

# MINI 'PEPPER' ROBOTS START NEW JOBS IN TAIWAN

**TAIPEI:** A shiny new cohort joined the workforce in Taiwan yesterday—a troop of mini robots all going by the name “Pepper”, enlisted to entertain customers and give them the hard sell. Chinese-speaking Pepper was introduced into two banks and an insurance company in the capital Taipei, dancing to music, playing with children in lobbies and leading staff aerobics sessions. The pint-size white automatons are designed to flatter queuing customers, declaring: “It’s my honor to serve you”.

Skilled in public relations, they guess clients’ ages at far lower than reality. Then they move in for the kill, providing information on financial products and encouraging customers to go to company websites and sales staff for information. Cathay Life Insurance, Taiwan’s biggest insurer, introduced its first Pepper into its Taipei branch yesterday. The firm plans to have 10 robots island-wide, but stressed that Pepper is meant to supplement its human colleagues, not sideline them. “Pepper’s job is to greet customers and introduce products to make the wait for services less boring,” said Rachel Wang, the insurer’s executive vice president.

“We hope it can do more in the future, but it definitely won’t replace our staff,” she said. Standing 120-centimetres tall, the robot was first unveiled by Japanese mobile carrier SoftBank in 2014, whose French arm Aldebaran developed the technology. Pepper has a wide-eyed face perched on top of a white plastic body, with rollers and what looks like a tablet computer on its chest showing its name. The robots have already been introduced into other workplaces around the world, including in Japan and France.—AFP



**JAKARTA:** Vendors serve customers at a market in Jakarta yesterday. —AFP

## TRUMP’S FACTORY JOBS SENT TO CHINA MAY NEVER COME BACK

**DONGGUAN:** US presidential candidate Donald Trump has pledged to bring long lost American manufacturing jobs back from China. But he may be too late—even for products that bear his family name. A Chinese company that makes shoes for his daughter’s fashion line is moving production to Africa, where labor is much cheaper. The billionaire tycoon has frequently accused China of stealing US jobs through unfair trade practices and currency manipulation, while simultaneously relying on the country to make Trump-branded goods.

But the kind of work that goes into making such products may never return to America, the president of major footwear producer Huajian Group said.

“Some manufacturers can’t even survive in China anymore,” Zhang Huarong said, speaking in his office in the southern factory hub of Dongguan. His company has made about 100,000 pairs of Ivanka Trump-branded shoes over the years, according to spokesman Liu Shiyuan. In August it filled an order for 20,000 — just weeks after Trump accepted the Republican nomination, with a speech vowing to bring jobs back to the US.

It is a goal Trump plans to accomplish by imposing a 45 percent tariff on Chinese-made goods, but his focus could be misplaced: Zhang has become one of a growing number of Chinese manufacturers expanding to Africa and Southeast Asia in search of lower production costs. In 2012, Zhang opened his first factory in Ethiopia. Four years later, he is building a billion-dollar facility there. Its production lines are already humming. “My goal is to create 30,000 jobs in Ethiopia by 2020, with exports reaching \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion,” he said. Low-wage, low-skilled manufacturing jobs like those Zhang is sending to Africa are “being priced out of the Chinese market, which still pays wages far beneath even minimum wage jobs in the United States,” said Christopher Balding, professor of economics at Peking University HSBC Business School. The Trump campaign did not respond to questions from AFP, while Ivanka Trump’s company “declined” to comment.

Huajian’s shoes are a fraction of the more than 1,200 shipments of Trump-branded products that have flowed into the US from China and Hong Kong over the last decade, according to an examination of US import data by anti-Trump political action committee Our Principles PAC.

Trump has defended his family’s decision to license its name to companies that make the goods—from shoes to ties to dress shirts—in China as smart business, while slamming other US firms such as Ford and Nabisco for offshoring.—AFP

# US FARMERS MAKING FORAY INTO QUINOA

## DEMAND FOR GRAIN GROWS

**SEQUIM:** To the south of Nash Huber’s farm fields are the Olympic Mountains, peaking at nearly 8,000 feet. Due north is the end of a channel of Pacific Ocean waters that separate the United States from Canada. Yet in this corner of the country is where the 75-year-old Huber hopes the South American grain quinoa takes root. Last month, Huber harvested quinoa commercially for the first time on about 30 acres, making him the latest addition to a small number of US farmers trying to capitalize on American eaters’ growing demand for the Andean grain.

“It’s a beautiful crop,” Huber said as he surveyed his combine grinding the plants and spitting out the seeds. He chose a variety called Redhead, which turned his field lipstick red for a couple of weeks before harvest. “We’re still learning. I kind of stepped off the end of the dock here with a bit of a bite this year.” Americans consume more than half the global production of quinoa, which totaled 37,000 tons in 2012. Twenty years earlier, production was merely 600 tons, according to the United Nation’s Food and Agricultural Organization.

Yet quinoa fields are so rare in American farming that the total acreage doesn’t show on an agricultural census, said Julianne Kellogg, a Washington State University graduate student monitoring quinoa test plots around the Olympic Mountains, including one next to Huber’s field. A rough estimate puts the country’s quinoa fields at 3,000 to 5,000 acres. Quinoa’s nutritional punch

has pushed the grain beyond health food stores and into general consumption, propped up by celebrities like Oprah Winfrey. It has all the amino acids humans need, making it a complete protein, Kellogg said. That’s hard to find in grain crops, she said. It’s also gluten-free.

The grain’s future is marked with possibilities, including milk, beer, cereals, hair products, snacks — products well beyond the salad bar. “I think we’re witnessing the start of a staple,” said Sergio Nuñez de Arco, a Bolivia native whose company, Andean Naturals, has been instrumental in bringing quinoa north, distributing to Costco, Trader Joe’s and others. The spike in demand from the US and Europe led big farm operations in Peru to enter quinoa farming a few years ago. That resulted in an oversupply, and prices have been falling.

According to a July report from the US Department of Agriculture’s Foreign Agricultural Service, quinoa prices plummeted about 40 percent between September 2014 and August 2015. “Farmers are rotating out of quinoa,” Nuñez de Arco said. “They went back to the city to look for work. It was good while it lasted, so it’s back to rural migration.” Nuñez de Arco has opened a California processing plant for the bitter coating that covers the quinoa grains. It wasn’t welcome news for his Bolivian farmers.

“There needs to be some improvement to practices and they’re gonna get that through some healthy competi-

tion,” said Nuñez de Arco, now based in San Francisco. “My push has been to protect the smaller farmer in a top-shelf niche, where they will have the demand.” In Washington state, Huber’s quinoa will head to Lundberg Family Farms, a California-based company that has been a leader in domestic quinoa production. This year, Lundberg and its network of contracted farmers along the West Coast hope to harvest 2 million pounds of quinoa.

“It’s great to have product available where folks are consuming it,” said Tim Schultz, vice president of research and development at Lundberg. “You have less food miles on it.” For more quinoa to grow in the United States, farmers and researchers must find the right mix of varieties and environments. The Washington State University plots are testing varieties for heat resistance and late-summer sprouting, among other benchmarks.

Next year, they’ll test plots in Maryland and Minnesota. “From a farmer’s perspective, it’s more options for rotations,” said Kevin Murphy, an assistant professor at the university. That’s an option that attracted Huber. Quinoa represents his first commodity crop. On a harvest day, he eyeballed a lower yield than he wanted, in part because the elk that roam the nearby woods frolicked in the quinoa fields. “I hope I break even,” he said with a laugh. “If we break even or make a little bit of money, that’ll be good because I learned quite a few things here.”—AP