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SHFW: Fashion Trailblazers – Stories from the Frontline of Chinese Design

18 October 2019
By Susan Owens, The Luxury Conversation

In Paris, Milan and London fashion designers are typically seen – but not heard. Their first priority is to sell clothes. But in a new initiative during Shanghai Fashion Week (SHFW) three of China's most successful designers shared their individual fashion journeys in a public forum, *Fashion Trailblazers: Stories from the Frontline of Chinese Design*.

The trio, Grace Chen (Grace Chen Couture); Hai Lin (Particle Fever) and Jianxia Yin (UOOYAA) all had one thing in common – commercial success. But that's where their stories had ended. Talking at the *Fashion Traiblazers* event, they revealed their inspirations, collaborations, production methods and media programs, telling a personal journey in terms of how they were able to make an impact the industry after a long, bumpy road to continuing fashion success.

Grace Chen had first suggested the initiative which was co-hosted by the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology (BIFT) and supported by Sally Xiaoli Wu, vice-president of Phoenix TV. “Instead of people talking about designers, why not hear it from the designers themselves?” The idea was swiftly adopted by BIFT’s Alumni Association and ultimately attracted an audience of designers, students, retailers and investors in an inclusive salon atmosphere. Grace is the most celebrated of the group when it comes to winning a high-profile international clientele.

Her couture collection has been shown around the world, including in New York, London and Paris where she was the first Chinese designer invited to show as a guest of the Chinese embassy.

Grace Chen “Monaco” Collection (L)

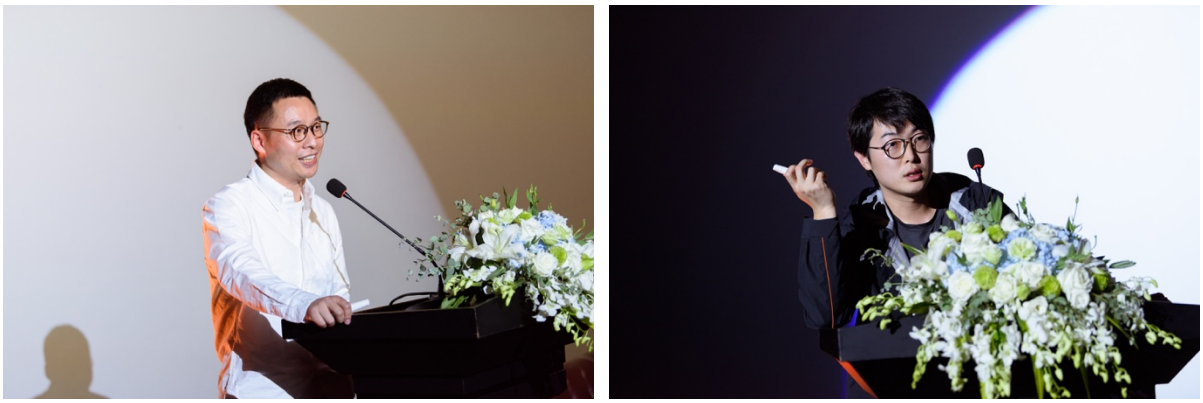
Grace Chen at the sixth China–U.S. high-level meeting on people-to-people exchange in Washington DC (R)

Reflecting on what defines success, she contends that commercial success is the only true yardstick and is dependent on one thing: being valuable to your customer. She has reassuring words for designers who think this means compromise; “I don’t believe you have to sacrifice creativity or self-expression to achieve this.”

“Fashion is not only about self-expression,” she says. “What you really need to think about is your customer. You need to ask, why do they buy my clothes?” In her case she’s very clear about the answer; “It’s because they have an artistic and functional value for my clients.”

All three designers described the value they place on connecting to customers. Hai Lin, who started his brand in a small rooftop studio in Shanghai just three years ago and now employs 70 people, said; “We value interactions with clients on all levels. Some turn up with posters they want signed, others will seek out our designers who are very happy to listen to their suggestions for a couple of hours.”

UOOYAA’s Jianxia Yin said; “You move from standout to breakthrough status as a brand when your values, and ours are to reflect the modern Chinese woman, enjoy the people’s consensus.”



Designer Jianxia Yin, Founder of UOOYAA (L) Designer Hai Lin, Founder of Particle Fever (R)

At Grace Chen’s most recent in Monaco, she introduced her fall/winter 2018 ‘Grace -The Monaco Collection’ which paid tribute to the Hollywood actress Grace Kelly and was attended by members of the Monaco royal family. Her appreciation of impeccable craftsmanship and enduring style is, in part, the result of 15 years working as a couturier in both New York and Hollywood before she returned to China to establish her brand in 2009 – and even while working at the high end of fashion she had sage advice for any designer enjoying the first flush of success.

“Fashion weeks are judgment day – the audience decides if you are hot or not. But for any young designer what is more important is their product. It’s only successful because, in the end, fashion buyers like it, buy it and carry it in their boutiques.

“You might be famous overnight; you might have the money to stage a show or the talent to win an award but ultimately a fashion business is not sustainable without commercial success.

“What is success if it is bought?” she asks. “It’s simply not sustainable. And so often this is not understood.”

Investors agree. Panelist Ping Ping, the managing director of leading private equity fund Chengwei Capital addressed the critical issue of funding a fashion brand. “Investors look at a designer and his or her company’s path to success, hoping to find a perfect match between the designer and the partner,” she said. “Most often it’s not perfect. Whether a brand succeeds or not is more dependent on whether the investor identifies designer thinking, philosophy and approach.”

Designer Grace Che, Founder of Grace Chen Couture (L) and Ping Ping, managing director of private equity fund Chengwei Capital (R)

Grace has always had two distinct goals; “To find a modern, confident and glamorous fashion language for Chinese women, and to be a bridge between a Chinese aesthetic and the world, where there are often misunderstandings.”

Chen’s international clientele prove she has achieved this. Typically, women at the top of the tree in the world of entertainment, business and politics, they are the reason the industry has her in their focus. “I hope the brand Grace Chen will be the very first Chinese luxury brand,” said Ge Wenyao, chairman of the Shanghai International Fashion Federation (SHIFF), the governing body of the Shanghai fashion industry.

Does she think the forum will become a regular event on the SHFW schedule? “I think this was a good starting point,” said Chen. “It doesn’t have to be restricted to Shanghai. It could be in London or New York.”

As a couture designer Chen values a personal relationship with each of her clients and achieves this through intimate showings in her beautiful, historic Shanghai boutique, set in a pretty garden. In addition, twice a year she sends out “by-invitation-only” notes to her Fashion Travel Series, when five to eight Chinese clients join her trunk shows around the world.

"It makes me a little different," Grace says of her relationship with the customer; "But I choose to be closer to her. When they travel with me there are unforgettable moments."

To read the full article (free registration):
https://luxuryconversation.com/shfw-fashion-trailblazers-stories-from-the-frontline-of-chinese-design/

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About Grace Chen Couture
Regarded as one of China's most influential fashion innovators, Grace Chen's designs has an exceptional ability to transcends time, place and culture. As the first mainland Chinese alumna of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Grace Chen was a designer to the stars in New York and LA for 15 years, before setting up her own label in China in 2009.

Hailed as "the Power Dresser of China" (South China Morning Post) and "China's Most Sought-After Couturier" (Hollywood Reporter), Chen has dressed an impressive list of global clienteles, including Oprah Winfrey, actress Helen Mirren, Sarah Jessica Parker and Sharon Stone (under a different label), China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, Emmy Award-winning presenter and entrepreneur Yue-sai Kan, Chinese media icon Yang Lan, as well as Taiwanese actress, Lin Chi-Ling, model Sui He, Chinese actress Ni Ni and many more.

Spearheading an iconic fashion travel series titled "Around the World in 80 Dresses", Chen is on a mission to spread the image of a modern Chinese style for the world. In the past five years, she has traveled across the globe, from Tasmania to Kenya, Japan, the United States and Europe to showcase her designs to new audiences. Whether it's the mayor of Brussels or the last Princess of Russia, all seem to be able to find a piece of themselves in Grace Chen.

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