



"Playing Dragon and Phoenix" was made by Beijing Watch Factory for the luxury market.

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# The test of time

The nation's master watchmakers were late entrants in the luxury market and though they had high hopes of competing with the Swiss, the reality is more mixed. **Wang Kaihao** reports in Beijing.

The old Soviet-style Beijing Watch Factory was erected in Changping district more than 50 years ago. A giant statue of former chairman Mao Zedong stands at the front gate.

"It's almost the same as the day I first came here," says Xu Yaonan, 78, a watch movement designer who has worked at the factory since 1962, after graduating from Tianjin University. He majored in horologe machine manufacturing in the department of precision instruments.

"The watch manufacturing industry had just started in China at that time. We all wanted to make a contribution to the country."

China made its first watch, in 1955, in Tianjin. Watch factories mushroomed nationwide in the following years and Beijing Watch Factory was founded in 1958.

In June, China Horologe Association (CHA), the official organization supervising the development of the industry, presented the title of "Chinese Watch and Clock Masters" to 12 people nationwide for the first time in the Great Hall of the People. Xu is one of nine "master watchmakers".

As the son of a clock repairer in his hometown of Wuxi, Jiangsu province, Xu grew up with watch making gadgets, which made him decide to follow in his father's footsteps.

"Everyone in the factory was so disciplined and we had a very ambitious slogan: 'The watch won't leave the factory if it fails to catch up with (those made in) Switzerland.'" Xu joined a delegation for a light industry exhibition in Poland, East Germany and Romania in 1964, and was proud to see Chinese watches appreciated by visitors for the first time.

He was a member of a 15-people panel to design a "national unitary watch movement" in 1967. The brass movement with a diameter of 26.5 mm and a thickness of 4.4 mm was put into mass production in 1970s and is still made at some factories today.

A watch was one of the *san da jian*, or "big three pieces" (the others were a bicycle and sewing machine) that symbolized high living standards for ordinary Chinese families in the late 1970s. A Beijing-brand watch sold then for about 110 yuan, which was about two months salary for Xu at that time.

Xu says there were more than 3,000 employees at the factory in the early 1980s, and the only way you could get a job then was through personal connections.

Miao Hongbo, 47, is the general manager of the factory and says when he arrived in 1986, its heyday had just passed.

"The Japanese quartz watch came in and the whole industry began to go downhill," says Miao, looking sullen. "Mechanical watches were no longer the first choice for timing."



WANG KAIHAO / CHINA DAILY

Above: Watch movement designer Xu Yaonan is one of nine national "master watchmakers". Right: The first tourbillon made by Xu Yaonan.



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The factory had to rent land to neighboring schools to make ends meet in the following years. Meanwhile, many other manufacturers failed to pass the test of time.

Zhang Yamin, 58, is the former deputy head of Hefei Watch Factory in Anhui province. His factory spent large amounts of money introducing instruments from Switzerland in the mid-1980s but the expansion led to overcapacity and a switch to making quartz watches was made around 1990.

"But we couldn't keep down our costs as low as our Japanese counterparts. The factory didn't have enough creativity and it got worse and worse."

The factory limped along for another decade and finally disbanded in 2005. Zhang now runs a watch-repair store.

According to CHA Vice-Chairman Zhang Hongguang, the country had 38 mechanical watch factories that could produce their own movements in the 1980s, but the number is just nine now.

In the 1990s, when the Chinese market opened up to numerous Swiss luxury brands, the movement designer Xu knew Chinese watches need to be updated.

He attended the Hong Kong-based watchmaker Kiu Tai-Yu's exhibition in 1994 and saw a tourbillon, which it was claimed, was the first made in China.

Tourbillon is a watch element that originally aimed to counter the effects of gravity for more accurate timing, but has now become a symbol for top-tier watches due to the highly demanding construction process. A tourbillon weighs no more than a swan feather but contains 72 parts.

"I thought, he is just a watchmaker like myself. Why don't I try?" he says.

For the first time, Xu decided to design his own tourbillon, but didn't have any books or models to reference.

"It's like drawing on a blank sheet of paper. I knew the theory of how a tourbillon worked, but that was all."

He had a look at old pocket watches to get inspiration but it didn't work.

Xu then took one year to make a tourbillon, generally considered to be the first made in the Chinese mainland. However, this achievement did not attract heavy attention after its birth.

"Many people asked me why I went to so much bother to make a tourbillon," Xu says. "They think no matter how it helps make timing more accurate, it cannot beat quartz watches. They don't realize watches are no longer only for timing."

Xu made three tourbillon and waited eight years until Miao and other managers decided to enter the high-end market.

Xu led a team for 11 months to make the watch "Playing Dragon and Phoenix", which sold for as much as 1 million yuan (\$157,000) shortly after Baselworld, the world's leading watch and jewelry show, in 2006.

Nevertheless, Miao confesses the high-end watch brand is unable to rival their Swiss counterparts. But he adds the Beijing watch has its own characteristics.

The factory began to make watches using enamel dial plates in 2006, which was then uncommon among domestic watchmakers and is still a major selling point of their product today.

"We don't have to be homogeneous with others," Miao says, while staring at the watch he wears, made in the factory.

The factory produces 80,000 mechanical

watch movements every year, but only about 2,000 high-end watches with tourbillon.

"The luxury watches are meat, and the ordinary ones are rice. It's not healthy eating just meat without rice. We have to build a solid base," Miao says.

According to CHA statistics, 65 percent of watch turnover in the Chinese market comprises Swiss watches. Zhang Hongguang thus expects more support from domestic consumers.

"If we only pursue foreign luxury brands, our own watches will have no space," Zhang says, adding it's urgent to encourage a new generation of watchmakers.

Xu's major at Tianjin University, which has nurtured many of the country's watchmakers, was cancelled in the early 1990s. Newcomers to the factory can only learn skills as apprentices.

And the relatively low pay is not attractive. Some experienced craftspeople at the factory can earn 6,000 yuan (\$942) a month, while most ordinary workers get just 2,000 yuan.

"Xu and several other old masters are like our spiritual leaders," Miao says. "But I really worry there are no youngsters who are able to take on their work."

Zhang Hongguang adds he is not sure whether they can select nine watchmakers who are qualified to be called "masters" next year. "They are artists rather than artisans," he says. "We have to rebuild a systematic training program, though maybe only one among 100 people has the talent to be an artist."

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## Rain fails to stop play in beloved Beijing

By ELLIE BUCHDAHL  
For china daily

I've told at least eight people the same tedious anecdote in the past four weeks. My granny, I begin, likes to put on a faux Yorkshire accent and recite very long monologues by the poet, Marriott Edgar.

One such monologue is called *Three Ha'pence a Foot*. It tells the story of a building contractor called Sam Oglethwaite who is asked by a chap called Noah for some wood to build an ark. Sam demands a price of three ha'pence (half pennies) a foot; Noah only wants to pay a penny a foot. No deal. And then the floods come.

After 40 days of rain, Noah sails past Blackpool, the only place in the world where there is still dry land — at the top of Blackpool Tower. Noah calls out to Sam, whose chin is just poking over the surface of the water: "Now what's the price of yer maple?" And then comes the rousing finale



"Three ha'pence a foot it'll cost yer,  
And as fer me," Sam said,  
"Don't fret.

The sky's took a turn since this morning;  
I think it'll brighten up yet."

"And that!" I say triumphantly to my thoroughly confused, thoroughly bored listeners, "Is what I say to this weather!"

In case you hadn't noticed, it's been raining a bit in Beijing. One day in July, the sky darkened, not exactly suddenly but swiftly. By the time I headed out from Gulou to Yonghegong, the atmosphere was already saturated with panic. You could feel it in the people, the cars, the bikes, and in the air itself. It was what you'd expect the last few moments before the apocalypse to be like.

As I stepped into Wudaoying Hutong, the heavens didn't just open — they erupted.

Yet the ankle-deep paddle through the street, the rolled-up trousers and destroyed loafers, were nothing compared with what was to come. On Saturday (July 21), at around midday, a dense cushion of smog that had been choking the city for a couple of days suddenly converted itself into a storm on a scale unseen in Beijing for 61 years. Lightning flashed within the fog cloud, thunder rolled incessantly, rain gushed down the streets.

I went to 798 Art District that day. Conveniently, I arrived just as the celestial taps turned on. I spent three hours sitting in cafes saying, "I think it'll brighten up yet," then fled into an unlicensed cab. The rain cascaded all night long. I waded to a local restaurant for dinner.

At least 77 people died that day, and hundreds of businesses and homes were destroyed. Since then, weather forecasters have pulled out all the stops, predicting torrential downpours any time the air smells damp. We have been told to suspect a lot more of this miserable weather throughout the "summer." Part of me feels as if Beijing misses hosting the Olympics so much that it's trying to turn itself into London.

In the days immediately after that Saturday, I mimicked the weather forecasters and went into crisis mode. The mere hint of a cloud in the sky was enough to get me canceling plans left, right and center to huddle in my flat with a bowl of soup to watch for the storms that often didn't actually arrive.

Then came a day when the sky was almost clear. I scoured the weather forecast. It predicted rain — but not until 11 pm. In a decisive moment, I hopped onto my bike and cycled to Sanlitun to meet my Chinese teacher. Surprise, surprise, it started chucking it down again. I battled home through a river, stopping at Yashow clothing market on the way to buy a pair of shorts to replace my poorly chosen white summer skirt, which now resembled a wad of used tissues.

It was then that I decided I had had enough. If Beijing's weather is going to go British on me, then I'm going to go British on Beijing's weather. Not, of course, the British that has you moaning about every aspect of the Olympic Games, or that orders food in foreign countries in a very loud voice that indicates the attitude: "You do speak English; you're just deaf." I mean "British" a la Sam Oglethwaite. However filthy that sky looks, I'll convince myself it took a turn since this morning, put on my big, ultra-Chinese poncho and hop onto my bike.

Beijing hates the rain. I hate the rain. But I love Beijing, and there are only two more weeks — less than, in fact — before I go home to England. Literally come hell or high water, I'm going to enjoy them.

I'll go one step further than Sam Oglethwaite — I know it'll brighten up yet. And I'll be hanging onto Blackpool Tower till it does, not budging from three ha'pence a foot.

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