

What is the essence of Hong Kong style?

Paris is chic, New York is edgy, Tokyo is eccentric. But what about our city? **Arthur Tam** goes in search of Hong Kong's fashion identity. Photography by **Calvin Sit**

All of the influential cities of the world have an immediately recognisable fashion trademark. Paris has its soft, classy and chic style reflected by Chanel, Lanvin and Christian Dior. London screams brooding and bold sophistication by Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen. Milan is colourful, vibrant and energetic. New York is a combination of an upper eastside WASP, the West Village artist and the Brooklyn hipster. And Tokyo mixes eccentric Harajuku street fashion, goth-punk culture and technological flair, characterised by the likes of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo. But when we think of Hong Kong, such instantly familiar fashion markers don't seem to exist.

Look around the city streets, however, and you'll find an eclectic, vibrant world of fashion. Luxury labels are abundant, as are the fast fashion fixes of the mass chain brands; vintage hipsters and 'MK' style hair cross the street together; myriad mini-mall wares are donned proudly. But if all these other cities have an identifiable undercurrent, what ties it all together in Hong Kong? What is the essence of our style philosophy?

"That question makes me think of the golden years of the 90s," says Silvio Chan, fashion

professor of Savannah College of Art and Design. "Back in those days, [the Hong Kong fashion scene] was booming. Local designers emerged and challenged the meaning of fashion. They tried figuring out new cuts and silhouettes."

According to JJ Acuna, the founder of popular fashion blog Wanderlister, the 90s were also a time with a point of view. "Hong Kong had it so good in the 90s when it was the Faye Wong and Vivienne Tam era. A lot of reactionary fashion happened at that time, when people were exploring what Hong Kong fashion really meant. What it meant to go from a British-ruled colony to being part of China." Indeed, the recent winner of the YDC (Young Fashion Designers' Contest), Elizabeth Lin, created a whole collection using prints that were inspired by nostalgic colonial architecture in Hong Kong. To her and Acuna, that era of Hong Kong represented the uniqueness of the city.

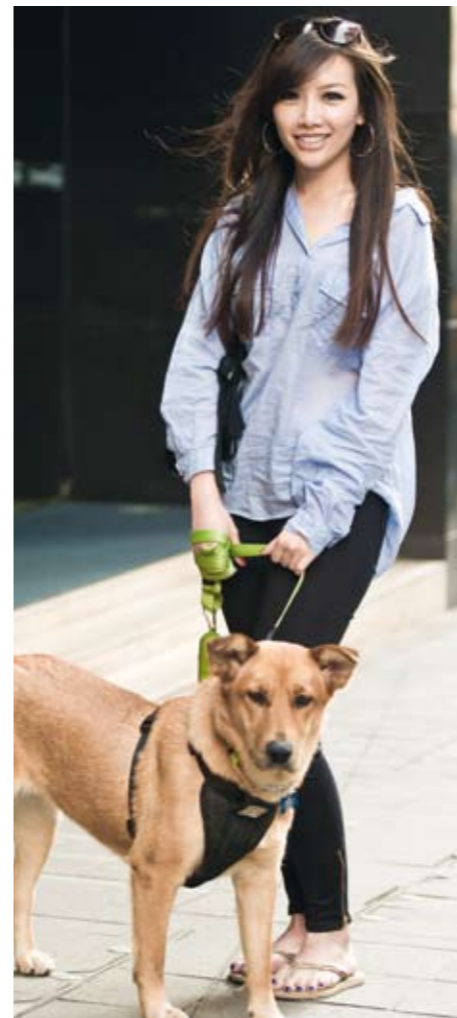
If Hong Kong fashion was at its heyday when Faye Wong was at hers, then her disappearance from the scene might have also marked the decline of our city's golden fashion era. In particular, in the intervening period, Hong Kong designers have struggled to make their mark on both the local and international markets. Part of that can be explained by the rise of other East

Asian neighbours on the global fashion scene.

"Hong Kong is a place that's popular in fashion in Asia, but it's not a major [fashion] influence in the world. [Nowadays] I think, when the media wants to write something about fashion in Asia, they will focus on Japan or even Korea," says Chan. And if that competition wasn't enough, Hong Kong now seems to be in the midst of a tussle for status with the Mainland. Says Chan: "The media focuses on Shanghai Fashion Week now. We've had a Hong Kong Fashion week for almost 50 years now, but it doesn't draw in the same kind of appeal."

Shanghai Fashion Week has only been in the game for a decade. However, with China's status as the booming region for everything, the rival scene to the north is attracting all sorts of international attention from people who want to get a slice. At the same time, Chinese designers are flocking to the best design schools around the world and bringing their new sense of creativity back home upon graduation, adding to the growth of Chinese-grown fashion.

Yet in Hong Kong, local designers have found it increasingly difficult to survive. "Fashion is first and foremost a business," says Chan, noting a maxim that local designers know only



too well. With skyrocketing rents and a lack of creative space, the Hong Kong fashion scene is increasingly becoming the domain of either luxury labels or mass chains like H&M and Zara, at the expense of independent designers. "I feel like in Hong Kong, shopping malls are so branded and so expensive that it makes it very hard for local independent designers to have a share in the consumer market. I was just in Bangkok and there was this mall with a level that focused on fostering independent designers. We don't have that in Hong Kong," says Acuna. "We import fashion and do nothing to export local talent."

Popular Hong Kong fashion designer Kei Hui of *créature de keis*, shares Acuna's frustration. Hui used to own a store on Wan Chai's Star Street, but he closed due to increased rent – the same fate met by successful local brands like Daydream Nation. Hui now designs out of his pristine white showroom in an industrial building in Wong Chuk Hang – a current hotspot for showrooms due to its temporarily affordable space.

"I won't be staying [in Hong Kong] much longer," says Hui. "I might go to China, Paris, who knows, but anywhere but here. There is a lack of respect for local designers in Hong Kong. When I was in Paris, I was surprised about the support that I received as an unknown designer. And best of all, I was helped out, all for free. You can feel the importance of fashion in a city like Paris. It's



We import fashion and do nothing to export local talent

just not the same in Hong Kong. Take Vivienne Tam. She left and really made it only when she went to New York."

Though Hui and other emerging designers in Hong Kong have made some impact in the fashion scene, their reach has mainly been limited to enthusiasts of independent fashion. And so, despite the fact that talent exists in our city, rarely do they make a lasting impact on the wider fashion culture. Acuna sums up the situation: "I have plenty of friends in the fashion industry who left Hong Kong last year because their businesses moved to Shanghai. Why is that the case? We have had all the opportunity to keep the fashion industry in Hong Kong but we haven't."

The upshot is, as compared to major fashion capitals around the world, which have had their style very much defined by the design talent creating within it, Hong Kong has had few iconic names which have steered the direction of the style scene.

That's not to say, however, that Hong Kong, as a city, lacks a distinct fashion identity. Rather, in place of a designer-led scene, we have a city where people are taking their influences from abroad.

"You can find just about everything in Hong Kong, to meet just about any style or taste. Hong Kong doesn't, per se, have a history in fashion so





there are no restrictions," says stylist to the stars Ricky Shum. "As a result, people focus on the new and popular, which changes all the time. And what's particular to Hong Kong is the speed and intensity at which it changes. We are very trend-driven. We buy whatever is a hot pick item."

It's palpable, too. If it's a Givenchy print sweater that's hot, you'll see over a dozen guys sporting it around town. Celine's luggage tote hit the scene and it was sold out in a flash. Boy London caps came and the street style enthusiasts spared no time to buy it up.

Ultimately, say the experts, the thing that defines Hong Kong style is actually how all of these items get put together. And, as Acuna suggests, a lot of that is influenced by the city itself – a reflection of economy, corporate structure and commercial gain. "Hong Kong does have a distinct style and people here are very fashionable in their own way, which is completely different to other cities in Asia," he says. If you're a big city shopper, for example, it's probable that you have a corporate job and fit into the intense corporate culture of the city. "It's a lot of dark and grey tones. People wear items that are appropriate for work but can also translate for an after work party. Usually when Hong Kong women want to bling out, they embellish with accessories.

And if they add colour, it's an electric shock colour that only a black palette can withstand. This is something that happens all year round."

Besides a noticeable corporate culture outlook on fashion, Hong Kong fashion has also been heavily influenced by our own history and environment – a vertical urban metropolis with a colonial history.

"[Hong Kong] has been influenced by Western



Hong Kong has become a hot pot of fashion

culture since the last century. But even though Hong Kong has a Western style, it will always add a little bit of its own flavour into it," says Chan. "Hong Kong is not totally a copy of Western style, but rather a fusion of Western and East."

"Hong Kong has become a hot pot of fashion," says Hui. "Just like a hotpot, you throw everything

in together and just see what the resulting taste is. You might find someone wearing an edgy distressed jacket paired with an elegant skirt from Balenciaga with a pair of sneakers. You don't know what the meaning behind it is, but it can be beautiful or distasteful."

It's a style that reflects the abundance of available fashion and an urban city lifestyle – a style where one can buy it all and wear it all at the same time. And, as Hui says, there's a particular street element to it, too. "Hongkongers like to be comfortable, so if there is something that you see a lot, it's sneakers. Just look at the way I'm dressed," he says, pointing to his simple, paint-stained khaki jacket, cropped dark blue slacks and black sneakers with neon yellow base. "It's kind of thrown together plus sneakers because we just walk a lot in the city – it's very Hong Kong. Look at Hilary Tsui and her followers. That's very Hong Kong – again, hotpot fashion."

Paris may be chic, the Brits may be sophisticated and New York may be edgy, but we have speed – and the essence of Hong Kong fashion may very well be how quickly we take up the myriad global trends, and mix and match them without restriction. Think what you will of our approach, but at least we can all be proud of the democratic principles behind it...

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