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THE HISTORY OF
HONG KONG
FASHION

Hong Kong has always had style. We've been channeling the East-meets-West look and making it our own for the last six decades.

Arthur Tam travels back in time to revisit and recreate the defining moments of Hong Kong's fashion history, as represented by the most notable female icons of these eras.

Photography by Calvin Sit.
Art direction Jeroen Brulez

Hong Kong has a colourful history of fashion. Take a look back through the decades from the 1950s right up to the 1990s, and it's easy to see a progression and definable change in trends that reflect shifts in economic prosperity, the influences of myriad foreign cultures, the rise of entertainment and, of course, the power of the consumer zeitgeist.

Before China became the manufacturing behemoth that it is today, most of the world looked to Hong Kong for skilled tailors and designers that could develop their brands and labels. For much of the Western world Hong Kong was a gateway into Asia. As cultural mixing began, so did the development of our city's unique culture and its East-meets-West fashion sensibilities.

Taking a trip down memory lane, we can see that Hong Kong has given birth to a variety of fashionable icons who captured the styles and trends of the time. From the 50s, we have the immortal actress Lin Dai, whose youthful and tragic death shocked the city, but as a result solidified her legendary look in intricate, exquisitely tailored and colourful cheongsams. In the 60s we had the charming and congenial teen idol Connie Chan Po-chu, who starred in an impressive 230 films, including her iconic role in *The Black Rose* as a Robin Hood-style cat burglar, giving her the nickname of HK's very own 'bond girl'. Chan's fresh face and infectious smile, combined with her impeccable pastel A-line dresses and hairband resonated with audiences. The 70s gave us the prolific actress Josephine Siao Fong-fong, who played the kooky and quirky character Lam Ah-chun in *Lam Ah-chun*. The character became an instant hit and her look has been recreated time and time again with the iconic bob, circular glasses, plaid shirt and bell-bottoms. There is no question that the legendary fierce chameleon of fashion, Anita Mui, dictated trends in the 80s. The singer and actress pulled off the Saint Laurent Le Smoking look, the big shoulder powerful vogue look, and the androgynous look that even Boy George would envy. Mui was a real superstar and had a hand in catapulting the names of local designers every time she wore their outfits. Then, of course, we progressed to the 90s, when the widely popular and revered singer Faye Wong stepped into the spotlight with her singular siren like voice and her couldn't-care-less-what-you-think attitude. Wong's look was an ethereal interpretation of grunge with free-flowing outfits and outrageous hairstyles – the most eye catching was her pinecone hairdo.

Here, we present a lookbook re-interpreting the women that have defined Hong Kong's fashion history – breaking down each decade from the 50s to the 90s, via their respective sartorial highlights. ▶

Stylists Arthur Tam and Nick Chan
Hair Dior Tsoi assisted by Yui Lam
Make up Gloria Chan @ Willmakeup
Model Jaelyn Yang @ Mission Models

Cheongsam Shanghai Tang, \$4,800
Necklace Nora Woo, \$7,330
Shoes Vintage Chanel from
Once Style, price upon request

Image inspired by Lin Dai

1950s

EASTERN TAILORING MEETS WESTERN TASTE

Out of the war and into business. During the 1950s, preferential tariffs were offered to Hong Kong by countries of the British Commonwealth, meaning that goods could be imported cheaply from HK, stimulating trade. Combined with the influx of Mainland refugees that brought along capital, textile knowledge and exceptional tailoring skills, Hong Kong naturally became an ideal spot to develop a garment manufacturing industry. “We had mass manufacturing companies like Lai Sun and Jan See Mee,” says associate director of the Hong Kong Design Institute Raymond Au – also known as ‘the godfather of HK fashion’. “A lot of beginner designers worked there and produced casual wear that was exported mainly to the US and UK.”

During this time women still primarily had their clothes made. “Our helper made our clothes,” says guru stylist Tiny Liu, who started her career in *City Magazine* 30 years ago as a stylist and editor

and is now a highly demanded image consultant. “Factory girls would wear a simple tunic with bias lapels and trousers, but for the more affluent Chinese women, you can see these intricately tailored and form fitting cheongsams with floral accents. A lot of skilled tailors from Shanghai came to make these ‘traditional looks’. At the same time we also had Western influences from Hollywood films like *Gone With the Wind* and soon a western aesthetic caught on.”

You could see stars like Lin Dai rocking both looks. One with lavish, detailed and colourful cheongsams and the other with tight fitted simple tops with flared skirts, which can be seen in her film, *Spring is Not For School*. When people weren’t having their clothes made, they could purchase simple casualwear at the two major department stores of the time, Wing On (founded in 1907) and Sincere (founded in 1900), which both exist today.



Trench Coat Gucci, \$29,500
Skirt Gucci, \$11,500
Headband Stylist's own
Bracelet Stylist's own
Shoes Vintage Celine's from
Once Style, price upon request
Image inspired by Connie Chan Po-chu



1960s

MANUFACTURING AND TRADE DEVELOPMENTS

During the swinging 60s, Hong Kong's economy really began to flourish with fashion buyers from all around the world coming to our city to buy fabrics and place orders on completed designs. "Hong Kong was picking up on an influx of international information and started making garments for a lot of international brands," says Au. In 1966 the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) was set up to create a platform to bring manufacturers, designers, buyers and traders all together, which helped stimulate the garment industry and expand the styles of dress that were available.

"The mod look also started coming in and influencing the younger generation. People looked up to idols like Lam Fun, Siu Fong-fong and Chan Po-chu," says Liu. The mod look was one of Connie Chan Po-chu's signature styles, with her polka dot, pastel and colour blocking dresses all brought together by headbands. "At this time cheongsams were still in fashion but their popularity began to decline, while the desire to have Western-styled clothing grew exponentially and tailors adapted to their skills to meet the demand," says author/editor Janice Wong, who recently released her second book, *My Fashion Odyssey of 25 Years*. London trench coats became all the rage (despite our city's unforgiving weather) as did the appearance of miniskirts, A-line dresses, tight-knit pants and blouses. More masculine silhouettes started appearing in womenswear while Chan started taking ass-kicking heroine lead roles in major films.

In 1968, the HKTDC and the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce put on the first ever ready-to-wear festival, which showcased looks from local designers and manufactures. "It marked a period where people started to take an interest in fashion design. One of the first fashion designers in Hong Kong was David Shee-kwan, who went on to develop his manufacturing company called David & Davids," says Au.

1970s

LOCAL POP CULTURE PROMPTS LOCAL FASHION

The most significant change in this decade was the rise of local TV pop culture, spearheaded by TVB (commonly referred to as 'Wireless Television') and Rediffusion Television, which is now ATV. "Back then, TV stars were just as popular if not more popular than movie stars," says designer and vice chairman of the Hong Kong Fashion Designers Association (HKDFA), Walter Ma. Ma gained tremendous popularity during this time with stars like Deborah Dik Boh-Lai and Liza Wang wearing his dresses. "It was common for local brands to sponsor outfits to TV stars," says Wong. "And when families tuned in during dinner time that's the fashion that they absorbed."

There was a big initiative from the HKTDC to promote local designers alongside Ma like Ragence Lam (the very first winner of the Hong Kong Young Designer's Contest in 1977), Benny Yeung and Eddie Lau, who would later create some of Anita Mui's most iconic stage looks. "Back then the HKTDC put a lot of focus on helping designers," says Ma. "Designers would get sponsored trips to go overseas to learn about fashion and the media had a focus to help give local designers coverage – a stark contrast to how it is now."

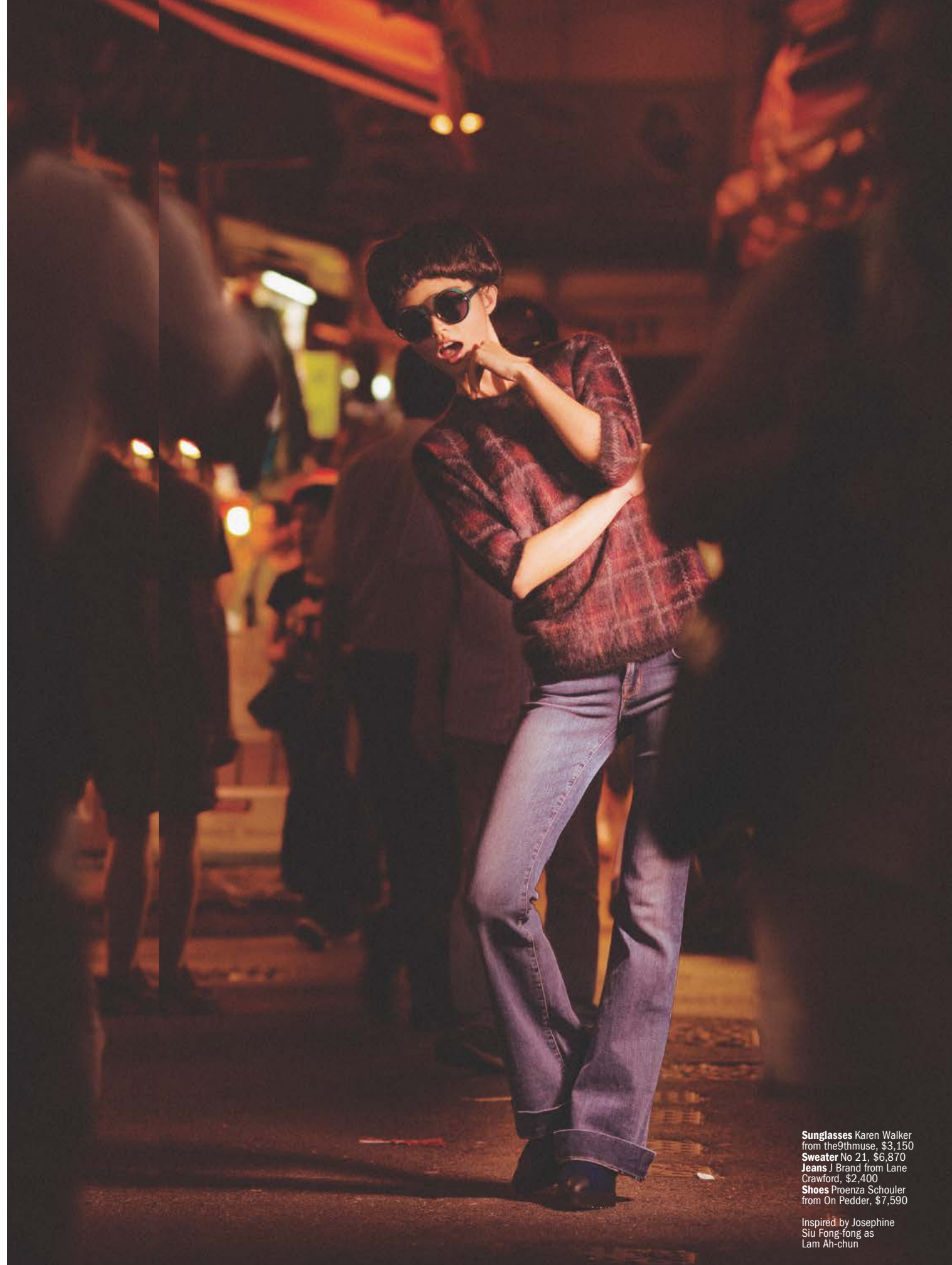
One of Hong Kong's first fashion lifestyle magazines, *Sisters*, was established in 1970. *Sisters* would come out with weekly coverage of popular trends while giving a shout out to local talent. Another pivotal fashion moment of the 70s was the

establishment of Joyce Boutique, which started at a humble corner of Wing On Department store but soon moved and took up space at the Mandarin Oriental. "You cannot talk about the history of Hong Kong fashion without mentioning Joyce Ma," says Wong. "[Joyce Boutique founder] Joyce Ma is the one who brought more tasteful and selective brands to Hong Kong," agrees Liu. "What she did influenced a generation of fashion lovers. And she's good. Being the first isn't enough, they also have to be good."

Ma was responsible for bringing high-end luxury brands into Hong Kong like Giorgio Armani and Prada and then later introducing edgier, avant-garde labels like Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and John Galliano. In 1979, Joyce opened its own standalone store and played a major role in providing exclusive items to socialites.

On the ready-to-wear side of things, women started wearing slim-waist dresses, leggings, hot pants, bell-bottoms, plaid shirts and big shawl collar jackets. The fashion icon of this era belonged to Josephine Siu Fong-fong and the character she portrayed in *Lam Au-chun*. Women were progressively adopting more comfortable styles of dress. Denim became extremely popular and Hong Kong companies like Bang Bang made a killing by satisfying the demand.

On the education front, Hong Kong Polytechnic University was established in 1972, expanding the opportunities for people interested in fashion to study design.



Sunglasses Karen Walker from the9thmuse, \$3,150
Sweater No 21, \$6,870
Jeans J Brand from Lane Crawford, \$2,400
Shoes Proenza Schouler from On Pedder, \$7,590

Inspired by Josephine Siu Fong-fong as Lam Ah-chun



Earrings Lulu Frost from the9thmuse, \$1,850
Jacket Sass & Bide, \$8,299
Dress Vintage Alaia from Once Style, price upon request
Necklace Once Style, price upon request
Bracelet Lionette from the9thmuse, \$3,798
Rings Dear Bell, \$298

Image inspired by Anita Mui

1980s

THE GOLDEN ERA OF HONG KONG FASHION

This was the golden era of finance in Hong Kong, but many facets of pop culture and fashion also thrived. Manufacturers were no longer just producing low to middle range products, they were also becoming producers for high-end fashion. From 1984 to 1985 Hong Kong was the world's number one garment exporter. However, at the same time China was undergoing its reform policy, which prompted the beginning of the end for Hong Kong manufacturing.

"Our consumption as well as our production of fashion was at its peak [in the 80s]," says Wong. "I think about 40 percent of labourers were in garment making. As you know, we have the skills for it. Also, during this time, we finally started having fashion editorials and the wider public was getting in touch with fashion." In 1984, *Cosmopolitan* came to Hong Kong, followed by *Elle* in 1987 and *Harper's Bazaar* in 1988. Luxury brands were paying attention to Hong Kong's growth and brands like Chanel and Jean Paul Gaultier entered the market. High-end fashion destination The Landmark opened up in Central in 1983, and LVMH opened their office in 1987 – bringing with them their host of labels.

On the local front, Joyce began to expand and fashion tycoons like Dickson Poon and Harvey Nichols, as well as Sir David Tang of Shanghai Tang began to make their presence known. On top of that, Vivienne Tam had just graduated from PolyU and was pursuing a dream in fashion that she would later come to fulfil. "We were actually

on a fashion show together," says Au. "Back then, there was a television station called CTV and they invited Vivienne and I to be the hosts and to talk about style and fashion. The show however, didn't last long and the station eventually went bankrupt. But other influential shows like *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* started popping up and people were able to see how stars style and dress."

"The 80s was a wonderful time for fashion," says Ma. "People were into the disco and party scene and people were so daring yet put together with what they wanted to wear. Business was booming for me as well. I used employ a hundred people back then with a few shops around the city. Local designers were also making some headway by setting up shop at the Beverly Centre. Back then, Carina Lau was just starting out as an actress and she would come to my shop and buy clothes."

The daring and bold fashionistas of the 80s were typified by Leslie Cheung and Anita Mui. Cheung played up his boyish good looks, flaunting Japanese-inspired suits, baggy trousers, tank tops and jeans, while Mui stood for female empowerment with a more masculine padded-shoulder look. "Women were starting to become executives in companies, so they needed a stronger and tougher look with wide shoulders and pant suits," says Au. Mui came out with controversial songs like *Bad Girl* and *Wicked Woman*, where she dressed in flashy Middle Eastern and androgynous outfits designed by Eddie Lau. In short, people had fun with fashion in the 80s.

1990s

THE AGE OF EXCLUSIVITY

By the 1990s, Hong Kong had solidified itself as a modern world city with a very affluent upper class. “Socialites were the main appeal for international luxury brands,” says Wong. “Tai tais would buy a total look – head-to-toe in one brand and they would always ask if any celebrity has worn the look. Back then actors and singers were seen as lowly, so the rich wouldn’t want to crossover with any of their outfits. Brands like Chanel were very exclusive and they would never lend clothes for celebrity editorials.”

For the rest of us, American influences of loose-fitting clothing and casualwear took the main stage. Comfort was of the upmost importance and no one during this decade encapsulated that better than Faye Wong with her flowy grunge outfits, which gave off a listless and disaffected appeal.

By this time the HKTDC had been hosting two fashion weeks per year and local mainstream brands were popping up all around with chains like Bossini, Giordano and G2000. Though, by no means were these brands dictating local trends. Trends were still being established at Paris Fashion Week on the catwalk with emerging designers from Europe and Japan. “The thing with Hong Kong is that we’ve always just had the money to consume, but we didn’t have the ability to dictate fashion,” says Wong. And as rent prices increased, local designers were forced to forego their shops and go to back to working with corporations, while major brands were the only forces that were able to afford the hikes. “I used to have a shop in Harbour City,” recalls Ma, “but even I had to eventually move out.” ■



Top Muji, \$200
Dress Muji, \$200
Backpack Stylist's own
Shoes Balenciaga from
On Pedder, \$7,700

Image inspired by Faye Wong