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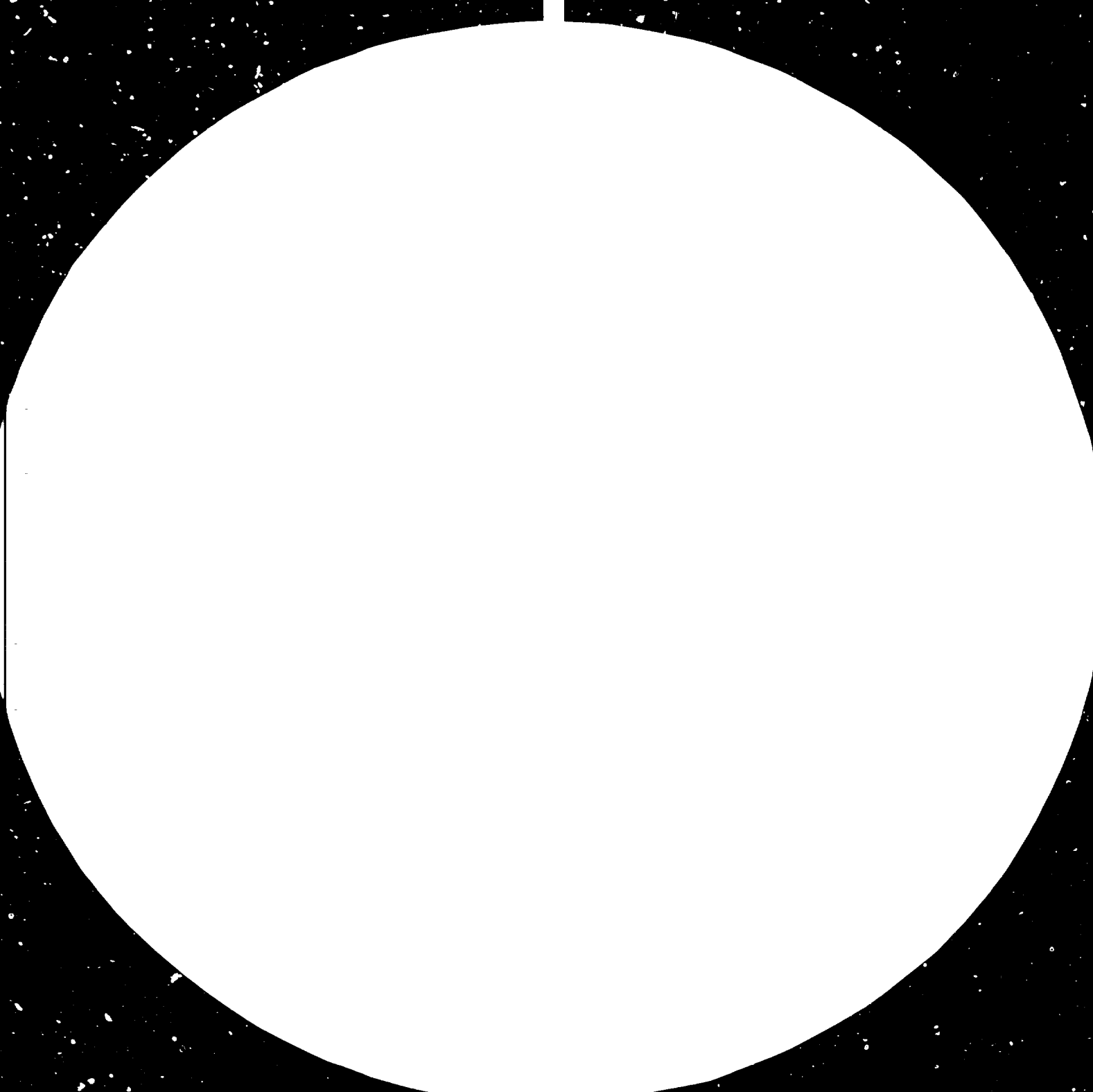
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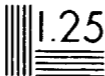
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Resolution Test Chart (NBS 1963-A) (ANSI Z39-18)

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THE FUTURE OF HONG KONG MADE TRADITIONAL FURNITURE *

by

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Introduction:

Twenty years ago, the major customers of Hong Kong-made Chinese traditional furniture were overseas importers and tourists, who admired the old Chinese culture and the elegance of the furniture, which is world-famous for its delicate art-carving and superb quality. Only a minority of the local people could afford to buy this kind of furniture then. They bought the furniture more for decoration purposes than for its practical use.

In recent years, as the general income of local people has increased considerably, the number of local customers has risen rapidly. For the same reason, overseas orders also showed a remarkable increase.

To cope with the growing demands from both overseas and local markets, we need better and faster production schedules. To achieve this, more factory sites, a full-scale apprenticeship scheme as well as a central timber-seasoning system, are absolutely necessary.

More factory sites:

Under normal circumstances, a medium-sized traditional furniture factory needs a space of at least 10,000 sq.ft. in order to accommodate the workers from all departments concerned. At present, the monthly rental for such a factory unit is approximately HK\$ 30,000.- to HK\$ 40,000.- in an urban area, and HK\$ 20,000.-- to HK\$ 30,000.-- in the New Territories. Such a high rental is really a burden on the factory owners. As a result, only part of the manufacturers in this field can afford to set up their factories in private-owned industrial buildings. On the other hand, more of the small-scale workshops are forced to work in densely populated squatter

areas and residential premises. Therefore, the quality of the products of these workshops is not easily controlled. Consequently, the credible image of our Hong Kong-made Chinese traditional furniture built-up in the past years will be gradually ruined.

To help maintain the good reputation of the traditional furniture circles, it is necessary to have all the manufacturers organized together to urge for government aid for the granting of low-cost industrial land to build up our own factory buildings, so as to maintain the quality of our products at a certain level to protect the benefits of our customers.

Apprenticeship scheme:

The general lack of skillful artisans in various departments in this field has existed for many years. The main cause is the absence of a full-scale apprenticeship scheme. In old days, an apprentice in a factory was no better than a page-boy. He hardly received any formal training from other artisans in the factory. During his three years of apprenticeship, he had to learn all by himself, with his eyes and heart.

If he was lucky, he would have received private instructions from individual colleagues. Besides, he was paid very little during his training period. He could not attend school because of the long working hours. All these reasons led to the decrease of new apprentice every year, resulting in the serious lack of artisans of today.

In recent years, the authorities concerned have become aware of the situation and launched a large-scale apprenticeship scheme in several industrial fields. At the same time, the government called for the co-operation of employers to help in the execution of this meaningful campaign. Unfortunately, the effect of such a scheme is not satisfactory, as far as the traditional furniture factories are concerned.

To my opinion, in order to attract more youths to join our factories, employers must provide them with more formal training, a better working environment, better salary and meanwhile, allow the young people to spend more time in school in order to receive advanced knowledge in connection with their work.

In this case, employers, of course, have to lose both time and money at the early stage. But if we consider it to be a long-term investment and think of the future of our traditional furniture business, we will understand that this is something which ought to be done.

Timber-seasoning:

Almost about 90 percent of the complaints from our overseas buyers regarding our products are in connection with timber seasoning. These complaints include cracking of panels, shrinking of joints and the chipping off of finish on the surface. All these defects are directly and indirectly caused by the improper seasoning of timber before it is used.

Though quite a number of factories have installed in their factories electric kilns for the seasoning of timber, there are more small-scale factories and workshops still adopting the old-fashioned method to air dry their timber.

No matter which method is adopted in the purpose of proper seasoning of timber, professional knowledge and a large open space are essential in the first place. Yet most of the factories lack both these two main conditions.

To solve this problem, the establishment of a central timber-seasoning plant is worthy of consideration. If such an idea is found feasible, the individual manufacturer will be able to deliver his timber to the centre for proper seasoning before it is used. Of course, he will have to pay certain charges according to the volume of the timber to be seasoned. This will be an economic and effective

way to ensure that the timber used for making our furniture has been properly treated.

Conclusion:

According to my own experience, the government, manufacturers as well as employees must work together in order to find a solution which is beneficial to all parties, to clear the present obstacles for the security of a bright future for the traditional furniture industry.



