroom, but he insisted on it.
(我不願把倉庫的鑰匙給丹，但他很堅持。)

LANGUAGE POINT

重要片語

trial and error
反覆嘗試、不斷摸索

Trial and error is a method of solving a problem by experimenting with different approaches until you find the solution that works.

Example: "Many students use **trial and error** to figure out the answers to their algebra homework."

「trial and error」指的是不斷嘗試各種方式，直到找到可以解決問題的方法。

例如：「許多學生都靠不斷演算解出代數作業的答案」。