

# Disabled artist overcomes challenges to enjoy success with artwork

Chan Tung-miu wants to help and encourage disabled children

Artist Chan Tung-miu. Photo: Annemarie Evans

The brush is held deftly between her big toe and the next toe, as artist Chan Tung-miu dips it in water and chooses her next colour. She swings the brush across the palette, settles on the brown and then brings it back to her painting, to deftly create tree trunks and brunches. Soon green leaves are added to create foliage in the forest scene against a night sky.

Chan, 42, has held a number of exhibitions in Hong Kong working with the Hong Kong Arts with the Disabled Association (ADA) as well as an international foot and mouth artists' organisation, which creates calendars and cards from her artwork.

Born with cerebral palsy, Chan's arms move with spasms and she sits talking with her hands tucked under her legs. Her speech is also affected by her condition, but her feet have become extraordinarily agile and dexterous to compensate for her hands. She passes her business card between her toes, and since the death of her mother in 2000, which was a tumultuous event in her life, she says she irons her father's clothes – again holding the iron with her feet.

“Well, otherwise his clothes would be crumpled,” she says.



[Artist Chan Tung-miu shows how she paints using her feet. Photo: Annemarie Evans](#)

Chan's artistic influences are varied, she says she enjoys different types of artists, but when pushed, cites Van Gogh. "No one taught me art at a young age," she says, "it kind of came naturally that I leaned it myself and learned how to use my feet."

Rather than oil or acrylics, Chan likes to use water colours. "Water colours are very multifaceted," she says. "You can express it in many ways. The uniqueness of water colour is that it spreads very quickly, you can't control it as well as oil, for example. So once you make a mistake, it's very blatant. I want to challenge myself. That's why I use water colours."

Chan takes her inspirations from nature. "I'll see different kinds of imagery and scenery and remember them," she says. Butterflies appear in her work, as do feet.

Chan is a devout Catholic and regularly attends the Revival Christian Church in Kwai Fong. With another church group, the Rainbow Missions, Chan will be heading in December to Guangxi province to volunteer with some disabled children. "I have spent time in Jongshan, I was there to get treatment for my arms. I am very concerned about how a lot of disabled children are laughed at. How these kids are considered as useless. Even some of those parents don't want those kids. I've always had this dream in my mind that I can go back to encourage these children to live strong."

The year before last in Guangxi, Chan met a 15-year-old boy. "He was in better condition than me," she says, "but he was afraid of stepping out of his home. He was a clever kid but never went to school. But after encouraging him, he was about to leave the house and he now goes to school."

"It looks like I helped him but I learned a lot from this kid. Even though with their living conditions they don't have much, they are able to find happiness. There are kids that have no home and are abandoned. Or they have a room with bare walls and no bed. Some live in dormitories."

"In Hong Kong I have everything I need, there is no reason for me to be unhappy," she says.

Chan's mother had been her great support throughout her life and when she died in 2000, Chan says it was a time of depression for her. "It was a very tough time. I had to get used to not having my mum around and learning to take care of myself. After my mum died I learned how to pay all the bills and I took over some of the chores for my father, who works as a bonesetter," she says.

"But sometimes when things push you to the wall you just have to handle it and get on with it. I really counted on my siblings' support at that stage. I think it's a blessing that there are always people around to give me support."

For artists like herself, Chan wishes that the government supported them better. "Perhaps create more factory studios like at Fo Tan," she says, "and convert more warehouses into artists' studios."

"I would love to have a studio like that to have more space to do my creations," says Chan, who paints at home. "And a place to store them, so that people can come and visit and see my art."