

## Lifestyle | Features



This photo shows Lee Ching-chang (left) with his wife Huang Pi-huang working at their Chinese herbal medicine shop in New Taipei City. — AFP photos



Traditional Chinese herbal medicine at a shop in New Taipei City.



Lee Ching-chang (left) and his daughter Lee Chia-ling (right) working at their Chinese herbal medicine shop in New Taipei City.

# TAIWAN'S TRADITIONAL MEDICINE STORES STRUGGLE ON LIFE SUPPORT

Traditional medicine store owner Gu Cheng-pu knows her dispensary can only stay open as long as her ailing father-in-law lives, their careers hostage to a quirk in Taiwanese law that is killing off the industry. At the back of her shop in New Taipei City, Gu tips a plate of freshly cut Chinese liquorice roots into a wok of boiling honey, the first step in preparing one of her many traditional remedies. "Chinese herbal medicine stores are a unique cultural icon," the 36-year-old explains. "They are not just a place where you come when you are sick to pick up medicine."

But shops like hers are dying out—with some 200 closing their doors every year—even though traditional medicine remains wildly popular in Taiwan. Authorities have not issued any new licenses since 1998 and those that exist cannot be passed down to younger generations. Gu's father-in-law is the license owner but he recently suffered a stroke and she now fears the worst. "If I am forced to close shop, the biggest regret for me other than losing our livelihood, is losing our tradition," she laments.

## Red tape

The license shortage stems from an attempt by authorities in the 1990s to better regulate the largely artisanal industry and bring traditional remedies into the purview of the professional medical community. By refusing to issue new licenses, authorities hoped professional doctors would offer traditional medicine options in a more regulated and scientific capacity. "In Taiwan the simultaneous use of Western and Chinese medicine among the public is very prevalent and we need trained medical personnel to make sure they don't interact with harmful consequences," Chen Pin-chi, division chief of Chinese Medicine and Pharmacy at the Health and Welfare Ministry, told AFP. "We initially hoped that professionally trained Chinese medicine doctors or pharmacists might slowly take over the running of Chinese herbal stores," she added.

But things did not turn out as planned. The lower pay and profits struggled to attract young doctors and pharmacists while patients kept going to the mom-and-pop dispensaries they trusted. The average age of a traditional



Bottled ginseng and herbs at a traditional Chinese herbal medicine shop in New Taipei City.

medicine store license holder is now 61 while the number of remaining stores has halved in the last 20 years to just 7,900. Taiwan's approach contrasts with that of the China and Hong Kong where authorities have pushed policies to boost and export traditional medicine.

## 'Experience counts'

According to the Compendium of Materia Medica, the sixteenth-century text that is the lodestar for traditional practitioners, there are more than 1,500 different kinds of herbs used in Chinese medicine. The average store might stock between 200 and 500 herbs, roots, animal parts and minerals — 355 of which are classified as medicine in Taiwan. Traditional medicine also permeates Taiwan's cooking—the island's signature beef noodle soup dish usually contains at least eight herbal ingredients—meaning ingredients are just as likely to go in the cooking pot as they are a tincture.

Lee Chia-ling, 42, has worked alongside her father in their family shop for more than 10 years, learning remedies from him. "It was very hard work in the beginning," she said. "You need to get your hands dirty. Sorting, washing, chopping and slicing, lots of work goes into processing raw herbs and roots ready for use," she said. "And even



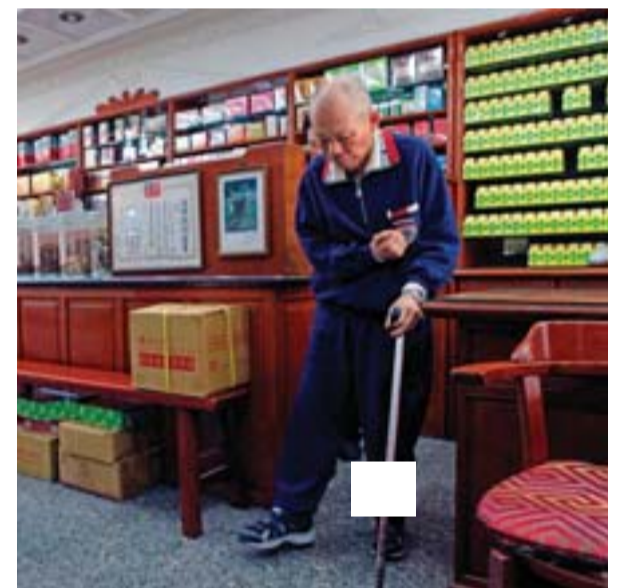
Various ingredients on offer at a traditional Chinese herbal medicine shop in New Taipei City.

now, I am still learning new things from my father," she added. Her father Lee Ching-chang, 69, said it takes three to five years to learn to distinguish the basic ingredients and how they react with each other.

"This is very much a profession where experience counts," said the older Lee, who entered the trade when he was 15 years old. "If the government will not issue any new licenses then the second generation cannot carry on with the shop," he lamented. The license shortage has prompted protests on the streets of Taipei and the government is in talks with industry leaders to try to find a way forward. "The Health and Welfare Ministry is well aware of the urgency of the matter and is actively trying to seek a solution," Chen Ping-chi said. "Hopefully we can come up with something soon that would allow Chinese herbal medicine shops to continue to be operated by the younger generation," she added. Gu is painfully aware the last 20 years have produced no solution and fears a change to the law may come too late for her family. "If this situation continues," she warned, "there won't be any Chinese herbal stores left in Taiwan." — AFP



A traditional Chinese herbal medicine store in New Taipei City.



Hsu Ping-jen, the licensed owner of a traditional medicine store, in his shop his children now manage in New Taipei City.



This handout photo shows Thai-born director Tom Waller (right) on location during the filming of 'The Cave' in central Thailand.



US actor Bobby Gerrits playing the role of a US Army rescuer on location during the filming of 'The Cave' in central Thailand.



Canadian cave rescue diver Erik Brown on location as an actor during the filming of 'The Cave' in central Thailand. — AFP photos

## First Thai cave rescue film due out on mission anniversary

Thai-born director who took just weeks to shoot the first film about the dramatic cave rescue of the "Wild Boars" football team says his focus is on authenticity and the mission's "unsung" heroes, with book publishers and Hollywood studios jostling to make their versions of the saga. Tom Waller says "The Cave", which is aiming for Thai release for the July anniversary of the operation, will be a "genuine" retelling of the gripping mission to extract the 12 boys and their coach from the waterlogged Tham Luang cave.

Its cast features more than a dozen of the real-life rescue heroes as well as extras such as the cooks who provided food round-the-clock for officials and the world's media massed at the cave entrance. The "Wild Boars" spent more than a fortnight trapped in the dark before divers rescued them in an mission of unprecedented complexity—diving the boys out through twisting passageways while they were heavily sedated. Waller, a Thai citizen with an Irish father and whose work includes "The Last Executioner", said he did not immediately think he would take on the project despite its real-life dramatic arc. "I thought it was going to be just a magnet for vultures who wanted to cash-in," he told AFP at the office for De Warrenne Pictures in Bangkok.

But then he started dwelling on all the people involved in the extraction, the volunteer spirit of the rescue, and the "unsung" heroes that weren't in the newspapers. "So for me it was almost a question of either make the film now or shut up and wait until Hollywood's made the film and enjoy it like everyone else," Waller hopes his Thai background may also give him an edge over bigger name foreign directors, while the swift turnaround meant memories are still fresh in the minds of those who took

part in both the rescue and the movie.

But challenges remained during the shoot. The real Tham Luang cave, in northern Chiang Rai province, is off limits so locations recreating the waterlogged, claustrophobic conditions had to be scouted across the country. "The Cave" also broad-brushes over some of the scandalous strands of the drama, which have led to law suits and angry social media squabbles. "People keep asking, who is playing Elon Musk?" Waller said, referring to the Tesla CEO's attempt to provide a submarine and his legal battles with a rescuer whom he insulted on Twitter.

## '100 percent true'

The trailer will be launched at the Berlin Film Festival next month, getting out ahead of bigger, better-funded projects believed to be in the works that may have a wider reach outside of Thailand. The cave saga has been hungrily-eyed as a money-spinner, with foreign-scripted books and films lining up to gain official approval from the ministry of culture to shoot or interview the boys at the heart of the drama. Seven months since the rescue at least six books about the rescue are listed on Amazon while speculation is rife that "Crazy Rich Asians" director Jon M. Chu may enter the fray.

But while large Hollywood studios may stack the cast with A-listers and tinker with the plot for dramatic purposes, Waller's film prides itself on its tethering to reality. "Everything in the movie is 100 percent true," said Jim Warny, 36, a Belgian who lives in Ireland and belongs to the niche world of cave divers who were called on to help, and who starred as himself in "The Cave". An electrician by training, Warny told AFP that the period after the rescue was intense, with rescuers inundated with offers, including a request to take reality TV presenters cave diving. Waller built a different level of trust with him and the verite vision appealed to him. "A lot of people just wanted to buy life rights or exclusivity, and waving a contract at you and not really focusing on the story before giving you a big lump of cash," said Warny. "That was something Tom didn't do." — AFP



US actor Mitch De Young playing the role of a US Army Captain rescuer on location during the filming of 'The Cave' in central Thailand.



Cave rescue divers Jim Warny (left) of Belgium and Mikko Paasi (right) of Finland involved as actors on location during the filming of 'The Cave' in central Thailand.

## 'Rambo' producer Vajna dies aged 74

Andrew G. Vajna, the Hungarian movie producer behind "Rambo", "Evita" and other international hits, died in his Budapest home on Sunday following a long illness, the Hungarian National Film Fund said. Vajna produced 59 films in all, including the 1996 Evita starring Madonna and Sylvester Stallone's first three Rambo movies. He was born in Budapest in 1944 and at the age of 12, when Hungary's 1956 revolution against Soviet rule was crushed, he fled the country and emigrated to Canada with the help of the Red Cross. He was reunited with his family in Los Angeles.

His 1997 comedy, based on a play titled Out of Order by English playwright Ray Cooney, holds the record for ticket sales among Hungarian movies produced over the past two decades. Since 2011, he had worked as a government commissioner under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, presiding over a revival of Hungarian cinema. "We are bidding farewell to the greatest Hungarian film producer. Hasta la vista, Andy! Thank You for everything, my Friend!" Orban said on his Facebook page. Movies during his term as commissioner won hundreds of international awards. They included "Son of Saul", which won an Oscar for its portrayal of life in a Nazi concentration camp. As part of Orban's efforts to expand his influence over the domestic media, Vajna also acquired one of Hungary's main commercial television channels and had stakes in the commercial radio market. — Reuters