

TIME MACHINE

The nation's master watch and clock makers have emerged from a difficult decade to make the most of the luxury market. **Wang Kaihao** reports in Tianjin.

Starting at the microscope and testing tiny details — Yang Zuobin, 63, devotes his mind to the miniature world of mechanical watch movements.

Yang has been at Sea-Gull Watch Group for 42 years. The factory is in Tianjin, the birthplace of China's first watch in 1955.

He was honored as one of 12 "Chinese Watch and Clock Masters" selected by the Chinese Horologe Association in June, and has the title "chief technician" at work.

CHINAFACE "I am only a worker, not an engineer," he says, humbly. "I didn't make them, but assembled them."

In 2011, he assembled the first watch on the Chinese mainland that combines three major symbols of a high-end mechanical watch: tourbillon, minute repeater and calendar.

An anonymous businessman from Xiamen, Fujian province, bought it for 1.28 million yuan (\$201,000), the most expensive domestic watch ever sold. It is a complex and small machine containing 435 components.

"Putting these components together takes days, but I have to spend months adjusting the movements and erasing errors."

Yang began assembling watch movements in 2004, when he was supposed to retire.

He had planned to open a repair store in a supermarket after retirement, but his stall was cancelled right before he moved in.

"When I was at a loss thinking about what I would do in the future, the managers asked me to return to the factory and assemble watch movements."

Sea-Gull began producing its high-end movements in 2002. However, it lacked skillful assemblers.

"Even the tourbillon is not that puzzling," Yang says, referring to one of the most complicated elements in luxury watches. "Though I had never seen it before, I soon understand its structure."

"Maybe that's because I've been dealing with machines for a long time. No matter how complex a watch is, it is a machine."

He entered the factory in 1970 after studying machinery for five years in a technical school, and worked for eight years on a lathe, until he transferred to be a machine repairer for 15 years.

"I try to love whatever I do. I have strong vanity because I always want to be top at whatever work I do."

Yang accidentally came into possession of a textbook on how to repair watches from an abandoned library during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76).

He began to tinker with watches in his spare time for relatives.

He is proud of experiencing the golden age of Chinese watches in the early 1980s, though he faced a bleak

future when the factory and watch industry as a whole was hit by quartz watches. The factory authorities announced on Chinese New Year of 1992 that workers would be temporarily laid off.

"I was not in the mood to celebrate New Year and I immediately decided to have a secondary occupation to make ends meet," Yang says.

On that year's Lantern Festival, he brought some watch-repair tools and rode a bicycle on the street while his family members went to see their relatives.

"I stopped half an hour later and found myself in the countryside," he recalls. "I went to the nearest village. The village head was very happy and used the loudspeaker to gather all the villagers and bring their broken watches."

That was his first repair job, for which he earned 22 yuan — his salary was no more than 200 yuan — and ended up fixing all the villagers' watches that week. He went on to eight neighboring villages for two months until factory manufacturing resumed and he became a mold repairer.

However, his enthusiasm for watch repairs was not to be extinguished. He went to a canteen at Tianjin University near the factory every noon to fix watches for the students, and continued going to the countryside on weekends.

"I hope those students remember me," he giggles. "The watches accompanied them through their final exams."

His part-time campus repair shop lasted for a decade, until the canteen was demolished in 2001. He says those years of viewing all kinds of watches helps his work today.

He moved to the after sales department in the factory to fix watches in the last few years before his "retirement" in 2004.

When he worries about the future of watch making, his work colleague Zhao Guowang, 34, who designed the blueprint of the 1.28-million-yuan watch, offers hope.

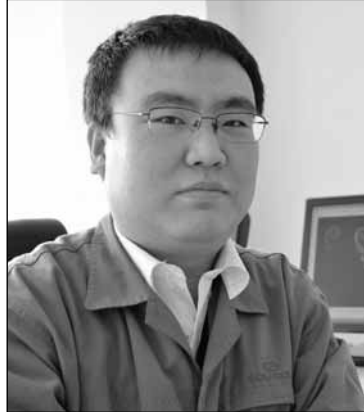
"When you review masterpieces throughout history and learn the theory by heart, it is natural to create something new," Zhao says, the youngest "master" among the 12 award-winners while the others are generally in their 60s or 70s.

Zhao had ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic disease of the spine, at the age of 6. Though he says it is not that painful anymore, his movements when he walks are affected.

He suffered from severe complications of the disease for one year in college, when his weight fell to 45 kg.

"I felt close to death and this changed my attitude to life. I always try to find the positive side of whatever I face. I felt lucky to finish college and was not that picky when it came to job-hunting."

He joined the factory in 2001.



Because of his disease he cannot do most outdoor activities, but he does have a lot of patience and showed a talent for design.

"We honor the masters because we encourage the others to learn technique," Lu Jun, Sea-Gull's general manager, said at the award ceremony in June. "It would hardly be possible for the industry to progress without their efforts."

"Young people are more ambitious and creative," Yang says. "But perhaps they need to be ready to settle their hearts to absorb the skills."

"It is true especially for the young men who tend to frequently change jobs," Zhao agrees. "You can see there are many more women than men in the factory."

Contact the writer at wangkaihao@chinadaily.com.cn.

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PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Above: Yang Zuobin adjusts watch movements in Sea-Gull's workshop. Left from top: The first watch on the Chinese mainland that combines a tourbillon, minute repeater and calendar was sold for 1.28 million yuan in 2011. China's first watch was manufactured in 1955 in Tianjin. Zhao Guowang is a young master and the big hope of China's watch industry.

Collectors watch as the value of China's timepieces rises

By **WANG KAIHAO**
wangkaihao@chinadaily.com.cn

Li Wei wears a Shanghai-brand watch that was made in 1966. It looks new.

"Since the birth of Chinese watches in 1955, their movements have more or less mimicked Swiss products until this piece, which is among the first independently designed by Chinese people," says the 48-year-old who is a member of the Beijing Collectors' Association, and head of the Chinese watch division of Watchlead.com, an online forum with more than 40,000 members.

"Each watch has its own legend in my eyes," says Li. "They don't have to be equipped with tourbillon or other fancy gadgets."

He does not want to say how many Chinese watches he has collected because he says the number doesn't matter.

"When you collect to outnumber others, you have gone in the wrong direction," he says.

Li used to be an old camera col-

lector, but was astonished to find many old Chinese watches were sold cheaply in Beijing's antique markets.

"A Chinese watch usually sold for just 3 (47 US cents) or 5 yuan about 10 years ago. I could get a bag of watches each time I went."

Chinese watches reached their zenith in the 1980s, but later declined in popularity due to quartz watches and the entry of Swiss brands.

"I realized the history of our own watch manufacturing would soon vanish if we did not do something." A historical file of Chinese watches at that time was incomplete, so he began looking through old media to trace old watchmakers for interviews.

"It is sometimes hard to find the makers' name because of the collective tradition in those years, when individuals were usually not emphasized."

It took years for Li to track down the Qingdao Watch Factory in Shandong province, in 2008, to find Sun Tiankong, who made a watch Li owns.

"The old man immediately told me the watch was made by him, with a simple glance," Li recalls.

"He was too excited to sit down when talking about how he made it." Li was overjoyed to find it was the oldest watch made in Shandong.

He continued writing articles online introducing the origins of old Chinese watches and this attracted others.

"Once I write down a story, I feel relieved to have recorded a period of history. I do this work not for patriotism, but I want to be responsible for what I love."

"You cannot simply say Chinese watches are not as good as Swiss ones. When you regard them from a historical point of view, you will see how many achievements have been made," Li says.

But he also says big companies that have developed tourbillons are attracting too much attention, as opposed to small factories and independent watchmakers.

He is happy to establish a forum for collectors to exchange informa-



WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

Li Wei enjoys digging out the stories behind old Chinese watches.

tion and make his work easier.

Along with more attention, the price of Chinese watches has also rocketed in recent years. It often takes tens of thousands of yuan to get a well-preserved one.

"No end for watch collecting, and money makes the boat," he smiles, quoting a popular saying among his colleagues, the parody of an ancient Chinese poem.

According to Wang Mengjin, 65, deputy head of China Horologe Association, Chinese have been keen on watch collecting since the late 1990s. Domestic watches began to be popular among collectors about five years ago.

In the early 1980s, Wang collected several old European pocket watches, which were made for emperors of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). He says these first collections are only for interest rather than making money.

"I met some watch collectors who were not rich in the 1980s," he continues.

"There were no luxury Swiss brands in China then, but these people collected common ones, which are closely related to their own experience."

For example, the country once produced watches for those who

cultivated Beidahuang, in Heilongjiang province, which was later turned into a grain production base. They became precious among those who participated in the campaign.

However, Wang says the reason why many collectors pursue watches today is purely monetary.

"Watch collecting is not like philately. You have to play with these machines from time to time and it's better to keep them moving. So, it will be meaningless to throw them in your drawer and wait for the price to rise," Wang says.

He adds ignorance means there are plenty of counterfeit articles.

"Someone will fabricate the historical background of certain watches to speculate and push the price of a common old Chinese watch to a very high price. A disappointing truth is many amateur collectors are easily cheated," he says.

"Collecting Chinese watches shouldn't be a fad," Wang says.

"But it is a chance to nurture our watch culture and know our own history better."