



PHOTO FEATURE

Made in Hong Kong

Is manufacturing really dead – or are there distinct signs of life?

By Esther Chan & Zoe Lai



Outside on a street in a Tuen Mun industrial area, it is quiet. It almost looks deserted, save for a few workers removing goods from trucks parked on the street.

But inside a factory building, the stop-start hum of sewing machines can be heard inside a small unit where around 30 women sit beside each other, concentrating on the garments they are making. Most of them are listening to songs through their earphones.

The scene is a reminder that the “Made in Hong Kong” label is not quite extinct although when *Varsity* called the Chinese Manufacturers’ Association of Hong Kong to ask how many factories were still operating in Hong Kong, we were told bluntly, “almost none”.

In the 1970s, Hong Kong was a booming manufacturing centre. But with increasing labour and rental costs, and the opening up of the Chinese economy, factories began moving to the Mainland in the late 1980s.

L plus H, a knitwear-making social enterprise, which was founded in 2008, is intent on reviving local production. Ho Wing-chong, the company’s general manager says the factory has a complete production line from cloth-cutting to sewing and even packaging. In terms of the scale of production L plus H cannot compare with the factories in Hong Kong’s past, but she says the biggest difference is in the style of management.

“We adopt modern management in our factory... We use the Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tracking system,” she says. Each worker has a RFID card and has to tap the card on a reader at every stage of the production process. Managers can check on productivity and trace where any mistakes have been made in the production line.

Ho says this can increase customers’ confidence in the quality of the product, especially when most of their customers are from overseas. “We usually receive

orders from America,” Ho says. “The manufacturing process is quite challenging at the beginning, as foreign designers are more demanding. They require a higher level of sewing skills from us.”

It was also challenging for the workers because knitwear factories disappeared from Hong Kong more than 10 years ago. It was not easy to pick up the skills again, especially as the orders no longer require mass production, but call for detailed craftsmanship. Ho says members of staff usually spend a long time working together to investigate how to put garments together from the patterns, as the designer cannot teach them. The new manufacturing process requires teamwork.

While L plus H has created new job opportunities for former factory ladies, Ascot Chang, a gentleman’s shirt and tailor-made suit factory has employed local tailors for decades. The label was established more than 60 years ago and still has its own production base in Hung Hom today.



In its 20,000 sq ft factory, tailors are busy with their specialised work. Some are ironing clothes with a rusty old-fashioned iron, some are studying slips of paper with customers' measurements and others are sewing.

Tony Chang, the 59-year-old heir of the company says the tailors are well-trained and experienced. He says some of them have worked there for more than 50 years. He believes it is vital to maintain the high quality of Ascot Chang suits and so he insists on keeping the main production line in Hong Kong.

During the 1980s, Ascot Chang tried to set up factories in China because of rising costs in Hong Kong, but the results were not good. "The suit-making skills in the Mainland at that time were not as mature as Hong Kong's," he says. "We are more concerned about quality than quantity."

So the company decided to build a factory in the Mainland to produce standardised ready-to-wear clothing, while keeping the bespoke production in Hong Kong.

Chang foresees problems though, as his tailors will retire and it is becoming more difficult

to find youngsters willing to join the industry. He recalls a young man he hired to learn the skills from an old tailor who quit the next day. Chang says suit-making can be tedious if you do not like it, but "many passionate tailors feel satisfied, even when they have only finished a pair of sleeves".

To tackle the problem, Chang works with the Clothing Industry Training Authority, which provides courses to train new tailors. There is no guaranteed result, but at least it is taking a step forward. "I hope we can find people who are passionate to join the industry," he says.





The industry bug also got 30-year-old Shum Wai-lam, the founder of a local tourbillon watch company, Memorigin. His father used to run a factory making watch components but Shum still faced family pressure when he decided to set up a factory. "My parents want me to work in the financial sector," he says. "They think it is hard to develop industrial business in Hong Kong."

Yet, he insisted and went to Switzerland for training before opening a laboratory in Chai Wan in 2011. Shum has three to four regular technicians working in the laboratory. It is a young team; the technicians are aged around

20 to 30 and are mainly responsible for the assembly line and new watch design.

The tourbillon is a high-precision part in a watch that is designed to improve accuracy. Making and assembling them requires high levels of skill, yet some of Shum's staff were not watch technicians to begin with. They learned the techniques together with Shum four years ago.

In the beginning, Shum mainly took orders from European brands and produced tourbillon watches for them. However, he found he had to create his own brand to sustain the business. "A



watch brand needs its own soul, we need to have unique design,” he says. Therefore, he added elements of Chinese culture, such as signs from the Chinese Zodiac and woodcarvings to create designs with what he calls a “Hong Kong spirit”.

Shum thinks the manufacturing industry is important for a competitive city and criticises the single-faceted nature of Hong Kong’s economy. “Not everyone in this city is suited to working in

the financial industry,” he says.

He says more young people are willing to learn the techniques recently, and cites the number of job applications he has received as evidence. This has inspired him to consider expanding the scale of production in the future.

Shum thinks Hong Kong has advantages, such as a low tax rate and cultural diversity that are strengths for the development of light industry. He sometimes feels depressed by Hong Kong society’s

disparaging attitude towards the manufacturing industry – but he still retains a positive attitude about the revival of “Made in Hong Kong”.

Edited by Godric Leung