



Name in English: Wah Ming Chang
Name in Chinese: 郑华明 [鄭華明]
Name in Pinyin: Zhèng Huāmíng
Gender: Male
Birth Year: 1917-2003
Birth Place: Honolulu, Hawaii

Star Trek designer who created the flip-type cell phone design

Profession(s): Artist, Sculptor, Animator

Education: Peninsula School of Creative Education, Menlo Park, California; Unknown high school in Southern California, High School diploma

Awards: 1961, Academy Award for Best Special Effects “The Time Machine”, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; 1973, INE Golden Eagle Award for “Ecology - Wanted Alive,” Council on International Nontheatrical Events; 1994, George Pal Memorial Award, Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films

Contributions: Wah Ming Chang, though almost totally unknown to the public, had an immense influence on late 20th and 21st Century pop culture and technology design through his life’s work as a designer, sculptor, and artist. He is known primarily for the sculpture and props he designed for Star Trek (the original 1960s TV series) including the communicator and tricorder.

Born in Honolulu in 1917, Chang’s family moved to San Francisco in the 1920s where they ran a tea room frequented by local artists. Fai Sue Chang, his mother, was herself a talented artist and had graduated from the California School of Arts and Crafts. Chang’s art was displayed in the tea room and the child prodigy began to get attention. By the age of nine his work was already being featured in a downtown San Francisco art gallery. Chang’s mother died when he was 11 and his father moved to Europe to escape the sad memory leaving his son in the care of artist Blanding Sloan and his wife. After completing his elementary education Chang moved to Hollywood to join the Sloan’s and began creating film sets at the age of 16. At 21 he became the youngest member of the Effects and Model Department at Disney. There he created the wooden models of Pinocchio and Bambi used by Disney’s animators to study body movements before making the classic Disney films. Around 1940 he was struck down by polio and only regained the ability to walk after a year of rehabilitation. In December 1941 he was married to Glenella "Glen" Taylor but had to do it in Texas as California law at the time forbade Asians from marrying Caucasians. In 1956 he co-founded Project Unlimited Inc., a special effects company that worked on such films as the 1960 movie, “The Time Machine” and the TV series, “The Outer Limits.” “The Time Machine” won the Academy Award for Best Special Effects in 1961 but Chang’s name was inadvertently left off even though the names of his business partners, Gene Warren Sr. and Tim Barr, appear on it. This was probably due to a clerical error in the submission form.

Wah Ming Chang's involvement with Star Trek started with the very first unaired pilot episode, "The Cage," filmed in 1964, the film footage of which was later reused for the later Star Trek episode, "The Menagerie" in 1966. He designed the prosthetic headpieces used on the alien Talosians. He created memorable Star Trek props such as the Tribbles by using artificial fur stuffed with foam. He also introduced the characteristic look of the Romulan Bird of Prey as well as Romulan helmets and ears, for which design and creation he received only \$748.80. His Balok effigy—repeated after each episode as part of Star Trek's closing credits—with its small chin, almond-shaped eyes and large cranium, established the popular image of extraterrestrial life still used as a pop culture icon today. While he is often credited with having created the phaser, the laser-like hand weapon used in Star Trek, it was actually designed by the Art Director of the original series. The phasers were just repainted from their black and white color scheme to a bluish-gray and black one by Chang.

Chang's greatest influence came through two of his device designs. This included the Star Trek communicator, which has been credited as the inspiration for modern flip-type cell phones. For the flip-top communicator, Chang was paid only \$1,019.20. According to *The Times of London*, Wah Ming Chang's development, "For a generation that grew up flicking imaginary communicators and saying "Beam me up, Scotty", the now near-ubiquitous flip-top mobile phone was the answer to our prayers". Martin Cooper, considered the father of the mobile phone, revealed in 1973 that watching Captain Kirk using his communicator on the television show *Star Trek* inspired him to research the mobile phone. Chang's development of the tricorder and communicator also sparked developments in other technology. In 2005, Star Trek fan Ed Roberts, admitted that he'd been inspired to invent the first home computer in 1975, the Altair 8800, and name it after the solar system Altair (Altair 6) from the Star Trek episode "Amok Time." The Altair 8800 led to Bill Gates writing the computer programming language BASIC for the computer and forming Microsoft.

Chang's other film credits include making the spectacular headdress worn by Elizabeth Taylor in the feature film, "Cleopatra" in 1963. He also built some props for the original "Planet of the Apes" film in 1968, and the dinosaurs in the "Land of the Lost" TV series from 1974-1976. In later years he devoted much of his time and effort to making educational films about preserving the natural environment and animals. He became an active member of the Carmel Art Association in 1975 and served as a director several times. The artist owned gallery is one of the oldest and most respected in the United States.

External Links:

Published Biographies

The Life and Sculpture of Wah Ming Chang by David Barrow and Glen Chang (1989)

Wah Ming Chang: Artist and Master of Special Effects ((Multicultural Junior Biographies) by Gail Blasser Riley (1995)

<http://timesonline.typepad.com/technology/2009/04/ten-innovations-inspired-by-star-trek.html>

<http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/library/creative/bio/5699.html>

<http://www.startrek.com/startrek/view/news/article/4051.html>

<http://www.herocomm.com/BeginHere/CreatorsStory.htm>