



STYLE EXPLORER: CHINESE FASHION DESIGN RECLAIMS ITS HERITAGE

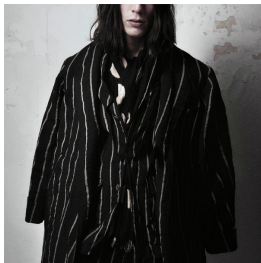
China's fashion industry is becoming increasingly independent from the rest of the world, says our columnist Arthur Tam, and looking internally for inspiration

PHOTO: DESIGNER: DENG ZHAOPING, FENG LIU/Getty IMAGES

BY ARTHUR TAM



Arthur Tam is a stylist, former lifestyle editor of Time Out Hong Kong, frequent contributor to Dazed and Confused, and editor of Fashion Statement. Check out more of his work at www.arthur.com.



Designer: Uma Wang

What would Chinese people be wearing if the Cultural Revolution had never happened? Would they be wearing 21st-century updates of well-tailored, robe-like clothes that are colourfully patterned, loose and flowing, layered and appropriately accessorised with beaded necklaces? It sounds like a cliché, but as a fashion follower of Chinese heritage, I find it a travesty that an entire fashion culture evaporated to be replaced with standard T-shirts, jeans and logo jumpers – a completely Western-dominated idea of fashion. It leaves me with a gut-wrenching feeling that my own identity has been erased in some way. At least in Japan and India people still incorporate traditional clothing into everyday life, whereas in China it has for the most part completely vanished, and for the longest time, has been clinging on to existence like an endangered northern white rhino. I want to see the old and the new coexisting – and in recent years, two types of Chinese designers have been appearing: some who have a progressive, modern stance on fashion and others who are reviving Chinese culture in a way that's free of Western stereotypes.

A while ago I was chatting with edgy, internationally acclaimed designer Masha Ma about how she felt being labelled as a 'Chinese designer'. She said: 'I don't mind. It's who I am. But to clarify, what are you referring to? Ancient China or modern China after the 70s? Because 5,000 years of Chinese history was stopped by the Cultural Revolution and now I'm influenced by modern China and the true essence of Chinese culture, which is about personal feelings and philosophy rather than appearances and symbols like phoenixes,

dragons and lanterns, which are frankly an exotic Western point of view of what China is about.'

I felt put in my place – an ignorant Chinese American who was no better than an imperialistic fetishist craving for the days of silk sheets and lacquered Chinese furniture. It dawned on me that I didn't fully understand and appreciate the modern direction of China's fashion. Perhaps my fantasy of a more 'Chinese' China was misplaced, and modern Chinese designs are just as authentic as they ever were.

The Chinese fashion scene has become much more than just a production and retail mecca; it is also producing some of the world's most creative and forward-thinking talent, like Ma, who upon graduating from Central Saint Martins in London became the first designer from the college to have a graduate collection shown at London Fashion Week (see our favourite spots in **London and other Fashion Capitals**). The collection was sleek, geometric and had that perfect modern balance of femininity and masculinity. China has shed its reputation as a creative desert, producing a group of designers that compete globally, like utilitarian Uma Wang, avant-garde knit expert Xiao Li and romantic Zhang Huishan. It makes me proud there is Chinese representation on an international level because ultimately, the perception of my identity will always be intertwined with the ups and downs of China's soft power. Ma and others have pushed for a more inclusive, diverse fashion scene that reflects global tastes – but that's only one layer to the story.



Brand: Mukzin
PHOTO: WU JUN/IMAGINECHINA



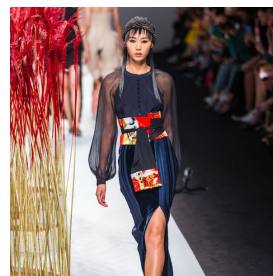
Brand: Yat Pitt
PHOTO: REN HANG

In the past decade we've seen another new movement, of Chinese designers reclaiming their heritage from a Western narrative that was built on incredibly racist films like *Daughters of a Dragon* or *The World of Suzie Wong*. At the couture level Guo Pei dominates with her extravagant gowns that are modern, artistic transformations of Chinese classics. On the catwalks of the recent Shanghai Fashion Week and Mercedes-Benz China Fashion Week there were strong Chinese references from independent labels like Ne-Tiger, Mukzin, Qi Gang, Zeng Feifei and Angel Chen. And on a budding, fringe level we have Yat Pitt, which means 'one stroke' in Cantonese, developing a youth-oriented clothing line with the tagline 'reviving lost Chinese culture'. These designers are taking back their heritage and presenting it in a fresh way.

So it's not only me who thinks there is value in incorporating aspects of traditional Chinese fashion into modern designs. More and more Chinese designers use it as a source of inspiration, while Chinese consumers are demanding it. As a recent *The Business of Fashion* article stated: 'Traditional materials and products are being reinvented for Chinese luxury consumers less enamoured by European luxury brands.' Even global brands like Hermès are jumping onto to this shifting taste in China with the development of their Chinese specific sub-brand Shang Xia.

There is a reappropriation happening in Chinese fashion, different from the exoticism that Ma describes, and not dictated by Western ideologies. It's an exciting prospect for the world of fashion, offering alternatives to the monopoly the West has held in fashion for far too long.

It's time to wake up from our collective delusion that fashion begins and ends with the catwalks in London, Paris and Milan. Chinese designers have begun to reclaim their identity and create a platform uniquely their own. This new focus offers the chance to create a truly representative fashion industry.



Designer: Ji Cheng
PHOTO: WU JUN/IMAGINECHINA

For more fashion-insider musings from Arthur Tam, [check out his article on the progression of men's fashion here](#)

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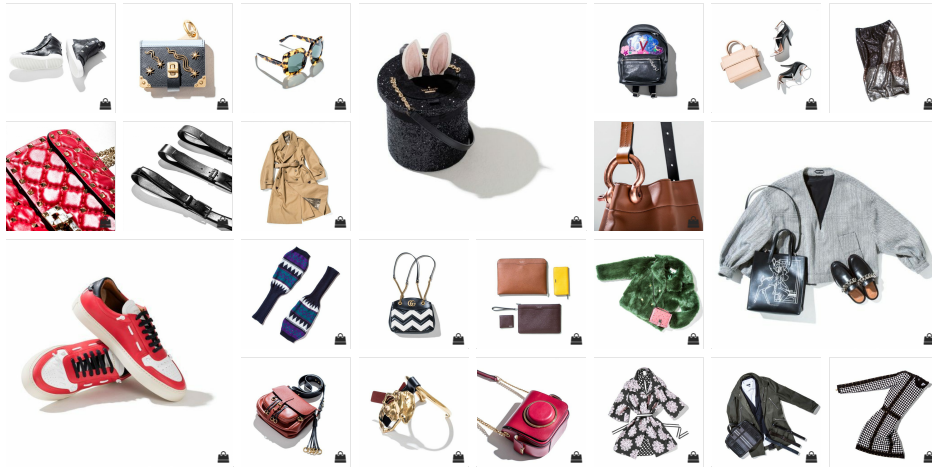
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