

FEATURE

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Guo Pei's haute couture collection in Paris on July 3, 2019. Photo: AFP / Thomas Samson

China chic now cutting-edge in Paris

Chinese designers have made it into the rarefied world of high fashion in the French capital

By [Katia Dolmadjian](#)

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“Made in China” may still evoke more off the rack than catwalk but Chinese designers are slowly installing themselves in Paris.

They are flocking to the fashion capital of the world as part of an upscale march towards the lucrative luxury market, a segment that is increasingly made up of Chinese shoppers.

As Paris gears up for its next run of shows early in the new year, it is clear that

Chinese designers have made it into the rarefied world of high fashion.

Think Guo Pei, the Chinese-born and trained couturier best known for the massive canary-yellow coronation cape worn by Rihanna that stole the show at the New York Met’s 2015 gala.

Guo, who has a Paris boutique, will present her haute culture collection. Several other Chinese designers, such as Uma Wang, Masha



Jarel Zhang's Ready-to-Wear collection in Paris on October 1, 2019. Photo: AFP / Thomas Samson

Ma, Yang Li, Jarel Zhang, Dawei and Shangguan Zhe, will show their latest ready-to-wear offerings in February.

Fashion group

“We’re starting to see fashion coming from China aimed at the entire world and which is creating new ideas about the country – a new ‘Made in China’ of quality and refinement,” Isabelle Capron, the head of Chinese fashion group Icicle’s Paris office, said.

Founded in Shanghai in 1997, Icicle has 270 shops in China and generates 250 million euros (US\$275 million) in annual sales.

Under the label’s back-to-nature ethos, it favors natural fabrics such as cashmere, silk, cotton, wool, and linen. It uses natural dyes made from onions, walnut bark, woad and tea to color

the clothes it makes in the three factories that it owns in China.

The Chinese firm opened its first international store in September in Paris in the heart of the city’s “Golden Triangle” of luxury boutiques.

“It’s a springboard for our internationalization,” Capron said. “Paris is the capital of fashion, and the goal is to give our brand visibility.”

Even though many Western brands are produced in China, European consumers still view clothes tagged “Made in China” as being of mediocre quality.

“Stereotypes are very tenacious: seven years ago when I said I was joining a Chinese group, some people looked at me and it was clear that ‘the Chinese have no taste’ and ‘the Chinese

are poor-quality manufacturers' were running through their heads," Capron said.

"But today, there has been a real swing, this new wave of Chinese brands is a tidal wave."



Shiatzy Chen's Ready-to-Wear collection in Paris on September 30, 2019. Photo: AFP / Christophe Archambault

Designer Shangguan Zhe, the founder of the Sankuanz label based in the Chinese port city of Xiamen, made his international debut in London in 2015.

Now a regular at the Paris men's ready-to-wear shows, he has not encountered stereotypes or challenges based on his nationality from fellow designers.

"People from outside the industry are more likely to have these stereotypes," Shangguan said in China. "People from within the industry are fully aware of the level China's manufacturing is at [and] the quality is actually getting better and better."

"[As for] Paris, [it] is a very international stage. People don't really care where you came from ... The product itself is more important," he added.

Shiatzy Chen, a fashion house founded in 1978 in Taiwan, produces its clothes in Shanghai and Taipei. It has staged shows in Paris for a decade and has a boutique in one of Paris's most exclusive streets.

Heart of couture

"Paris is the center of Western fashion and the birthplace of the couture. A design studio in Paris, the heart of couture, helps us to explore complex Western construction techniques as well as stay on top of the latest trends," Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia, who founded the fashion house and who has been dubbed the Coco Chanel of Taiwan, said.

The label, which set itself a mission to create "neo-Chinese chic" through a fusion of East and West, has 70 boutiques throughout Asia. The collections marry traditional techniques with contemporary cuts.

"To be attractive, including for Chinese clients, a Chinese label cannot limit itself to boutiques at home, it must also be present in Paris" luxury goods expert Eric Briones, a luxury goods expert, said, noting that China today represents some 35% of the global luxury goods market.

"[This] rise of a new 'Made in China' is just the start of a revolution, initiated by a young generation that wants to consume Chinese," Briones, who co-founded the Paris School of Luxury, added.

– AFP