



Tony Tam Kwok-Chiu, Assistant foreman

I went to primary and secondary school here – up to Form 4. Then, I went straight out to work, stocktaking spare parts for a car company for four to five years. After this, I changed jobs to work in construction, for the better income. I joined in 1980-something, so I've been in the industry for about 30 years.

When constructing a building, there are two groups of responsibilities: one's piling, while the other's to build the cover of the building that people see. Our job is driving the piles into the ground – we leave after the foundation's done. After the foundation is laid, bamboo scaffolding needs to be put up, and then electricity, plumbing, and air conditioning sorted out. There are more than 10 stages in getting a building ready for use.

Who's the boss?

I'm not the boss, but I supervise the guys. In fact, I started in a supervisory position, because I had some experience in this from my previous job. The organisation is the same

in every company of this type in Hong Kong. There's a project manager, site agent, foreman, general foreman, and assistant foreman plus the workers. At the moment, the foreman is based at another construction site, but comes to this site three to four times a week. Once this project is finished, I may be promoted to foreman on the next one.

Management is important. I have to be on site full-time. I have to make sure the workers are doing all the things required to finish the job, which include reinforcement fixing, positioning, and securing steel reinforcing bars, nailing planks, and pouring concrete.

I'm in charge of the workflow – if the company sets a deadline, say 10 months, and I see that we're running behind, I have to make sure we catch up, and manage the workflow efficiently.

Doing this is easy, because there are company guidelines. If they tell us we need to drive one pile into the ground every three days, and I realise on the second day that we



haven't made enough progress, I allocate more resources for it and have the workers do their jobs quicker.

In solid company

I'm working on Mosque Street, but the company has five jobs going on across Central, Aberdeen, Chai Wan and Repulse Bay. All the jobs happen to be on Hong Kong Island, but we also do jobs in Kowloon.

There are usually about 10 to 12 people working on the site. If there aren't enough hands, we call the job site to ask for more. Normally, we use the same people every day until the job is done. On this particular project, there are two workers, two welders, a guy operating the machines, and a supervisor under me; but we work as if we're all on the same level, like friends. If I was to order them around, they wouldn't listen to me. There is friction at times, but I listen to both sides before trying to come up with a solution. I have fired people, but fewer than 10 in my 30 years of work.

There was one guy who wouldn't listen to me. If I wanted him to nail two planks, he'd only nail one. Also, we get off work at 6 p.m. and are supposed to wash our hands at 5.45 p.m., but he'd go ahead and wash his hands at 5.30 p.m. He was careless and lazy, and messed up the routine. In fact, he wanted me to fire him. He didn't want to work here, because the pay was lower than at another construction site where he wanted to be. If he quit on his own, he'd have needed to give a month's notice, but if he got fired, he'd be able to be gone in just three days.

The engineer who is 29 is the youngest guy on the

site, but we also have workers in their 40s, and 60 is the normal age to retire. Some people work until they're 70 though. There are physical exams for employees over the age of 60 that are required to be done once a year. We pay half of the cost, and the company pays the other.

Workers from Mainland China

Of our eight workers on this site, four of them are from the Mainland; and other sites have more – maybe seven or eight out of 10. In fact, there are more and more Mainlanders entering the profession each year.

There's no resentment about this. It's not as if Mainlanders are fighting Hong Kong people for the jobs. These days, with the MTR [Mass Transit Railway] expanding, there are a lot of jobs – there's also a tunnel being built in Central, and the development of the residential area around the old airport. The cruise terminal there [at Kai Tak] needs an expansion of its facilities, and malls. Also, most youngsters don't want to do construction work because it's very physically demanding, and you're always in the sun. In Hong Kong, there's a demand for employees in many other professions, and a lot of people prefer to work as security guards in residential and office buildings or at hotels and restaurants – they're indoors, so it's not so tiring. Hong Kongers who do want to work in the industry need to have the right certificates for certain positions – the law requires licences for welding and operating machinery.

Mostly, the Mainlanders are from Guangdong Province, but some are from the north of China. The Mainlanders

have to have been in Hong Kong for seven years and have ID cards to work in construction. They speak Mandarin, though they normally learn Cantonese when they come to Hong Kong. We can always write things down if we need to communicate. It's easy to solve problems... In the past few years, we've even had some Filipinos. At the moment, we have a girl from the Philippines who's an engineer.

Up close and personal

Our job site is very busy. We start at 8 a.m., break for lunch, and then 'go, go, go' up until 6 p.m. After work, I go home, take a shower, and then go to sleep. Every day, we wake up about 5 a.m. or 6 a.m. depending on where we're working. It could be in Aberdeen or the New Territories... I don't get to choose which projects I work on. For this current job, I wake up at 6 a.m. and take the MTR to Admiralty, and then a minibus here. It takes about an hour to get here from my home. Our working days are Mondays to Saturdays 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a one-hour break from noon to 1 p.m.

Most of our wives also work, because we have one or two children. My wife used to work as an office runner, but is now too old to work. We have two sons of 30 and 34 years old; both are also in the construction business and the oldest has a child.

I was born in Hong Kong, and I live in Kwun Tong. Kwun Tong is no good. There are lots of people, lots of cars, air pollution... The only reason I still live there is because the apartment I own is there. I've thought about moving, but can't make enough money to make it happen.

Show me the money

Rates of pay depend on the market price. Today, a worker earns HK\$600 a day, which is the lowest rate. The highest rate is for the welders – HK\$1,400 a day. A welder's job is to connect every beam. They spend a lot of time wet and dirty, but it's well-paid work. Years of experience make a big difference to pay, so a lot of people stay on in the industry; and what other job could they go to? For me as an assistant foreman, the HK\$14,000 a month is too little. With my experience, it's not really enough. Payment is calculated by the day, but paid monthly into our bank accounts, by autopay. Our company doesn't usually pay for travel – only the basic salary, but, if it's very far, the company will pay about HK\$50 a day, though this doesn't take into account travelling time.

Accidents happen

Raw strength is more important than intelligence on a construction site. We draw and plan out everything prior to building, so all the workers have to do is follow the designs; they don't really need to think. But, things do go wrong at times.

Sometimes when you're heaving large objects, the wires can break and cause the objects to fall. Some objects are very heavy, for example, over 500 pounds [227 kg]. If we're injured on the job, we can claim money from the government; and some workers have received HK\$100,000 from the government in damages. But, it's not such dangerous work – as long as you're careful. Usually, the accidents are only minor ones...



One time in Yuen Long, after several storeys of a building had been built, it was discovered that there was a cave underneath the foundations, so the building needed to be dismantled. The surveying of the land hadn't been done thoroughly enough... Another time, the entire project needed to be stopped, and the development company had to compensate the buyers who'd already purchased units in the residential block.

Past portfolio

I've worked on about 20 projects during my career. I've done hotels, hospitals, residential and office blocks... I worked on the police headquarters in Wan Chai. It took about 18 months of work to lay the foundations, and at its peak, there were about 100 guys on the project. I also worked on the Exhibition Centre [Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre], and the new airport.



Between 2006 and 2008, I worked on projects in Macau. The culture is very different there. In Hong Kong, everything is so tight timewise, so urgent, whereas there, people are very slow. Sometimes, we would go for breakfast in Macau... Three minutes after ordering, we'd ask where our food was, because we had to go. 'You're rushing us!', they accused us, angrily. Hong Kong is a little too fast, but this makes Hong Kong people perform very well.

Change is good

There are so many construction sites in Hong Kong because it's changing. Some people feel that construction creates noise pollution and makes everything dusty, while others think that everything's renewed, and that it creates more usable space. So, opinion is divided. I think the city has to change as time moves on; it has to improve.

Change is a good thing, and I'm happy with the direction of Hong Kong. I was born in about 1950, when Hong Kong people were very poor and had nothing to do. 'Change, change, change' – I like the changes. I think the quality of life here is good.

We only build, we don't demolish – but, if something's old, it needs to be changed. It's 2014, and you need to make improvements. You can't be stuck with buildings that are from the 1930s – they're an inefficient use of space. I agree with demolishing older buildings, to make way for newer more efficient buildings, but it depends on which district we're talking about too. If it's a residential area like Sai Wan [Western District], you should definitely tear down the old for the new.

Who knows when it'll stop? It's non-stop. We build something new, say in Sham Shui Po, but in 30 years' time, it'll be old.

The happiest part of my job is the completion of projects. I have a real feeling of accomplishment when I pass by the finished buildings. They started off as just empty holes in the ground. ■