



Hong Kong's couture industry is reinventing itself as designers change their business models to keep pace with the times, writes Divia Harilela

Behind the seams

In France, haute couture dates back more than 150 years and is protected by law. In Hong Kong, however, the couture business is much younger, having only emerged in the 1990s, when now renowned designers such as Barney Cheng, Benny Yeung Yuen-chun and Cecilia Yau Suet-ki began to dress the city's rich and famous in made-to-order creations crafted in their small ateliers.

"There were not many designers specialising in couture before then as the difference between a couture designer and a traditional tailor was not defined and was appreciated only by very sophisticated clients. When the economy boomed in the 1980s and 1990s, people started to look for something that was more personal," explains former couture designer and Hong Kong Fashion Designers Association executive committee member, Bonita Cheung Kit-man.

Cheng, who has been in the couture business for almost 25 years and has dressed the likes of Michelle Yeoh Choo Kheng and Gong Li, says, "I can only name a handful of Hong Kong designers who were around when I started.

"I opened my doors to offer unique designs to discerning clients because I believed there was a need for bespoke creations on this small island, where people would often show up to the same event in identical outfits. I also wanted to dispel the myth that Hong Kong could not do anything other than cheap knock-offs and imitations."

Thanks to Hong Kong's busy social calendar, the couture business boomed as tai-tais demanded new outfits for every special occasion. More talented locals emerged, from established couturiers such as Arthur Lam Shue-pan and new faces such as Dora Chu and Kev Yiu, many of them specialising in evening wear.

Several years ago, however, couture experienced major challenges. Cheaper manufacturing costs on the mainland led to more competition as new boutiques

arrived offering made-to-measure services. Then came an influx of brands from the West, offering women more choices, especially of evening wear.

The arrival of brands from the West also led to increased rents, making it difficult for designers to open shopfronts or even maintain their workshops. The latest hurdle is the rise of online shopping, which offers clients more competitive prices and an even wider choice.

"When I first got into the bespoke market, the economy was not so great, and people could easily get dresses at affordable prices from the internet. Being a couturier was not as good as I imagined it would be. I had difficulty finding consignment stores and related clients," says Yiu, who decided instead to target the celebrity market, designing for the likes of singer Kary Ng Yu-fei and actress Fan Bingbing.

Says Arthur Lam: "There was once good demand and an appreciation for quality and local designers. Now most people want things fast and cheap. The lifestyle of people around the world has changed, too. From furniture designs to restaurants and clothing, simple and no fuss is in demand."

This has forced many established couturiers to change their business models. Some created new lines that catered to their clients' modern lifestyles.

Lam, for one, has branched out into ready-to-wear targeted at the more lucrative mainland market, while Cecilia Yau recently opened a store in PMQ showcasing an off-the-rack collection which appeals to a broader clientele.

Cheng, meanwhile, has shifted focus to a luxe diamond jewellery line.

"I would not consider it a move away from couture as much as a natural progression into the jewellery business. I love designing ensembles and being able to advise on jewellery to go with their Barney Cheng trousseau. Of course, branching into different arenas does help to put money in the pocket. Right now we are delivering on a 20,000-piece uniform design

A look from Melissa Bui's 2015 autumn-winter collection (above); gown from Aolisha by Kev Yiu (right).



project that we are invoicing eight digits for," he says.

The next generation of talent has followed suit by diversifying their offerings. Central Saint Martin's graduate Dora Chu started her couture line in 2008 after working with the likes of Jenny Packham and Alexander McQueen. While her elaborate creations have been worn by wealthy women in Hong Kong and beyond, she recently announced that she will be launching a ready-to-wear line.

"With the change of social scene, I do see that women need to attend more, but less formal, events. A ready-to-wear product provides quick and convenient solutions to customers from this perspective. Designers can no longer specialise in bespoke, but must diversify into new product lines to cope with new demand. I've seen designers engage in jewellery, handbags and also fragranced products to compliment their business portfolios," Chu says.

Others have gone on to identify new niches in the couture market much such as Cheng's former assistant, Melissa Bui, who launched a demi-couture line in 2013 featuring elegant silhouettes accented with specialised embroideries.

"I am translating my knowledge of

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DORA CHU, DESIGNER

couture workmanship into a more economically accessible ready-to-wear line. Customers can expect couture-like quality at a more

affordable price. I also include simpler everyday pieces that are younger and more modern in every collection; we can't all wear ballgowns every day," Bui says. Vivian Luk, who started her business in 2008 after working with Vera Wang in New York, has capitalised on the growing bridal market while offering a children's line. Her bespoke business, she says, is still on the rise, thanks to her ability to



balance her own style with the needs of her clients.

"In Asia, it is still part of the custom in our culture to respect something purposely fitted on the wearer, be it through alterations or something tailor-made. Asian clients have a different sense of fit and concept, whereby bespoke would be able to meet their needs directly when compared to ready-to-wear," Luk says.

"It's just a matter of finding a new way of doing bespoke that is different to how traditional couturiers work that would make it attractive to today's lifestyle."

While the West has been lamenting the demise of couture for years, Hong Kong couturiers have a more positive attitude about the future of the craft. Asians are becoming more supportive of home-grown talents who have a distinctive take on fashion that combines both local and international sensibilities.

Some designers such as Susanna Soo, who creates a ready-to-wear line as well as couture, have started to do couture trunk shows on the mainland as a way of expanding their market and capturing a client base that's eager to learn.

At the Waldorf Astoria Shanghai on the Bund, where she held her trunk show, two or three clients at a time would visit for a 90-minute personal introduction to the collection by Soo, who says mainland women seem to appreciate her luxurious silks, laces and body-conscious silhouettes.

"It seemed to be very new and fresh to them, but at the same time they dress well, [with] sophistication," she adds.

Hong Kong's couturiers still offer lower costs than their counterparts in the West.

"I use the same fabric mills where many couture houses create special fabrics; I bead using the same hands that do many of the world's best embroideries and beadings. A bespoke service will never die out in Hong Kong, especially with prohibitive ready-to-wear prices for evening pieces that are more expensive than our home-grown couture," says Cheng.

Chu adds: "The market hasn't died down but requires a level of sophistication to satisfy changing customer needs. Customers learn their taste in daily fashion wear and couture designers need to be up to date to be able to exceed customer expectations." divia.harilela@scmp.com