

## Money: Ma Rong In Women Of China

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'The new edition of the 100-yuan (US \$15.38) banknote, part of the fifth series of renminbi (RMB, China's currency), was issued nationwide on November 12, 2015. If you carefully examine the banknote, especially if you use a magnifying glass to look at the banknote under light, you will notice the portrait of Mao Zedong, the first chairman of the People's Republic of China, looks like a delicately made engraving. Ma Rong created that image of Mao.

Ma, a senior craftswoman who works in the design and engraving studio under the techniques department of China Banknote Printing and Minting Corporation, also engraved Mao's image for China's 50- (US \$7.69), 20- (US \$3.08), 10- (US \$1.54), 5- (77 US cents) and 1-yuan (15 US cents) banknotes, all of which formed the fifth series of RMB, which was issued by the People's Bank of China in 1999. (The People's Bank of China only issued a new version of the fifth series 100-yuan note in 2015.) Ma became the first woman to engrave the main image for China's RMB banknotes.

Ma arrives at her studio, in southwestern Beijing, at 8 a.m. almost every day. She puts on her uniform and then gets a steel plate and several knives to begin her work. The steel plate, which is as smooth as a mirror, is placed at the center of Ma's desk. She holds a magnifying glass, in her left hand, and a knife for carving. As she moves her hands, a portrait formed by delicately carved lines gradually appears on the steel plate. "When I am holding the tools, I feel that I am entering a world, in which there is nothing but dots and lines, the concave and convex," Ma says.

In 1978, Ma, then 16, began to learn how to engrave at Beijing Banknote Printing Plant (today's Beijing Banknote Printing Ltd.) She became a student of Zhao Yayun, the first female engraver in contemporary China. Ma set a goal for herself: To become an excellent engraver like her teacher, Zhao. The first lesson Ma learned was that she must not spare any effort in creating perfect works.

Engraving is an art form that involves great patience and fine techniques. People who work in the field must work very hard to produce perfect engravings. "For an engraver, a banknote represents a work of art that requires dedication and exquisite craft-making skills," says Ma.

The second lesson Ma learned was to endure great loneliness while at work. However, she was lucky that she met her lifelong companion, Kong Weiyun, who studied in the same class, at the plant. The couple fell in love. They have both worked as engravers for 35 years.

In 1997, Ma participated in a competition, and that event had a great influence on her career. Around the time of the competition, China was planning to issue the fifth series of RMB notes, and Mao's image was to be on the front side of the notes. It was the first time his image was to be on each denomination of RMB.

For more than three months, Ma worked between 13-14 hours a day. She seldom had time to take a break, even for water. Her efforts eventually paid off; she won the top prize, and her engraving was chosen to be the image of Mao on the banknotes.

It is widely recognized that it is extremely difficult to engrave by hand the images to appear on banknotes. It usually takes an engraver 10 years to master the skills needed to create such images. Ma, one of China's fourth generation of engravers in the field, is trying to find successors.

"I spend most of my time on engraving. Both the happiness and worry I have in my life are closely related to my career. I don't think all of the people can understand my dedication to my work. But I hope more people will understand the hardships we, as engravers, have to face. I also hope the younger generation will be willing to learn the techniques," Ma says.'

TITLE

Engraver Creates Portraits on Banknotes

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DESCRIPTION