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# 霓虹燈師傅——梁榮光

## Neon Master - Leung Wing-gwong

### 3.8



「我是一九五九年七月十一日入『大華』。」梁榮光師傅出生於澳門，中學畢業便去香港，在到港一星期後，就跟隨姐夫到當時位於灣仔謝斐道的大華霓虹光管公司學師。梁師傅記得，當年學師，每天朝九晚六，一年做足三百六十天。「當時只休五月初五、八月十五、新曆年（元旦），過年就休兩天。」

一九六〇年代，梁師傅形容是個很窮困的年代，在搭巴士一毫子一程、雲吞麵三毫子一碗的日子，學師時只有月薪港幣數十元。三年後，學滿師的梁師傅轉到瓊華霓虹光管公司工作，月薪隨即倍增至港幣一百八十元。

他形容，學師時期是艱苦的，什麼也要做，例如吹玻璃管、打鐵、安裝，這三個主要項目一定要識。吹玻璃管，即是行內說的「吹管」，拿著玻璃管，用火槍高溫燒軟，然後慢慢把它屈成一個形狀。「吹霓虹管最辛苦之處就是要站著，一天站足八個小時，不能坐，所以雙腳會很累；加上工場十分熱，只有一把風扇，吹著雙腳，上半身不能用風扇吹，因為風扇會吹動火槍的火勢。以前沒有冷氣，所以那時候沒有人願意學吹玻璃管。」

至於做鐵箱（即招牌底盤），「要將它們駁在一起，然後裁剪，剪到招牌的樣子，再把它們合成，中間放上一個八吋的電箱，然後用窩釘直接用手揀進去，連鐵框都是我做的」。梁師傅說，這樣的底盤，由兩至三個人做，製作大概需時兩至三天。

除了吹管、做底盤，還要到現場安裝。一般安裝霓虹招牌，都需先搭棚，在建築物外牆鑽洞，把一條鐵「種進去」，再以螺絲鎖實和鋪上英泥。其後，等到英泥乾透，用滑輪把招牌「扯上去」。因為這是霓虹招牌，所以還要駁電，以前都是從地舖拉線駁電到招牌。梁師傅稱，一個二十呎高、四隻大字的招牌，只需用上數隻火牛，而火牛都是本地出品的。



梁師傅提到，以往還會親手調校光管顏色。「以前的年代，光管主要是白色、綠色、藍色和大紅色；若要一些其他古靈精怪的顏色，那就需要自己調配粉末。」調校顏色不單止要以精準的比例混和不同顏色的粉末，還要考慮玻璃管本身的顏色。「粉紅色不用調配的，只要用藍色的管，再加紅色的粉，就會是粉紅色了。」

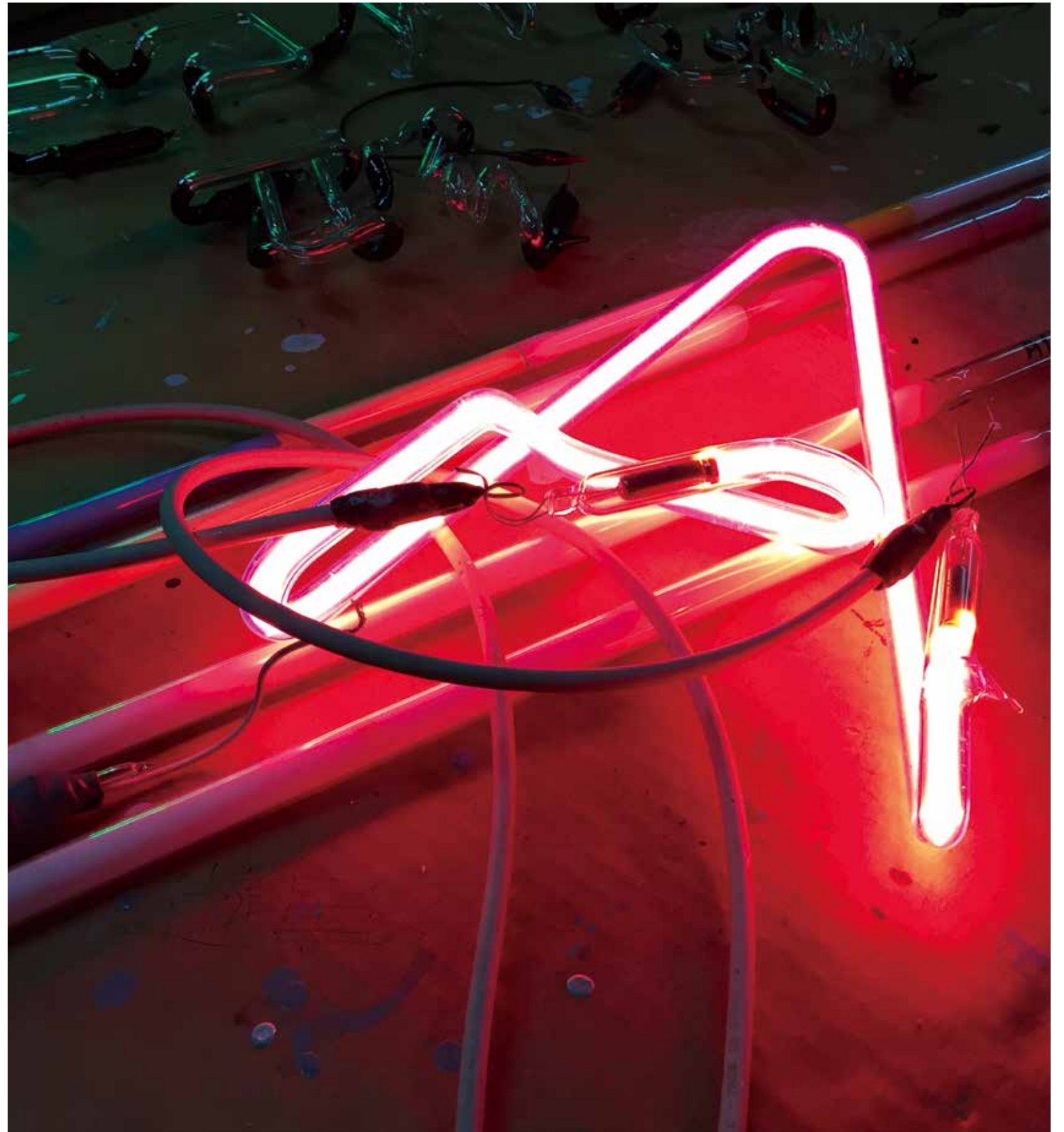
梁師傅在五十年代末入行，剛好能趕上六十年代霓虹業起飛的時期。他說，當時有很多大公司設在彌敦道，所以那裡的霓虹招牌最多；然後是灣仔駱克道。他形容彌敦道是「非常誇張，尤其是娛樂場所的霓虹招牌」。及後，香港有燈火管制，梁師傅記得當時是七十年代末，所有招牌要在晚上十一時關掉，生意頓變得慘淡，大華的老闆為維持生計，一度轉行賣凍肉。捱過了燈火管制，香港霓虹招牌在八十年代重拾光芒，八十年代末至九十年代初，香港開始出現動態的霓虹光管，招牌就有更多花樣。「早期的霓虹招牌，相對死板，放上去就算了。」而梁師傅印象較深的，是二〇〇〇年代安裝在灣仔碼頭附近的中國移動通信霓虹招牌，當時因為時間緊迫，要在一個月內做兩個鐵架，他形容招牌巨型，比四層樓還要高。

梁師傅回想自己做霓虹招牌逾半世紀，輾轉在不同的霓虹公司打工，至八十年代末、九十年代初自立門戶接工程，做過的霓虹招牌遍佈港九，至大約二〇一二年退休。

"I joined Dai Wah on 11th July 1959," said Master Leung Wing-gwong, who was born in Macau and came to Hong Kong as soon as he graduated from high school. A week later, he went along with his brother-in-law to join and work as an apprentice at Dai Wah Neon Company, which at that time was located on Jaffe Road in Wan Chai. Master Leung recalled that during his apprenticeship, he worked from nine in the morning to six in the evening every day, 360 days a year. His only holidays were 5th May and 15th August of the lunar year, New Year's Day and two days during Chinese New Year.

The 1960s, as described by Master Leung, was an era marked by poverty. At a time when the bus fare was only ten cent and a bowl of wonton noodles cost only thirty cents, the monthly salary of an apprentice was measly a few dozen dollars. After finishing his apprenticeship three years later, Master Leung switched to King Wah Neon Company, where his monthly salary surged to 180 Hong Kong dollars.

He said the apprenticeship involved a lot of hard work. "You had to do everything. Apprentices must be competent in three tasks: tube bending, forging and installation. Tube bending, also known as 'glass blowing' within the industry, means melting the glass tubes over high heat and slowly bending them into desired shapes. The hardest part of neon tube bending was that you had to stand for eight hours a day and you were not allowed to sit, so it put serious strain on the legs. The workshop was overwhelmingly hot. There



was only one fan that blew at your legs instead of at your body since the current would affect the flames. There was no air conditioning back in the day, so no one was willing to learn it."

As for the iron box (the chassis of the signboard), "you had to weld the pieces together, then cut the chassis into the shape of the signboard and assemble the text and the chassis. You then placed an 8-inch electric box in the middle and fixed it with rivets by hand. I made even the entire iron frame by hand," explained Master Leung. An average chassis would take two to three workers about two to three days to make.

After blowing glass tubes and forging, it was time for on-site installation. Typically, a scaffold would be erected outside the building and holes would be drilled on the exterior wall for the implantation of iron bars fixed with screws. After that, the holes would be filled with concrete. After the concrete became fully dried, the signboard would be lifted by a pulley. The electrical power required by the neon signboard was drawn directly from the ground-floor shop via electrical wires. According to Master Leung, a four-character signboard about 20 feet tall required only a few transformers produced locally.

Master Leung also talked about tuning the colours of the tubes by hand. "White, green, blue and bright red were the main colours used in the past. To create special colours, you had to mix the powders yourself." To tune the colours, you not only had to blend powders of different colours in precise proportions, but also take the colours of the glass tubes into consideration. "You didn't have to mix powders to get pink but simply put red powder into a blue tube."

According to our preliminary analysis of the colours on the sketches, most neon lights used dark blue backgrounds, while the texts were mostly in red. Regarding this matter, we consulted Master Leung, who stated that "in the past, the vast majority of signboards had backgrounds in dark blue, which we referred to as peacock blue within the industry. The primary purpose was for clarity, so that the texts or the information could be clearly seen. Aside from dark blue, we also used dark green, which is rarely used now. As for the choice of red for the texts, it was not always the case. For example, fluorescent purple was once popular in the late 1970s. It was very eye-catching and we referred to it as luminous purple. Alternatively, white was also commonly used for texts."

For these Nam Wah neon light signboard sketches, we tried to search for their painters from various sources, but failed until we obtained some clues from Master Leung. "There was a painter named Chan Ban, who was the same age as Tam Wah-ching. Chan Ban worked as a neon light signboard sketcher at Lee Kwok and Dai Wah neon light companies and was also one of the founders of the Neon Light Union. I have the impression that Chan Ban was a nice and knowledgeable person who had been working at Lee Wah Neon Light Company. Another painter was Cheng Ka-yee, who graduated from the

Guangzhou Arts School. There was another painter who I personally know, whose surname is Mak, so everyone called him 'Fat Mak'. He specialized in drawing neon light sketches for Nam Wah. Just tell him some ideas of the neon signboard, such as the font style and the colours, and he could turn these into a sketch. The neon light signboard sketch of Luk Yuen Tea House, for example, was painted by him." As Master Leung recalled, there were quite a few neon light sketchers, including Chan Ban, Cheng Ka-yee, Tsang Tsz-ki, Fat Mak, Leung Cheong and So Yan. However, as time goes by, he has lost contact with many of them, and some have even passed away.

Joining the industry in the late 1950s, Master Leung was just in time to ride the boom of the industry during the 1960s. He said that back in the day, neon light signboards concentrated on Nathan Road, where most major companies located, followed by Lockhart Road in Wan Chai. He described Nathan Road as "overwhelmed by the signboards, especially those of entertainment venues." Later, Hong Kong experienced a blackout period. Master Leung remembered that it was during the late 1970s when all signboards had to be switched off by 11 pm. As the neon light business plummeted, at one time Dai Wah's owner switched to sell frozen meat to earn a livelihood. Having overcome the blackout, neon signboards regained their popularity in the 1980s. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, animated signboards began to emerge in Hong Kong, allowing designs to become more playful. "Early neon signboard designs were relatively straight forward, with texts just put on the backgrounds." One of the most impressive signboard to Master Leung was that for China Mobile near Wan Chai Pier in the 2000s. Since time was tight, two iron frames had to be made within a month. He said the sign was massive, measuring more than four storeys in height.

Master Leung reminisced that after spending over half a century making neon light signboards for different companies, he started his own business to take orders in around the late 1980s and the early 1990s. He created works which could be found across Hong Kong before he retired in around 2012.