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Hong Kong-grown green textiles

Producing clothing for major brands like *Brooks Brothers* and *Burberry*, Hong Kong's *TAL Apparel* is among the leaders of a move to "green" the industry, at a time when the trend for sustainability is spreading swiftly across the sector.

Last March, *TAL* was invited to become one of the founding members of a global initiative, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) in recognition for its work in research and development of green textiles. SAC comprises leading apparel and footwear brands, retailers, manufacturers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic experts and backed by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

The move towards sustainability is gathering force as major brands recognise that demand is growing particularly in mature markets in the US and EU, adding value to an industry vulnerable to rising costs and price competition. They also know that governments around the world are becoming more willing to make greater environment-related demands on garment producers that are intent on trading in their markets.

TAL is among SAC's 33 founding enterprises that span the entire textile and apparel chain, including retailers and research institutes in North America, Europe and Asia.

These include big names such as *Adidas*, *Wal-Mart*, *H&M*, *Marks & Spencer*, *Levi Strauss*, *Gap* and *J C Penney* as well as Hong Kong-based brands *Esprit* and *Esquel*. They are joined by the Duke University's Center for Sustainability & Commerce.



Turning clothing into green.



Shirts for major brands.



Lee with wrinkle-free shirts.

TAL, among three manufacturers in the group, sees itself as an innovator and manufacturer supplying leading brands, focusing on style, comfort and functionality and a flexible supply chain that integrates with its customers.

The company is best known for its wrinkle-free shirts and stain-resistant garments; one in six men's shirts sold in the US market is said to be produced by *TAL*, while a wide array of clothing goes to brands around the world, including *Banana Republic*, *Givenchy*, *Hugo Boss* and *J Crew*.

The company says sustainable and eco production is a hallmark of its approach to manufacturing. The garment industry has a major impact on the environment at every stage of a product's life, from fibre production to disposal of the garment after use, so *TAL* began practicing sustainable production early on.

Last year, it announced a three-year sustainability plan, to reduce the company's carbon footprint by 15% within three years to make sustainability an integral part of every aspect of its manufacturing activities. It established its own detailed internal standards of environmental and social governance.

To monitor electricity consumption, managers had meters installed at various stages of the production line to measure energy consumption and flow and re-direct generated heat and steam to areas that can be used instead of allowing it to escape.



Reduction of energy at plants.

The intention is to reduce energy consumption, as well as the production's impact on the environment. The factory and office lighting are fitted with LED lights. Items such as returning the cone of the fabric roll to the provider so that these can be re-used and turning on sewing machines only when they need to operate are part of the programme.

As a supporting member of a World Wildlife Fund programme to lower carbon emissions in manufacturing one of *TAL*'s factories participated in a test that won the company a Silver Label for its practices in recycling, exhaust emission management and energy-efficient facilities and procedures.

Managers say the experience has now become the platform for the rest of its nine factories in five countries.

TAL was also one of two apparel manufacturers to participate in a worldwide test under a greenhouse gas protocol initiative, which involved reporting its carbon footprint for manufacturing garments on a cradle-to-grave basis.

Moving green to the global scene

Spreading the value of sustainable production, *TAL* became one of 12 founding members of the Sustainable Fashion Business Consortium (SFBC) in 2008 on Earth Day April 22. This is a Hong Kong initiative to create a platform to improve textile and apparel manufacturing processes and procedures throughout the supply chain and reduce the environmental impact.

SFBC is also tasked with promoting and increasing the use of sustainable practices across the fashion supply chain.

The new, SAC global mission puts the initiative on a worldwide basis, focused on reducing the environmental and social impact of apparel and footwear products by working in a collaborative approach with the hope of influencing the industry around the world.



TAL Dongguan compound.

Dr Delman Lee, *TAL*'s President and Chief Technology Officer (as well as grandson of late Founder Chen Che Lee) is guiding the company's approach to the entire process.

"Our participation allows us the opportunity to interject with the manufacturer's perspective," said Lee.

TAL's R&D team has between 15 and 20 staff, and collaborates from time to time with the Institute of Textiles & Clothing at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.



Innovative denim.



Special treatment.

So far, the collaboration has brought forth a number of significant innovations in the development of textiles, relevant to

sustainability. They include the *SoftAL® Process* which allows for production of a 100% cotton shirt that does not need ironing. There's also the *SoftAL® Wool*, the world's first garment wet processed machine-washable, tumble-dryable 100%, wool trousers and *EZCOOL®*, which allows a garment to dry twice as fast as a normal cotton product. The *DriXpert®* fabric provides moisture management to keep the skin cool and dry regardless of exertion.



The new trend towards green-orientated technology is expected to move Hong Kong's textile and apparel industry beyond its role as a sourcing and trading hub and base for manufacturing on the Mainland. Enterprises that control a substantial amount of the global fashion business are now in the process of moving to research and development to compliment the SAR's planning, design, marketing, strategy and administration base.

Interestingly, *TAL Apparel* hails from an early generation of such manufacturers that has gone to the forefront of technology developments. The company founded in 1946 by Chen Che Lee, has over the years become one of the largest garment operations in Asia with over 25,000 workers in factories located on the Mainland, in Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. It produces over 55 million pieces of apparel annually, on a turnover of US\$750 million.

Five members of the Lee family are involved in the enterprise under Chairman Dr Richard Lee and CEO Dr Harry Lee, spanning two generations in the clothing business.

Simple but elegant.

from special correspondent Vicky Sung, Hong Kong

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