

# Stitching Back in Time

Photos and text by Phoebe Man and Phyllis Lee



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It is a Saturday afternoon and bride-to-be Liz Luk and her mother walk into the Wing Lung Embroidery Co. in Shanghai Street. She has forgotten to bring her receipts, but the proprietor does not seem to mind. “Don’t worry, I recognise you,” says Connie Ng with a grin and asks her to try her gown, or Qun Gua on.

Qun Gua is a two-piece costume made of red silk that is traditionally worn by brides in Southern China. Grooms on the other hand, wear Da

Gua which is a black silk coat worn over a brocaded dragon robe of dark blue.

“You can only wear Qun Gua once in a lifetime, it indicates the start of another stage in life,” says Luk, who looks forward to wearing her traditional gown at her wedding. Another customer, Sandy, has come all the way to Hong Kong from Ireland to hold a wedding party for relatives here. Sandy and her husband were married in Ireland but wanted to wear something traditional and Chinese when taking photos with relatives in Hong Kong.

But brides like Liz Luk and Sandy are becoming rarer these days. With more people choosing only to wear western bridal dresses for their weddings, the Qun Gua industry is

now in recession. Embroidery shops selling and renting out Qun Gua have closed down.

Shanghai Street used to be the heart of the Chinese wedding embroidery shop business but Wing Lung, a family business with a 35-year history, is the only one left. Wing Lung’s 81-year-old resident tailor Master Lun is one of the territory’s oldest Qun Gua tailors and has witnessed the changes in the Chinese embroidery industry.

Master Lun joined the industry when he was 18. He became a Qun Gua tailor because they made good money back then. He says managers earned about \$100 per month whereas Qun Gua tailors could earn up to \$800 a month in the 1940s.



Sandy and family.



Another reason Master Lun entered the industry was because his uncle was willing to teach him and pass on the skills of making a Qun Gua when he was still an apprentice. Master Lun recalls that many Qun Gua tailors back in those days were not willing to teach their apprentices all that they knew. The tailors would ask the apprentices to leave when they got to a certain stage with a dress as they did not want to reveal their skills and secrets to others, not even their own apprentices.

“My uncle was different from those tailors. He taught me how to make a Qun Gua step by step. I just stood next to him when he was working and learnt as he taught me,” he says.

Master Lun has been in the industry for more than 60 years and he says it thrived in the post-war years and after the Cultural Revolution. There was a decline during the years of the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, because the dragon and phoenix decorations on the costumes were taboos at the time.

But it is the emergence of the all-in-one services provided by modern bridal shops in recent decades which seems to have sent Qun Gua into a terminal decline in Hong Kong.

Master Lun says these bridal shops provide Qun Gua as an extra to customers when they rent western wedding gowns from them. This makes customers pay less attention to the essence of Qun Gua. As the Qun Gua provided by bridal shops are usually of lower quality than those from embroidery shops, customers fail to appreciate the artistry involved and no longer wear them with pride.

Since the industry is fading out, Master Lun does not want any apprentices. “It’s useless for them to be Qun Gua apprentices nowadays because they can’t earn a living from making Qun Gua,” he says. However, he stresses that he is willing to teach the skills of making Qun Gua and contribute his paper patterns to others in the industry so as to pass on the art.

The owner of Wing Lung Embroidery, Connie Ng is one of the people who has been asking Master Lun to accept her as an apprentice. She thinks it would be a great pity to abandon such traditions and therefore decided to take up the business two years ago.

Ng is a very friendly and gentle woman. She runs the shop with another lady - and their cat - every day. Ng always greets customers with a smile. “We mainly serve the neighbourhood,” she says.

For Ng, the artistic value and uniqueness of hand embroidery is irreplaceable. “When you look at it seriously, every wedding gown is a work of art because tailors produce them stitch by stitch,” she says.

She is determined to learn from Master Lun because she knows that once he retires, she will not be able to hire another experienced Qun Gua tailor in Hong Kong.



Connie Ng serving her customers.

Photo Feature



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It may seem like she is swimming against the tide of history, but Ng is sticking with the traditions of gown making, while at the same time, trying to cater for the requirements and tastes of modern couples. She also offers packages and cooperates with the western bridal shops in order to reach out to more new customers.

For the few Chinese embroidery shops remaining in Hong Kong, it is a case of adapt or die. Timmy Wong Kwok-hing, the director of Lucky Embroidery, a Chinese embroidery shop with two branches in Hong Kong, has introduced new, trendy

Qun Gua. For instance, instead of brocading the traditional dragons and phoenixes onto the Qun Gua, new patterns like goldfish and peonies adorn the new designs.

Wong adds that apart from using just gold and silver thread on Qun Guas, they now decorate the patterns with crystals to make the Qun Gua more sparkly and elegant. Modifying the cutting of the traditional Qun Gua to flatter the figure and make brides appear slimmer is another technique to attract customers.

Although Wong is coming up with innovative ways to survive in the

industry, he says the going is made all the tougher because of high rents. As a result, he had to move one of his shops upstairs three years ago.

Despite all the challenges and unfavourable conditions, Wong remains optimistic about the industry.

“Western bridal dresses are for westerners. Qun Gua are for Chinese. Wherever there are Chinese, there are Qun Guas,” he says. “I hope that not only the Chinese, but also westerners will one day wear Qun Gua as their wedding garments.”