

A photographer's crusade

Man captures last moments of canines before they are put down

TAOYUAN: The photographer gingerly places a small, mixed-breed puppy on a platform in his makeshift studio at an animal shelter in northern Taiwan. The dog looks about two months old, with alert, trusting eyes and a shiny black coat.

Tou Chih-kang captures expressions, personality. He creates the kind of photos that any pet owner would love to have.

This puppy has no owner and will not get one. Once its photo shoot is over, it will be taken away by vets to be put down.

Tou has been recording the last moments of canines at the Taoyuan Animal Shelter for two years. He has captured the images of some 400 dogs, most of which were pets abandoned by their owners. To him the work is distressing, but he's trying to spread a message of responsibility.

"I believe something should not be told but should be felt," says Tou, a thick-bodied 37-year-old with an air of quiet confidence. "And I hope these images will arouse the viewers to contemplate and feel for these unfortunate lives, and understand the inhumanity we the society are putting them through."

His photographs are redolent of the kind of formal portraits – of people – that were taken 100 years ago, designed to bestow dignity and prestige upon the subject. In many of the dog portraits, the animals are placed at angles that make them look almost human.

This year Taiwanese authorities will euthanise an estimated 80,000 stray dogs. Animal-welfare advocates said the relatively widespread nature of the phenomenon – Taiwan's human population is only 23 million – reflects the still immature nature of the island's dog-owning culture and the belief among some of its majority Buddhist population that dogs are reincarnated humans who behaved badly in a previous life.

It would seem, judging by the many stores in Taiwan that sell fancy dog clothes and other baubles, as if Taiwanese fawn over their animals,



Perfect angle: Tou trying to make a portrait of a puppy in the final moments of its life at a shelter in Taoyuan, northern Taiwan. — AP



Sad fate: A dog sitting in a cage behind his paperwork before being put down by lethal injection at a shelter in Taoyuan, northern Taiwan. — AP

and some do. But others abandon pets to the streets once their initial enthusiasm cools.

Activists said that some 70% of dogs in Taiwanese shelters are killed after a 12-day waiting period, despite

government efforts to find them homes. Gabriel said dogs in US shelters are less likely to be euthanised, though millions of cats continue to be put down there each year.

The dogs who wind up in Taoyuan

are picked up by roving patrols, funded by local governments, of workers equipped with large nets. The dogs come in all sizes and shapes.

After Tou photographs them, veterinary workers take them for a brief turn around a grassy courtyard before leading them into a small, clinical-looking room where they are killed by lethal injection.

Tou, who uses the professional name Tou Yun-fei, said he began his project because the Taiwanese media were not paying enough attention to the dogs' plight.

A handful of the some 40,000 dog pictures Tou has taken are due to be exhibited this August in his first full-scale show at the Fine Arts Museum in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung.

A few photos already are on display at Taoyuan city hall, part of a bid to raise citizens' awareness of the responsibilities that come with raising a pet. — AP