

# working in style

■ *Yu's Tailor and Tux* is different from many of its competitors in the tourist districts of Hong Kong such as Mongkok, Tsim Sha Tsui, and Causeway Bay. Located in the Mid-levels, a quiet corner of a residential area, the shop doesn't have catchy signs or tall and slim dummies behind the display windows. With a low ceiling and wooden rooftop, the small shop has a facade that is framed with rose wood while the inside is truly plain but practical. Everything inside is solely for tailoring purposes; nothing redundant – a rectangular tailoring table with two long rulers, racks of suits and tuxedos ready for rent, a long and narrow mirror for customers, a wooden shelf of cloths and fabrics, one fax machine. That's all.

"The shop's been here since 2003, and it's been like that since then. Old fashion, I called it. I don't need anything in particular to attract customers but my practical skills," says John Yu, the owner of the shop.

Perhaps it's due to the location; most of Mr Yu's customers are foreigners – expatriates who work for multi-national companies. Mr Yu says that his business model is not quite as the same as those located in tourist areas because of different customer targets. "Many people thought this is a good location for business as it is closed to Central, an affluent financial and tourist district. But our customers are different," he says.

The tailors in tourist districts such as Mongkok or Causeway Bay are more aggressive, ambitious, and industrious. Some of them might even promise customers to complete their orders



within 24 hours. "Our customers are not tourists," Mr Yu says. "Tourists won't come to this area. We do not compare ourselves with most of the tailors out there. We go for quality, while they aim for quick turnover."

And Mr Yu's 51-year experience in this industry has made him familiar with the different demands from various customers. "Americans like loose outfits; Europeans, on the other hand, prefer clothes that fit them perfectly. And Hong Kong people are the most demanding customers. They would like to have the best of everything."

And that's true. If customers don't have any expectation on the quality of

their clothes, they would simply go and buy a ready-made one.

In Hong Kong, buying a full tuxedo or a suit is by no means convenient, and many people would prefer to purchase one from the mainland due to cheaper labour costs. But Mr Yu says the qualities of the mainland suits vary. "It all depends on how you weigh your value: do you just need a suit or a tux? Or do you want to have one whose material and style is of your own choice and whose size fits your body figure?" He says that if quality is not an issue, one can find a full tuxedo in the mainland at a price as cheap as RMB28.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Prior to opening this shop, Mr Yu worked in the Hong Kong Correctional Services teaching prisoners the skills of tailoring. "During that time, the tailoring industry was quiet. I told myself that since I have the skills and techniques, why don't I give it a try?" Just like any governmental job, to get into such a teaching position wasn't easy. Mr Yu was required to pass examinations in order to get in. After 10 months he was promoted to a senior teaching position.

Working in the Hong Kong Correctional Services gave Mr Yu as well as the prisoners valuable opportunities for taking up social responsibilities. Every class, they would receive orders given from society and produce suits and clothes for clients. "This class was not mandatory. All of my students chose this class because of their own interest." Mr Yu treasured this experience, and he stayed in the same job for 20 years.

"I enjoyed teaching them, especially when they showed their passion and interest in learning the skills." While most of them truly enjoyed the class, there were always a few students who were so smart that they could even have been Mr Yu's right-hand men.

#### CUSTOMERS' SUPERSTITIONS

As a tailor, Mr Yu always sees different people from all over the world. One thing he finds particularly fascinating is foreigners' resolution in retaining their stuff. Mr Yu observes that a lot of his customers would want to pass down their used clothes to their loved ones. In the midst of financial crisis, while there is a phenomenon that many Hong Kong people attempt to renew their used clothes and accessories just for the sake of saving money, foreigners do the same but with a completely different purpose.

"My customers like to keep their clothes, especially if they are made of good fabrics and material. They would pass them on from generation to generation," Mr Yu says.

He admires their persistence in renewing the items and passing them along. "You can see how long it's been used and kept by looking at the alteration right away. They alter it not for the sake of saving money but for preservation." Mr Yu says sometimes foreigners can be superstitious, too. If it happens that the customer believes his suit would bring him luck, he'd wear it to important occasions and meetings no matter how torn and worn it is. They want to have it fixed and patched again and again.

#### APPRENTICESHIP

In 1950s, Mr Yu's family, like many in Hong Kong, was poor and needed to work industriously to make a living. Seeing that being a tailor could gain him a better career, Mr Yu, then 13, decided to become an apprentice of a tailor in 1958.

Being an apprentice was tough, especially for a teenager. Although the master-tailor provided a place for Mr Yu to stay, the experience was totally different from staying in a boarding school. What Mr Yu gained, by being an apprentice, was tailoring techniques, a place to stay, and three meals per day. But in return, he was responsible for cooking, buying grocery, hauling tall and heavy wooden doors for closing up the store every evening.

"Those doors were so huge and heavy," he says. "It was never an easy job to open the store in those days. There were a total of six giant wooden doors I needed to haul back and forth early in the morning and then evening."

And his pocket money was not much, given that the tailor had already provided him food and shelter. However, Mr Yu says it was far better than many labour jobs already. The average rate for a new apprentice was HK\$5 per month. And it may go up to HK\$10 after the first three months, and then to HK\$70 if the apprentice was able to produce a pair of trousers.

"For a teenager, earning HK\$70 was not bad during that time, but I had to cook for a large group of people. Life was tough," he says.

#### DECLINING INDUSTRY

However, the golden age of this industry has gone, and it's now going downhill. In the past, a tailor shop would be packed with customers, but such a scene could hardly be seen happening in Hong Kong nowadays.

Mr Yu says that it's been more than 30 years that no one is willing to be an apprentice in this field. Unable to pass on skills and techniques to the next generation, many tailors in Hong Kong are disappearing. And that's why people prefer to go to the mainland for tailors.

"Having an apprentice is an extra burden for a tailor, especially now that the industry is waning. Nowadays, 99% of products in Hong Kong are made in China."

#### PASSION

In spite of this, Mr Yu treats his job as his life-long career. Ever since he decided to be a tailor, he never has a thought of giving up. Even though the market is quiet, Mr Yu still persists in his passion. Everyday, he would be in his shop from noon to 8pm. Some may work solely for money, but Mr Yu finds interest in his job. "My family members always tease me for my attitude of pursuing my own interest. To them, interest is meaningless and can't buy you bread and butter. But I like being a tailor; it gives me great pleasure when I can produce a suit that fits my customer perfectly." ■

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