

Feeling fit: a shop that suits customers to a T — as in Tina

Lu Feiran

Payton Reynolds from the United States went to the South Bund Fabric Market seeking to have a three-piece suit made. His grandfather, who once lived in Shanghai, had recommended a particular tailor there.

But when Reynolds arrived at the market on Lujiabang Road, he found at least 100 tailor shops, and every one of them looked popular. How to choose?

After walking around the market three times, he finally stopped at the Tina Custom Suit shop. Messages from satisfied customers written in English and other languages were displayed on a wall.

Shop assistants welcomed Reynolds with an array of options. Lapels — notch or peak? Fabric — wool, cotton twill, linen? Color, breast pocket, buttons, initials embroidered on the inner sleeve? The prices for a suit and a pair of trousers vary from 1,200 (US\$164) to 3,600 yuan depending on the fabric.

Reynolds said he was flabbergasted by so much choice.

“There’s really nothing else like this in the US,” he said. “There, everything is ready to wear. You try it on; you buy it. There’s very little tailoring.”

And it’s fast. The common period of making a three-piece suit is about two weeks, but it’s no problem to shorten it to three days as Reynolds were about to leave Shanghai soon.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “In America it takes months to get anything done. You might be able to get a pair of pants done in a week.”

Shop owner Chu Xuehong, known to customers simply as

Tina, is always proud to hear such comments.

The Anhui Province native has been in the tailoring business for more than three decades.

“In the beginning, most customers were Chinese, but later foreigners began appearing in my shop,” Chu said. “I was so nervous at first because I didn’t know any English.”

Chu managed to take orders using all kinds of gestures. At home, contemplating what she should do, she decided she should first learn how to say “钱 (qian),” or “money.” She also bought a tape recorder to listen to lessons on business English.

“Gradually, I could praise my customers in English,” she said. “I often complimented them on being tall, or handsome or smart.”

She also adopted the name “Tina.”

“Just rolls off the tongue, it does,” she said. “And easy to remember.”

The South Bund Fabric Market has been operating for more than three decades. Its hundreds of shops range from fabrics to tailoring, buttons to ready-made qipao dresses. In 2005, urban renewal forced it to relocate from its original site on Dongjiadu Road in Huangpu District.

During its tenure, the market has gained global recognition. Before the coronavirus pandemic curtailed travel and businesses, it was a stop on the itinerary of foreign tour groups.

“When tourists reached Shanghai, they often came to the market as their first stop,” Chu said. “That gave them time to return for fittings, and then to pick up the finished garments before



A giant Chinese character “布” (fabric) is the icon of the South Bund Fabric Market.



Making custom suits is like connecting with people. In the course of measuring and fittings, we become friends with our customers. The charm of the handmade never fails.

leaving the city.”

Many foreigners came into the shop with photos on their phones of the clothing they wanted Chu to make.

With the pandemic essentially passed, foreign customers are gradually returning this year. Chu said she serves a wide array of customers: white-collar workers, young couples planning weddings, college students gearing up for job interviews.

Quality is the secret of attracting customers. Around 30 experienced tailors work at Tina. Most come from the city of Taixing in neighboring Jiangsu Province, so Chu set up a main workshop there earlier this year.

At the workshop, tailors do specialized jobs, such as pattern making, cutting, sewing

and final ironing. The workshop provides accommodation and a canteen.

“Many of our tailors are couples,” Chu said. “As the saying goes, ‘Men and women don’t feel tired when working together.’”

Chu said machine-made suits can never duplicate the quality of handmade ones because everyone has a different body shape and “one size fits all” doesn’t work.

Uwe Fischer, from Germany, couldn’t agree more.

When Fischer needed a new suit, friends recommended Tina Custom Suit.

“When I first tried it on, it was a perfect fit. They even adjusted it down to millimeters,” said Fischer.

Chu, however, said she is worried that so few young

people seem interested in becoming tailors. The youngest tailor at the Taixing workshop is now 45 years old.

“Young people nowadays would rather be couriers than tailors,” said Jiao Jianjun, director of the workshop. “I’m not surprised. Tailoring work can be quite monotonous and may take years to master. It’s labor intensive. Many of our tailors work late into the night.”

But Chu still clings to the hope that there will be new talent drawn to the business if demand for bespoke clothing remains high.

“Making custom suits is like connecting with people,” she said. “In the course of measuring and fittings, we become friends with our customers. The charm of the handmade never fails.”