



# Band of Brothers: Hong Kong's Last Shipbuilders

Master shipbuilders turn to yacht repairs to revive dying industry

By Vivian Lai, Kanis Leung, Yan Li and Zoe So



**A**s noon approaches, the heat becomes unbearable. Five middle-aged men down tools and pick up cold beers. Relaxing in the shade, they start to make jokes and tease each other like teenagers. These ship repairers have worked together for 40 years, and bantered with one another during their work breaks, but they never run out of topics.

The owner of Perfect Shipyard, Wong Kwai-Chuen who is almost 60, spent his childhood playing in the shipyard. When he later inherited the business from his father, the business was still booming. "We got so many orders waiting for our services that sometimes we might even reject them," he laughs. When police officers were only earning several hundred dollars a month, the workers at his dockyard earned more than a thousand.

The workers used to live together in the dockyard, spending their nights in canvas hammocks and their days building ships. But now they no longer do either.

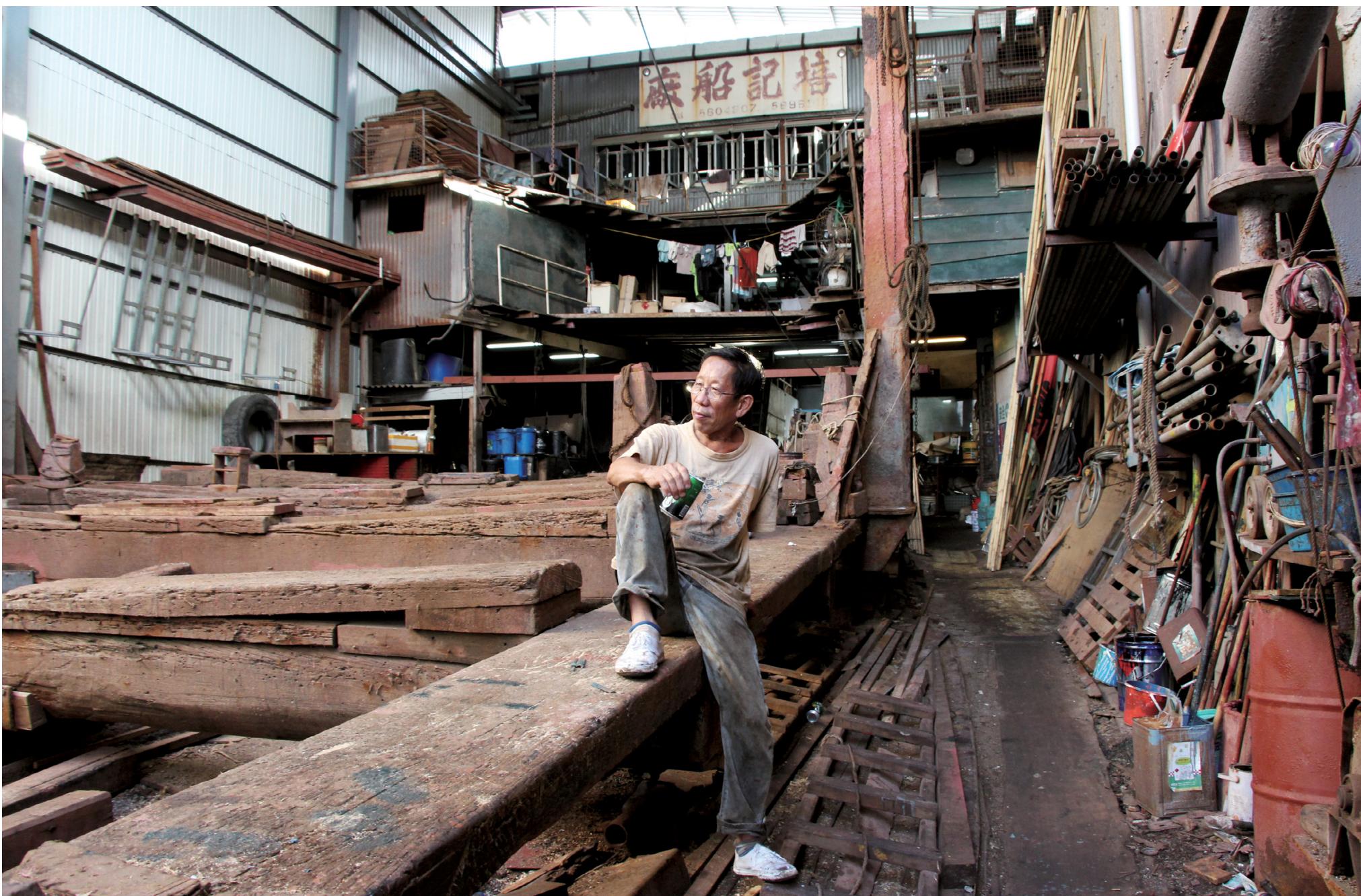
As Hong Kong's economy took off, their shipyard was forced to move twice to make way for reclamation works, each time to a smaller location. "Our

working space is very limited. Sometimes the customer's ship is even larger than my shipyard. How can I repair it? I just can't," Wong sighs.

The dockyard is now located at the Shau Kei Wan Typhoon shelter. Operations had to be scaled down in the 1970s when customers started to turn to mainland China for its lower costs. Wong bitterly recalls: "[Our business] plummeted and hit rock bottom. Revenue fell from several million dollars a year to only about HK\$600,000 a year."

Instead of building ships from scratch, the company now only carries out repair jobs. But the business and the industry here is being revived as customers flock back to Hong Kong for the better craftsmanship and after-sales service. With the orders coming in, Wong is happy for now. But he is not sure if the good times can last because the business now faces another challenge, the lack of young people joining the industry.

Working as a ship repairer is laborious and dangerous. Exposure to the scorching sun is the least of their problems. Workers have to balance on thin wooden boards, hanging more than six feet up from the ground. They also have to





dive under the sea to build rail tracks for the ships. More than a decade ago, one of Wong's workers died when he dived underwater to fix the tracks. The accident hit Wong hard.

He and his remaining six workers, all in their late fifties, are among the very few ship repairers in Hong Kong who still know how to build and repair wooden boats. "Twenty years ago, people already called this a sunset industry. Who would enter an industry without any prospects?" Wong says. "Actually, I have internal conflicts. Of course I would be happy if there are people willing to join the industry. Yet it also feels like I'm asking them to dig their own graves; if he joins, he won't be able to make a living in the future."

Knowing his is likely to be the last generation of wooden boat builders, Wong takes the task of sustaining the business very seriously and does not plan to retire. "I will continue until I can't work anymore."

To keep the business going, the company has also started taking orders for yacht repairs in recent years. Surprisingly, that did not create any vicious competi-





tion with the yacht repair business next door. Although Sunny Marine Services is their competitor, the boss and the workers are their friends. “Sometimes their boss will ask me to go over and help. And when I am running short on certain materials and they have it, I also borrow from them,” Wong says.

Po Lo, an experienced yacht builder has worked in Sunny Marine Services for more than 30 years. “Without academic qualifications, we have to do this kind of work,” Lo says. “Who doesn’t want to work in an office with air-conditioning?”

When he first started in the industry, Lo was paid a monthly salary of HK\$300. He is now earning HK\$30,000 a month

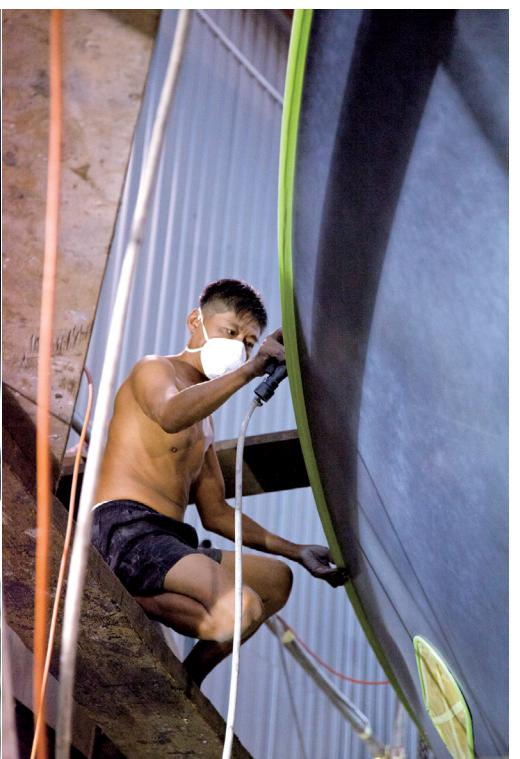
and putting his son through university. “The work is arduous and dirty. It’s just like farming. Who would want to join?” says Lo. Another worker chimes in: “This generation is different from ours. They cannot endure hardship. It’s better for them to study more.”

Meanwhile, a young face stands out from the other workers. The workers push him forward and proudly proclaim: “This is the youngest worker in the whole industry.” Twenty-year-old Mo Ko has only been here for a few months. After graduating from secondary school, he worked at restaurants and cafes but later decided to work in the dockyards like his father and grandfather, attracted

by the relatively high salary and the short working hours.

Unlike his older colleagues, he is rather optimistic about the future of yacht-building. “I am actually not that worried because there are always yachts around. There are a lot of yachts in Hong Kong and orders keep on coming,” he says.

But still, Ko does not plan to stay here for long. “I will work here at most for a year or two. This is simply a place for me to pause midway.” While he doesn’t have a particular career goal, he is now planning further studies. For him, working at the shipyard is a stepping stone. He can earn more money to



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fund his education and spend his spare time taking courses and obtaining qualifications, such as the Pleasure Vessel Operator Certificate of Competency.

He also recently obtained his driving license. As he leaves the shipyard after work, Wong and other workers come out to help him manoeuvre out of the narrow parking space. And with beers in their hands, they watch as Ko drives off. □

*Edited by Rachel Cheung*



