

# Shanghai wok man: The city's dying art

*Follow the sound of metal meeting metal to the shop of Cen Rong Gen, one of Shanghai's last remaining wok makers*



By Kellie Schmitt 24 November, 2009

Baoyuan Lu is like many small streets in Zhabei District, littered with umbrella-shaded fruit stands, laundry dangling from windows and open store fronts selling knickknacks. But unlike other streets, here there is a steady hammering that gets louder and louder as you walk down the road.

It's the sound of iron being pounded into the form of a wok, and the culprit is wok man Cen Rong Gen.

## In the name of progress

Cen, 57, has been constructing woks for as long as he can remember, a craft his now deceased father took up 70 years ago in Shanghai. Now his brother, Cen Liang Gen, 49, helps out, but the trade will likely end with them.



Cen has no progeny to carry on what he says is the last wok-making of its kind in Shanghai. "Sure the machines make [woks] now, but this way is better," he says. "Pounding the iron makes it denser and the woks last a long time." Cen's son went to college, graduated with a physics degree, and now works for a big company. Now, there's no one left to teach.

*It's mid-day on a Saturday and there are woks to be made. The hammering begins, echoing down the street. Its rhythm is steady -- the consistent sound of someone who has spent his life perfecting it.*

Next year, wok man Cen Rong Gen's two-room home is slated to be torn down as part of the city's urban redevelopment incentive. A subway line already buzzes overhead, just above the small shaded courtyard where the brothers work. Cen will move into a modern apartment and leave a legacy of craftsmanship behind.

"I'm tired," Cen says, from his perch on a small stool. "The work is too hard and I'm too old."

His lower back hurts from sitting on the backless, wooden seat for seven to eight hours a day. He wears ear plugs and his hands are smudged gray from the charcoal used in the fire to heat the woks' raw metal.

## It's just a job

Cen cuts a slab of carbon-steel, a mix of iron and carbon, and places it over the open fire. After it heats, he'll hammer it into shape, creating circular indentations in the metal. Iron flecks fly off, sparking in the afternoon sunlight.

"It's not about whether I like it or not, it's what I do for a living," he says.

He can make two to three woks a day. Prices start at just under RMB 100 and go up to several hundred, depending on the size.

Even though he dismisses the art of his job (he's too practical for that), he clearly takes pride in his work

Cen goes into his one-room workshop to pull out a book, in English, featuring Chinese woks and wok-style cooking. He can't read it, but he fingers the glossy pages, turning to a photograph of his woks stacked in an iron tower.

Cen sells to mostly Chinese chefs, home cooks and foreigners curious to purchase a relic of the city's past. One of the foreigners even offered to give him free space in Pudong, but he's not interested. Retirement is calling.

So is work.

It's mid-day on a Saturday and there are woks to be made. The wok man returns to his stool and sits down. The hammering begins, echoing down the street. Its rhythm is steady -- a rhythm that has taken a lifetime to perfect.

Getting there:

**Cen Rong Gen's woks**  
**214 Baoyuan Lu, near Baotong Lu**  
**宝源路214号, 近宝通路**





Cen Rong Gen's tools of the trade - a trade which won't be around much longer.



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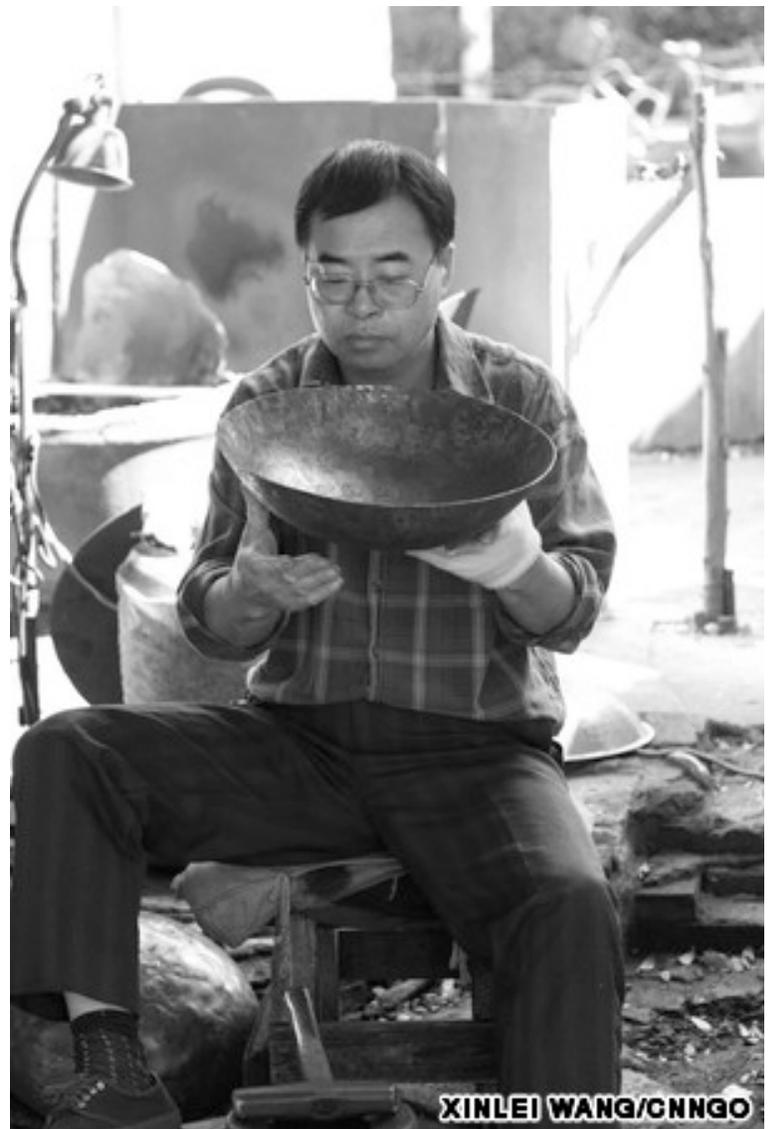
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