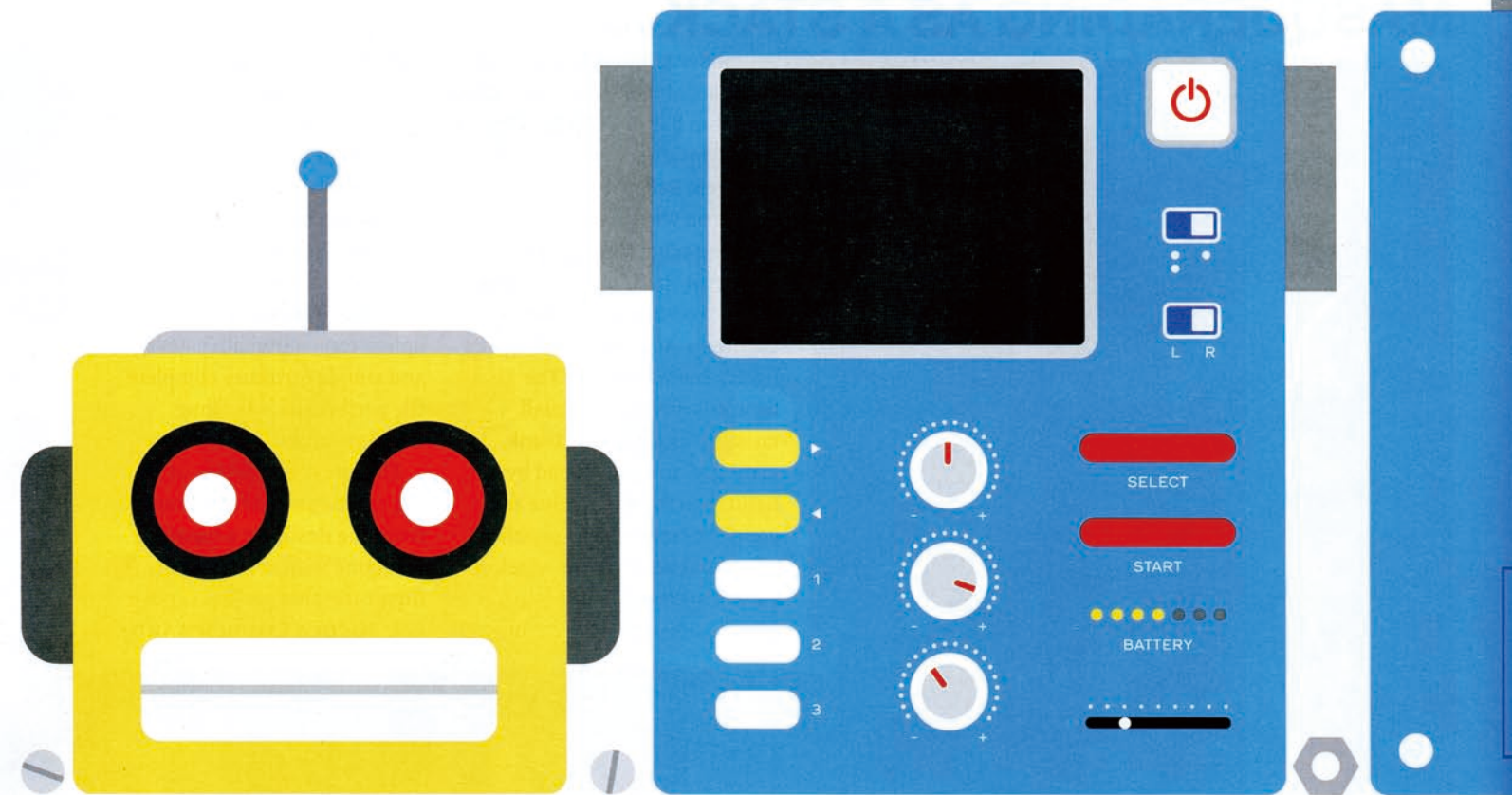


INSIGHT **REMADE IN TAIWAN**

It used to make everything from microchips to Ninja Turtles. But now that China is the world's workshop, Taiwan is turning to design. ANNA BATES investigates

ILLUSTRATION **JAMES JOYCE**



Do you remember when everything was “Made in Taiwan”? When those words branded goods from Barbies, Transformers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to umbrellas and computer motherboards? During the miracle years, between the 1960s and the 1980s, Taiwan’s manufacturing output exploded by a staggering 680 percent. But then China stepped up, offering even cheaper production. Now most of Taiwan’s products are Made in China.

So what does an island that built its fortune on manufacturing do when it can’t do that any more? Icon visited to find out.

“Taiwan needs to transform from a manufacturing to a

knowledge- and creativity-based economy,” says Lilin Hsu, founder of design and education institute Xue Xue, “and use China to develop global brands.” Taiwan sees itself as five years ahead of China in terms of design and innovation. If it can marry this knowledge to China’s vast manufacturing resources, the island will be in a strategic position.

But for this plan to work, Taiwan has to hang on to its design advantage, and that’s why the government is pumping money into the Taiwan Design Centre and innovation think tanks, to nurture a culture of design. The splurge has caught the attention of young designers, according to TDC

deputy Linber Huang. “Now is a design moment,” he says. “Taiwan is strange – when electronics had its moment, everyone studied electronics. Now everyone is studying design, so there is a lot of help for designers because the government won’t win votes if designers are unemployed,” he jokes.

TDC holds design symposiums and a Design Expo, it promotes Taiwanese designers at fairs abroad, enables overseas study and funds huge graduate shows, encouraging the annual tsunami of new designers to sell their ideas. A substantial chunk of money goes to “feeler” divisions in America, Japan and Germany. From these regional centres,

reports are beamed back to the island to make trend-books, advising Taiwanese companies and designers what styles and colours are in vogue elsewhere and encouraging collaboration.

But this strategy isn’t always yielding impressive results. At Proxene Tools, a small, ambitious manufacturer of spanners, we are presented with a line of products encased in gaudy plastic. They’re for the European market, designed by a German designer who, according to TDC, epitomises European style. The new features might be a small improvement on the original plain steel versions, but Proxene is mostly pleased with the collection because it looks like



what they think Europeans want. And this is a pity, because downstairs in the bright, airy factory, workers meticulously cut, polish and test a line of the company's original spanners. These products, designed in-house, are considered a classic among Japanese workmen; they're the sort Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison would go wild for. When the company brought in a designer, it was just to add the gaudy styling. Proxene has inadvertently introduced the ugly side of design: flashy novelty.

Grace Cheung, co-founder of architecture and industrial design studio Xrange, says such outcomes are the result of a flaw in the government's overall

strategy. "The government views design as something to make things prettier, to design for a certain style," she says. Xrange partner Royce YC Hong agrees, saying that the strategy is "skin deep. They're promoting branding."

Nevertheless, this styling is widespread among manufacturers. Rather than develop and invest in a single distinctive product line, there is a tendency to simply produce many different varieties of the same thing in different styles – a practice that is especially common in China. "Here you have farmers, middle class, elite," says Vanessa Chang, a director of 180-strong design studio Nova. "Then you have

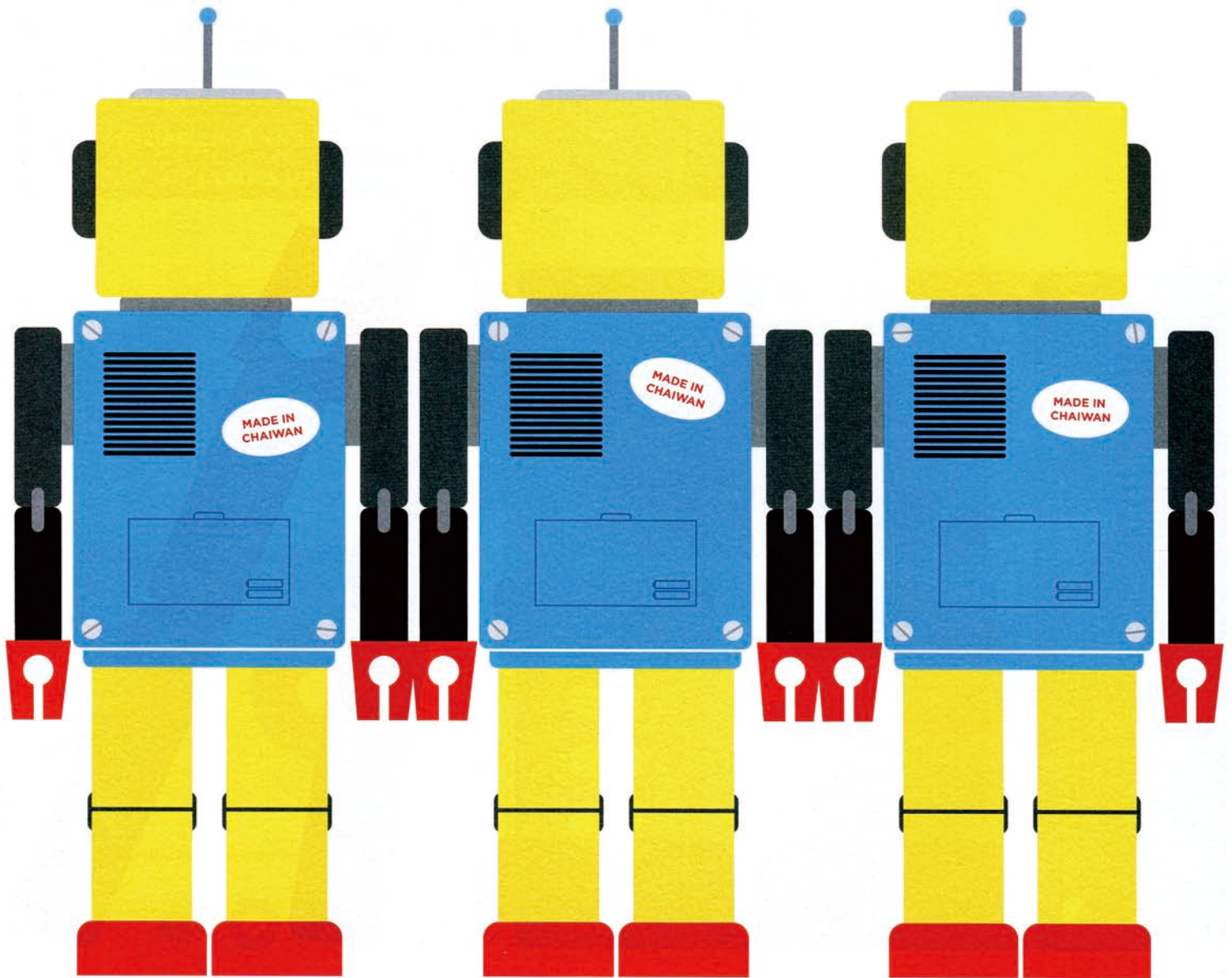
categories within these [with different tastes] – so several trends will continue to exist at once. One brand has 100 new products a year. People want constant changes. Two or three new products a year is normal for a brand in the US and Europe, in China it's 15 – they do it for brand power."

Taiwanese companies could still find a distinctive voice with their design obsession, but Nova is guilty of feeding the Chinese habit of carpet-bombing the market. "For a design company, it is obviously not a problem," says Chang. The thing is, over-production makes work for designers but it doesn't necessarily help Taiwan's brand.

Such complications have

arisen as a result of Taiwan's increasingly close economic relationship with China. After years of hostilities between the island and the mainland, relations greatly improved in 2008 and trade has since boomed. But while this partnership stabilised Taiwan's economy, it could also lead to it picking up bad habits.

Xrange chooses to see the positive side. The studio suggests that such over-production at least gives designers an opportunity to experiment, and for brands to find their niche while the industry is young. And it's got a point, because Nova does boast some genuinely innovative ideas – its best product is a washing ↗



machine for students and low-rent tenants where you simply empty a bucket of water into a basin, eliminating the need for plumbing. “As the industry develops I think you will see a lot of [over-production] being weeded out,” says Cheung.

“Now, when designers go to a company they don’t really have a say,” says Hong. “But I gave a lecture last week and students were asking how to avoid this.”

Xue Xue, the TDC and Jung-Ya Hsieh, founder of design studio Duck Image, think the best way for this innovation to reach the market is for designers to set up their own studios and freelance for Taiwan’s experimental small to medium-size enterprises,

rather than working directly for corporations.

Duck Image has forged a successful career in this realm. The studio’s willingness to innovate has won the attention of vast, part-government-funded think tank the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI), which has invited it to play with new materials and turn them into products. The studio is currently designing a flexible speaker system as thin as paper. It’s at ITRI (the birthplace of the world’s top two microchip factories) that the serious investment into innovation happens – the lab’s white coats are experimenting

with everything from solar cells to cartilage regeneration technology. But to innovate rather than improve, ITRI has begun an imaginative initiative called Creativity Lab – loosely modelled on MIT’s Media Lab.

Here, an odd mix of artists, psychologists, designers and engineers meet to brainstorm. The results vary from the highly plausible – a foldable electric scooter – to the diabolical – a virtual baby to keep old people company, as long as they place a dummy or bottle into a slot when asked to. But as the lab’s director Karen Tsai says: “In every 100 ideas there could be one winning product.”

Such initiatives are a step in

the right direction – but are they enough to stay ahead of China?

There are 1,200 design schools in China now, so competition is on the way. But Hong isn’t worried: “I do feel optimistic about Taiwan’s position. I think creatives will work very closely with people in China to create something for the greater China area – Taiwan could be seen as the cultural centre.”

Taiwan’s neighbours are getting jealous, which is certainly a good sign. Korea is watching the slow merger of China’s resources with Taiwan’s technical and design know-how with alarm, recently warning in its business newspaper: “The Chaiwan storm is coming.” †