

CHINESE CHALLENGE

Low Costs May Hold Key to Higher Digital Textile Growth
Dr John Provost reports on a seminar held in Hangzhou, China

Encouragement of the digital textile-printing sector is a priority for the Chinese government – and

the economies available from China's printers could encourage greater demand for digitally printed textiles in the US and Europe.

Those were two of the messages that emerged from a recent seminar in Hangzhou, China, organised by Honghua Digital Technology Company, the manufacturer of the Atexco 'Vega' digital textile-printing machine and one of the leading Chinese developers of digital-textile solutions.

Speakers at the seminar included the general manager of Honghua, Jin Xiao Tuan, who is also the director of the China National Ink-Jet Technology and Engineering Centre, and Professor Hitoshi Ujiie, of Philadelphia University, who is director of the university's Center for Excellence of Digital Ink Jet Printing of Textiles. Prof Ujiie is also the editor of the influential book, 'Digital Printing of Textiles'.

Mr Jin outlined Honghua's 17-year history in digital printing, which includes recognition by the Chinese government as the national digital- printing-technology centre. Honghua now exports to over 20 countries worldwide and has sold more than 300 of its belt-type digital-textile printers in the domestic Chinese market.

Mr Jin indicated that, in his view, the Asian market accounts for only 20% of the global digital-textile-printing market, and that Europe has the largest market share, at 60%, with the Americas accounting for the remaining 20%. He suggested that, with the Asian market now supplying over 50% of the traditional textile-printing market, there were considerable opportunities for digital-textile-printing growth, particularly in the Chinese market.

Based on a survey of the Chinese market, the most successful business model for digital-textile printing was among garment-manufacturing companies that had their own design teams, garment-manufacturing and printing facilities, and distribution channels. Digital-textile printing companies that relied on commission-only printing were always under price pressure from their customers. Commission prices were in the region of US\$4 a square metre and under increasing downward pressure.

Mr Jin went on to describe the total approach of Honghua to the market, and to the development and supply of machines (particularly the Atexco Vega printer, which was described in Issue 3, 2009, of Digital Textile), software for design/colour management and textile inkjet inks.

Professor Hitoshi Ujiie's presentation, 'Inkjet Textile Printing Status Report 2010', covered the complete spectrum of the digital textile-printing industry, including its history, the current status of the market in terms of machine numbers and trends, and case studies of European and US digital-textile-printing companies. The final part of his lecture covered, in detail, digital workflow and models, and also included extensive ideas and concepts for producing designs specifically for digital-textile printing.

Table 1 represents Prof Ujiie's assessment of the number of machines operating in the digital-textile-printing field – from figures compiled around a year ago.

Following his return from China, Prof Ujiie made the following comments to Digital Textile:

“Globally, digital-textile printing shares about 1% of the total textile-printing technologies today. It is the same percentage of 1% in the Chinese market and the quality of digitally printed textiles is as good as the rest of the world. The big difference between China and the rest of world is the production cost of inkjet printing.

“China starts to offer very reasonable printing costs, even with digital-textile printing. It can be far less than \$10 per yard of processing fees, comparing with close to \$100 per yard of production costs in the US. It is foreseeable that offshore digital printing to China becomes one of the options for production inkjet-textile printing and I believe that this might proliferate the inkjet-textile printing market in the USA and Western Europe.

“China is now the world’s largest textile-printing producer, with a market share of over 30% of the global traditional textile printing and, although digital textile printing is still small, it is seen as a key technology area that the Chinese government is supporting. With increasing developments in both machinery and textile inkjet inks, from companies such as Honghua and the digital textile printers themselves, the knowledge and the skill base in digital-textile printing in China will only increase.” DT

Table 1: Digital Printers for Textiles

An estimate by Prof Hitoshi Ujiie of the number of machines in operation

Short Run Sample Printers

Mimaki: (TX-1, TX-2 TX-3) 2,000+ units

Medium Speed Production Printers

Ichinose: (3210) 2020 200+ units

Robustelli: Monna Lisa 100+ units

Konica Minolta: Nassenger V 100+ units

High Speed Production Printers

Reggiani /Huntsman /HP: DReAM 30+ units

Reggiani /Kyocera: ReNOIR 12+ units

Osiris ISIS 1+ units

Sublimation Transfer Printers

Mimaki: (JV4) 4,000+ units

Roland: (Hifi Pro) 1,500+ units

Solvent Printer

Mimaki: (JV3) 10,000+ units

(Source: Survey by the Centre for Excellence of Digital Inkjet Printing of Textiles at Philadelphia University, March 2009)