As one of the world's biggest wetsuit manufacturers, Sheico has long been comfortable in the water, but the Taiwanese group thinks the time has come for apparel designers to embrace neoprene, and is investing in making it more accessible.

A sea-change for neoprene?



Sheico has produced a collection of neoprene garments to demonstrate its versaility to brands.

Sheico Group

Alongside some of the more outlandish designs in Alexander Wang's most recent collection, the use of neoprene looked relatively normal. The material most commonly associated with wetsuits added a futuristic feel to pants, sweatshirts and funnel-neck coats on the US-based designer's New York catwalk; and a hotly anticipated collaboration with H&M suggests neoprene is ready to move away from the realms of surf, dive and designer wear and on to the streets.

A previously unconventional choice for garment design, neoprene is no longer a stranger to the catwalk: Zac Posen presented neoprene trouser sets and bustiers in his spring-summer 2015 collection, Philip Lim used it for panels on shirts and jackets, and Kenzo's models sported the material in jumpers and on their feet. Leathergoods brand Montblanc added it to bags and it has also crept in to footwear designs at Céline and even adidas.

Taiwan's Sheico Group feels this heralds a change. "People are now seeing that it's not only at home in the sea, but also on land," says sales manager Jim Shiue.

The group, famous for producing around 65% of the world's wetsuits, has begun to invest in neoprene as a fashion material, blending it with spandex to make it more flexible, and producing it in thicknessess of 0.5mm to 1.5mm so it can be easily combined with other fabrics. A concept 'neo fashion' collection was presented at the Ispo trade show in Munich last year, and it will be launched for the US market at Outdoor Retailer Winter Market in Salt Lake City at the start of 2015. "Everybody associates Sheico with life vests and wetsuits, so we want to show what else we can do," says Mr Shiue.

Cornering the market

The growth of Sheico has been fairly spectacular: from a small, rubber boot making company, established 40 years ago by Pi-Goong Shiue, it has now pretty much cornered global wetsuit production. Headquartered in Yilan County, the family-owned business employs

10,000 people in 12 factories across Asia producing 4.5 million wetsuits per year and 80% of the world's safety jackets (3 million), according to the company's estimates.

The sheer volume of production means it is a supplier to all the big brands – including Quiksilver, Rip Curl and O'Neill – keeping all its customers happy by offering each a dedicated team. Brand representatives visit the R&D centre to discuss design, performance and materials. "Because we manufacture for all the top brands we have to work to individualise their private lines," explains Jim Shiue.

While it goes against the core neoprene offering, the company also worked with Patagonia when its surf division suggested adding a plant-based rubber to the mix. The wetsuits, made with 40% neoprene and 60% guayule plant-derived rubber, were launched in Japan in 2013 and are now available globally. "They came to us with the material and we helped make and commercialise it," explains Mr Shiue.

Most of the group's surfing wetsuits are made in two factories in Cambodia – one of which employs 3,600 – while the diving suits are mainly put together in Thailand. Another diving suit factory in China is added to a safety jacket and triathalon suit facility, while the Taiwanese headquarters are located near a neoprene sheet factory, a spandex yarn factory and a spandex sheet factory. This means branching into the more flexible 'fashion' neoprene by increasing the spandex content is a fairly straightforward move.

"We believe that since a lot of high-end designers are using it in their catwalk collections we can take that concept and combine it with spandex to produce a material for everyday wear," says Mr Shuie.

Changing perceptions

Sheico's design team, headed by Ju-Fei Yang, has created a collection that shows ways in which it can be combined with other materials. "Neoprene has a particular character, the foam's thickness is the key to keeping warm and dry, but it is also the weakness because of the low breathability," explains Ms Yang. "However, we have developed it to be as thin as 0.5mm-1mm, which can be easily applied to fashion garments as it increases the air-flow and is lighter weight."

Alexander Wang's H&M collection shows the possibilities of adapting neoprene to everyday wear, and the team anticipates it being used as pure, thin neoprene for an outer shell, or as a mixture of neoprene and spandex, depending on the garment. "It is suitable for function-oriented fashion, like outerwear, as it's water resistant, as well as compression wear; it is already widely use in protection gear," says Ms Yang, adding that they have received positive feedback from designer brands. "We think it can definitely be used in everyday wear, especially as an outershell to combat the fast-changing weather."



The wetsuit specialist has the capability to manufacture apparel at one of its Thai factories.

Sheico Group

If the concept catches on, the garments can be produced at the group's Thailand-based factory, where non-branded activewear and yogawear collections already roll off production lines. Special machines are needed to sew and weld the pieces together. "One of our strengths is that we are a vertically integrated company, producing everything from spandex yarn to circular knit fabric, all the raw materials for the personal floatation devices which have to be certified, and the neoprene goods and finished products," explains Mr Shuie.

Not resting on its laurels, at the Taipei Innovative Textile Applications Show (Titas) in October, Sheico demonstrated a move into digital printing, with its booth swathed in textiles featuring a bird's-eye view of the group's base and surrounding countryside – including a long stretch of beach where the wetsuits are tested. "We want to promote how beautiful Yilan County is," explained Mr Shuie of the picture choice. "Neo fashion is also about our roots - combining spandex fashion with our neoprene roots."