

# Spirit of the Hong Kong Typeface — Chan Sac-kin

Chan Sac-kin, Managing Director of the Universal Type Foundry, Ltd. (UTF), was a pioneer of the printing industry. Through the retellings of a fictional apprentice at UTF, Ah Shing, Chan Sac-kin's contributions, visions, and obsessions are illustrated. Covered also are type foundries' scope of business and their far-reaching impacts. Ah Shing's story takes the reader on a journey through time to give an account of the printing industry's

history from prominence to obsolescence. Printshops that used to fill the streets of Central are no longer there, and yet, the functions of printing have become ubiquitous thanks to the advent of technologies.

## Scene 1

Time: Day time

Location: Around Gough Street, Central

Characters: Ah Shing, Chan Sac-kin

(At the street in Central, a few men are kicking shuttlecock.)

Ah Shing: My turn!

Others: Great kick!

Ah Shing

(monologue):

I'm Ah Shing, working here in Central since I was twelve. We, printshop guys, took a liking to shuttlecock-kicking, and it's been my favorite pastime for the past 60 years — I played this sport in every corner from Lan Kwai Fong to Gough Street!

Back then, printshops were everywhere in Central. A fellow townsman from Hokshan referred me to work at the Universal Type Foundry as an apprentice. At the time, Mr Chan Sac-kin was the Managing Director — he took me under his wing and I followed him around offices in Central and the workshop in North Point. I really look up to him. He didn't talk much but as I read more of his articles in *The Printer's Journal*, I figured he liked things simple and elegant. Printing was a high-tech industry back then. Landing a printing job made me the envy of everybody. Mr Chan always said:

Chan Sac-kin: "In printed works, the content is like the soul, and the design, the body. An awakened soul deserves a brilliant body. A brilliant body requires Chinese and Western movable types from the Universal Type Foundry."

Ah Shing: That's the Universal Type Foundry advertisement slogan. I thought it was so cool back then, but now I think it's a little... (giggle)

(Tea house noise.)

Ah Shing: Pu'er tea please!

Ah Shing: I picked up the Pu'er tea habit from Mr Chan. He often brought me along to the Lin Heung Tea House at Queen's Road Central. I came across many printing industry tycoons there. Time flies, things change. Even the Lin Heung Tea House has moved to Wellington Street a long time ago.

Ah Shing: Universal Type Foundry's business had a global reach. Say, the Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers. They bought our Chinese movable type to print their monthly journal to serve the entire Chinese community there. Those were our best days. I was impressed that Mr Chan didn't stop at making movable type. He kept experimenting with different printing techniques like lithographic printing, typesetting, and so on. He went so far as researching ways to store papers for longevity. The future of the printing industry in Hong Kong hung in his head all the time.

Chan Sac-kin: Southeast Asian countries only lack modern printing talents. They have no shortage of capitals to acquire the latest and fastest printing machines... Should there be a brain drain in Hong Kong... foreign sales would be challenged too. The Hong Kong printing industry must take heed and catch up before it's too late.

Ah Shing: When desktop publishing came along in the 1990s, we'd become irrelevant. All those challenges like flexible typesetting and consistent inking became non-issues with computers.

Ah Shing: When Universal Type Foundry went out of business in the late 1990s, I was not young anymore. I managed to get myself a job in a small printshop on Gough Street, thanks to all those skills I'd acquired over the years working under Mr Chan. Old-school printshops still had their place printing invitation cards, red packets and ledger books. When the time came, even those old-school printshops went out of business ten years ago. So, I retired from work altogether.

Chan Sac-kin: An awakened soul deserves a brilliant body.

Ah Shing: Things we printed these days were seldom awakened, but I was fond of brilliant bodies just the same.

(WhatsApp incoming message notification sound.)

Ah Shing: Who just texted me? Oh my lovely grandson just sent me his wedding invitation via Whatsapp...

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