

Taiwan Log Book

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By Steve D'Antonio

Photos by Steve D'Antonio and Ta Shing



Ta Shing

Skilled and experienced staff are a prerequisite for any successful boat building operation. The folks at Ta Shing are both and then some, however, they also possess the all important 'can do' attitude.

There's no question that a significant number of new and used recreational vessels plying the world's waters today are manufactured outside of the U.S., many in Asia. That leads to a question I hear repeatedly from clients buying new and used boats or from participants in my workshops and lectures, "Steve, what do you think about the quality of boats manufactured in Asia?"

The answer, for me is clearly, "It varies", which isn't very helpful and can be said about boat builders in the US, Europe, Australia and South Africa. A more appropriate question might be, "Steve, what do you think about the quality of boats manufactured by XYZ Yachts", and it doesn't matter where they are geographically located.

I have the good fortune to be able to walk the shop floors of boat building shops and manufacturing plants all over the world. I'd like to tell you about a recent trip to one such yard in Asia. It's a story about the culture of their country, their work ethic, their employees, their resources and their corporate leadership, all of which needs to be taken into account when evaluating any boat builder.



Ta Shing

Ta Shing is one of the few Taiwanese builders to operate its own onsite “log yard”, where complete teak and other hardwood logs are milled for their use exclusively.

No Walking

Let me start with where I usually first touch a country's culture and work ethic. Typically, it begins when I board their national carrier. The moment I set foot aboard the China Airlines Boeing 747-400, the enhanced attention to detail, uber-strong work ethic and professionalism were unmistakable, everyone was hustling, literally. No flight crew member moved at just a walking pace and I would notice the same of, it would seem, the entire Taiwanese population. When you are being served (and I don't mean solely in a food service sense), *anyone* providing you with support, information, products, assistance; those people doing the serving – *run*, literally. This high speed approach extended to taxi drivers, sometimes disconcertingly. It seems to be a point of honor for them to get you to your destination as

quickly as possible. I often exited cabs feeling somewhat seasick and as if I should have been wearing a crash helmet.

There's yet another unmistakable trait possessed by the Taiwanese. They take exceptional pride in their professions. They take pride in their appearance, and whatever they do, they do it well. Railway workers wear uniforms, for instance, that would put those of many of the world's militaries to shame – clean, pressed, starched and creased, with gleaming buttons and white gloves, leather belts and shoes shined, squared-away hats; you get the picture. Even the woman pushing the refreshment cart through the train, in uniform, looked as if she's just passed inspection.



Steve D'Antonio

Doing a job and doing it well; it's a Taiwanese mantra. This woman was arranging flowers in the lobby of my hotel shortly after midnight.

You might be thinking at this point, "Of course they run. This is the third world and they need the job; there are ten people waiting to fill the position." If you were thinking that, you could be forgiven, but you'd also be mistaken. Taiwan is a stable democracy with a vibrant capitalist economy; it's considered one of Asia's economic "tigers" and with good reason. The country of 37 million people have a median age of thirty seven, the same as the United States, life expectancy is seventy eight, also the same as the US and their infant mortality rate is 5.1/1000, compared to the United States'

7/1000. Their unemployment rate is an enviable 4.3%.



Steve D'Antonio

Many of Tainan's shop names and street signs are in English.

Boat Building, the Taiwanese Way, the Ta Shing Way

The purpose for my visit was to carry out an in-progress inspection for a client who commissioned the construction of a Nordhavn 68. Among other things, I would review standard equipment installations as well as modifications and changes I'd been involved with or recommended.

My destination for this trip was the well known boat building firm of Ta Shing Yachts, The company, started by C.M. Juan as Shing Sheng, which means "New Life", in 1957, began with the construction of wooden fishing boats and then progressed to fiberglass; they were the first builder in Taiwan to use this material for commercial boat building.

In 1977, the company name changed to Ta Shing, which means "Big-New". This accurately reflected the new company; it was larger and had a new direction, yacht building. From the mid 70's through 2001, they built a range of sailing vessels including well known names such as Mason, Orion, Tashiba and Taswell. All told, Ta Shing built over 1000 sailing vessels in this period. In the early 90s, Ta Shing began building the now ubiquitous Nordhavn line of cruising trawlers, and while the worldwide economic malaise has affected them, as it has most builders, they remain strong and have hardly looked back

since forging the relationship with Nordhavn's Pacific Asian Enterprises. The first Nordhavn, a 62, rolled out of Ta Shing's shop in 1992. Recently, Ta Shing completed its 147th Nordhavn. In the ensuing period, the range of models produced by this shop includes the N35, N56, N57, N62, N64, N68 and N76.

After meeting PAE representatives at the Taipei airport, we made our way to the high speed rail station, where we then boarded a train that would take us down the entire length of Taiwan to our ultimate destination of the city of Tainan. This region of Taiwan is known for its industrial and manufacturing base and especially for its clustering of boat builders.



Steve D'Antonio

A mandatory stop when visiting the Ta Shing yard is Tu Hsiao Yueh restaurant, another multi-generational family-run business. It has been serving some of the tastiest Tan Tsai noodle dishes in Tainan since 1895. The fare was simple yet delicious.

England, during the Industrial Revolution was referred to as "The Workshop of the World." Based on what I saw of this region, I would say Kaohsiung can claim that title. It comprises block after block of small and medium sized manufacturing businesses. I wondered how many products I'd owned over the years, from toys to computers, that had been

made here.

As I entered the yard on the first day of my visit, which occurred on the morning of my arrival in Taiwan, I was introduced to the Ta Shing crew. First to the office staff, the engineering team and managers and then, one by one, to folks on the shop floor. Many spoke no English, and I speak very few words of Chinese, however, that didn't matter – a smile, a slight bow and a hand shake are the universal language.

Like so many things in Taiwan, the yard was immaculate. I've spent virtually my entire professional career in boat yards and boat building shops. I've heard many folks say a cluttered or unkempt yard is acceptable; it means they are busy. I disagree. There's a significant difference between cluttered and busy; Ta Shing was decidedly the latter and neat to boot. While there was the usual fiberglass dust and wood scraps found in any active boat building shop, everything was squared away and in its place. Tools had a well used, yet well maintained look about them; it was easy to see that they'd been employed in building hundreds upon hundreds of boats. Personal tools owned by laborers were clearly prized possessions, many were stored in custom made wooden tool boxes. A huge band saw located in the "log yard", Ta Shing is one of the few builders in Taiwan to mill their own lumber onsite, is a pre-war Japanese model. It's well maintained, is used regularly, and runs like the proverbial top.



This vessel under construction was a hive of activity. However, it and the shop area around it are clean and squared away.

The real gem in Ta Shing's crown is its staff. They are gracious and accommodating to a fault however, that I expect of any business. They are distinguished from others by a few notable traits: their expertise, their efficiency and, perhaps most compelling of all, their can-do attitude.

As I made my way through the shop over the next few days, I encountered individuals who were working with a noticeable sense of purpose, and while I didn't speak their language, I do speak the language of the boat builder and thus was able to understand them in ways lay folks cannot. I know, for instance, how incredibly difficult it is to install, shim and align a large shaft log (the fiberglass tube through which a propeller passes) where tolerances are measured to just a few thousandths of an inch. I also know and have seen on countless occasions the consequences of an error in this installation; they often manifest themselves long after the vessel has left the yard and long after anyone could be held directly responsible.

When I encountered the Ta Shing staffer carrying out one such installation, he's installed virtually every shaft log on every Nordhavn that's left the yard and has worked for Ta Shing for over forty years, the intensity and professionalism with which he undertook this task was palpable. He's seventy one years old, looks like he's fifty, and moves like he's thirty.

I noticed a resemblance among some of the Ta Shing staff. When I asked if there were any relatives working at the yard the response spoke volumes: there are two father and son teams; a mother, father and son; a father and three sons; three brothers; two brothers and one son; two brothers; twin brothers; a husband and wife; and an uncle and nephew. The

term employee retention takes on a new meaning at this yard. There are over forty employees who have worked for Ta Shing for over thirty years. The chairman has been with the company for forty-six years. The company vice president has been with Ta Shing for over thirty years. He and the founder's son, Tim Juan, who now runs Ta Shing, have been friends since the age of four; they used to play together at the Shing Sheng yard.



Steve D'Antonio

Many things in Taiwan are smaller than westerners are accustomed to, however, the beer bottles were an exception; they are nearly as large as wine bottles. The glasses in which beer is served however, are tiny indeed, which offers the consumer many opportunities for toasting.

On nearly every occasion, when I questioned a technique or practice, the response and explanation invariably finished with, "...what do you suggest?" Suggestions, discussion, and a sharing of ideas were encouraged and welcomed at every occasion. When I suggested a potential change or modification, particularly if it was something that the yard had not undertaken previously, the willingness to overcome the challenge and fulfill my request was both refreshing and welcomed. It was the very essence of the can-do attitude I so admire.

Conversely, when a request exceeded the yard's comfort level,

they clearly said so and explained why, often describing a previous experience. That's telling, as boat builders are, in my experience, often quick to agree to a task or modification out of a fear of appearing incapable, only to reveal later they are unable to do it, or worse, done it poorly. Being able to say 'no' demonstrates confidence and the all important trait of professionalism.

I thought a great deal about this Taiwan trek for weeks after my return, something about the people and the culture resonated with me. If you admire attention to detail and commitment to excellence, then going to Taiwan is like slipping on a comfortable pair of shoes. It's intoxicating to be surrounded by folks who universally exude this ethos. Ta Shing, on the other hand, represents an even loftier standard, one to which all craftsmen and craftswoman should aspire.



Ta Shing

It's a sign of a true craftsman when his or her tools are well taken care of and even revered. Custom made tool boxes like this one were a common sight.

For more information on the services provided by Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting, Inc. please email Steve at info@stevedmarineconsulting.com

or call 804-776-0981