



Rather than focusing on quantity, Kotai is now concentrating on the design aspect of leather production. ALL CREDITS: KOTAI



Kotai, a tannery with an unusual take on leather

When Kotai Tannery first started out, its aim was to produce as much leather as possible and there was little emphasis on design and research. Based in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and originally named Hsing Nan Tannery, the company produced pig splits and skins for a range of applications including garments and shoe linings. It was set up in 1970 and by 1978 its customer network had grown to the point that it needed a second tannery to keep up with demand. This tannery was based in nearby Pingtung and the Kotai name was introduced. All of the

company's operations are now based there.

According to the company, one of the main attractions of its products was that quality standards were very high. However, the design element was certainly lacking. Mr Y Lu, who established and ran the tannery and is still its chairman, was selling large volumes of finished material but had very little creative input to bring to the table. This changed when Mr Lu's daughter Rebecca and her husband became involved in the running of the tannery.

Ms Lu had studied fine art and wanted to make new and interesting types of

leather. By this stage Kotai was also processing cow hides, which broadened its horizons in terms of design. "We mixed cow leather technology with the pigskin leather technology. With some of the finished products it's difficult to tell which is which," she explains. Ms Lu works closely with managing director, Kevin Chu, who has spent a great deal of time researching and designing leather. "I see leather as more than a product; it is a piece of art," he says. You can appreciate leather from the look, the feel and even the smell."



Discovering new dyes

Tapping into what appeared to be a growing trend, the company decided to look at more natural ways of producing leather. Although it still uses chrome to tan a portion of its leathers because some of its customers need to keep costs low, Kotai is now producing a number of white and vegetable tanned leathers. In addition to this, the company is playing around with ways of making the whole dyeing process greener; by recycling the wastewater, for example.

Kotai is also using natural dyes rather than chemical dyes for many of its leathers. "Everyone is doing metal-free leather but using chemical dyes," Ms Lu points out.

She claims that one of the dyes Kotai uses was discovered entirely by accident. "One day we were drinking some Chinese medicine and there was some left over in the cups. Somehow a piece of leather fell into one of the cups and the next day when we pulled it out it was beautiful. We started testing and testing it, playing around with it and having some success," she says. The leather produced using this type of dye has a rich, bright yellow colour, which, according to the company, is proving very popular.

Ms Lu claims it is so safe that some of the company's German customers use it for baby shoes. "The babies can even put them in their mouths; it's non-toxic," she says. Unlike some dyes, it does not transfer onto the skin and the leather is biodegradable at the end of its lifespan.

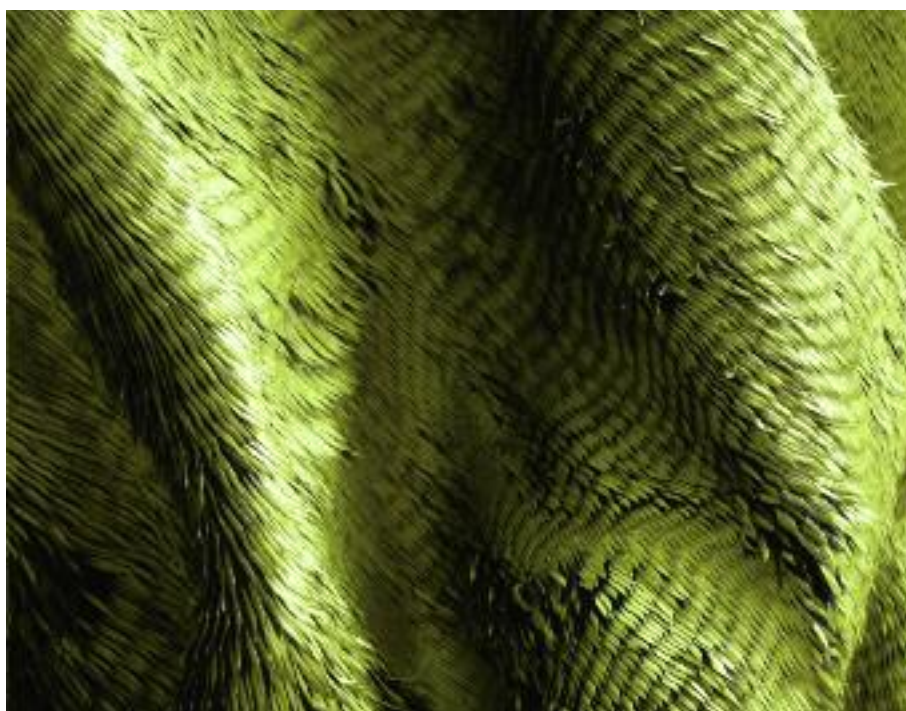
Moreover, the company discovered there was another hidden benefit to using this more natural process. "My husband's feet sweat a lot and we live in a very humid country. We tested the shoes and found the metal-free shoes don't smell. That's part of the beauty of it," says Ms Lu.

Kotai has also found a new way of producing an indigo-coloured dye in a natural way. The dye is made from leaves taken from a special tree in the mountain areas of Taiwan. According to Ms Lu, aborigines in mountain areas plant and tend to the trees and collect the leaves for the company to use.

Although it wasn't easy finding a way of transferring the colour from the leaves to the leather, the company tried and tested various methods and eventually came up with a way, and the leaves used to produce the dyestuffs give the leathers a really vibrant hue. Kotai was originally concerned that demand for indigo might not be terribly high, but it turned out that the colour was well sought after, even



The company has experienced strong demand for its indigo leathers.



Kotai has been experimenting with many techniques to give its leathers interesting textures and finishes.

by some of the "top" brands. Ms Lu claims that Japanese designers, in particular, are clamouring for indigo-coloured leather. As a result, Kotai plans to produce more and more of it.

The art of leather

The main aim at the tannery now is to celebrate the product and to keep

working on ways of making it more attractive, better quality and more environmentally friendly. "We love leather, it's our passion," says Ms Lu. "We are trying to make it like art and we love playing around with different effects." In addition to the soft, smooth leathers the company produces, many articles feature cut-out effects, tasselled looks and



embossing.

However, the design emphasis isn't limited to the leather it produces. From her first involvement Ms Lu was resolved to make the production process as aesthetically pleasing as possible, with the 60,000 square-foot plant itself as the first port of call. "I didn't want it to be like before; a smelly, dirty, unpleasant environment," she says. "There are lots of trees, greenery and parks. We want it to be a humanitarian place. It's a very modern, pleasant environment for our workers." Art even plays a part within the tannery. Ms Lu's husband has painted designs on some of the company's leather and framed his artworks to brighten up the walls within the building. "We're having so much fun with the leather," Ms Lu explains.

Kotai sources its pigskins from Japan and the US, and all of the cow hides it uses come from the US. Most of the interest it receives is from shoe, handbag and garment manufacturers and it produces around two million square-feet of leather in total. However, the company has also had some more unusual inquiries including requests from wall-hanging manufacturers in Dubai and queries from automotive companies. The company exhibited its collection at Le Cuir a Paris this year, the first time it has ever presented its product to the public. "Our shows are normally exclusive to the brands we produce for," Ms Lu explains. "It's been very successful, we are so encouraged."



Kotai has made an effort to give its workers a pleasant work environment.



The tannery is surrounded by green trees and shrubs.



The yellow dye, discovered by accident, is based on a special type of Chinese medicine.