

A cut above the rest

HONG KONG FASHION DESIGNER SPECIALIZING IN HAUTE COUTURE MAKES A BIG SPLASH WITH CELEBRITIES AND TOP CORPORATIONS ALIKE

BY ALFRED ROMANN IN HONG KONG

It's not often that fashion designers get to witness thousands of people in one place all wearing their designs, but Cecilia Yau remembers the proud moment clearly and emotionally.

That particular occasion was an indication of success for a relatively young designer from Hong Kong who has made a splash in fashion circles from her home city to Paris.

More than a decade after launching Cecilia Yau Couture in Hong Kong in 1999 and after earning numerous accolades — from winning the Hong Kong Young Fashion Designers' Contest in the same year her business started to being selected by the Junior Chamber International Hong Kong as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Persons in 2013 — Yau was asked to design the uniforms and revamp the image of the largest employer in Macao.

SJM Holdings, a casino holding company owned by



Cecilia Yau



billinaire Stanley Ho, commissioned Yau to design uniforms for the company's 20,000 employees at every level.

Some time later, she participated in a charity walk with thousands of SJM staff, all wearing the uniform she designed. It was a career-defining moment for her and one not dissimilar from seeing staff at Hong Kong property giant Henderson Land or Langham Hotels — companies she previously worked with — also wearing her designs.

"Most uniforms aren't very stylish. If you want to look different, you have to do it in an au couture way," Yau says. "Most of my clients are the leaders in their industry. They want to be ahead of their competitors so they come to me and say 'can you design something for us? We want to look totally different so that (customers) recognize us immediately?"

For most designers, high-end corporate assignments are the epitome of success, but for Yau they represent the tip of the iceberg in design success and achievement.

"People always mix up artists and designers," she says. "Artists can go on painting forever without a timeframe, but designers work within a limited timeframe, season by season, and your customers cannot wait forever."

The Cecilia Yau Couture store is situated in Hong Kong's Central district. The open space is lined with lush, sophisticated and colorful gowns and wedding dresses.

"To be able to create something, I like

to make myself quite relaxed. When I am nervous, I can't create," Yau says. "Most of the time I get my ideas when I am doing nothing — when I am taking a shower or going to the flower market and watching the colors."

"I do not limit myself to one kind of design. I just want to do something I truly love and I have my own platform to do just that."

The store, her atelier, is her space. It is here that her designs have propelled her to success. It is also here where celebrities come to choose their gowns for red carpet events or, more significantly, life events like weddings.

For example, Yau designed the wedding outfits for model Irene Wang and Karson Choi, the son of business tycoon Choi Chee-ning, better known in Hong Kong as the "King of Toys." She dressed the Hong Kong celebrities in regal gold. The choice of wedding outfits was not a metaphor, she says, but perhaps fitting for Hong Kong, a city where the chase for gold — money, success, careers — leaves little room for anything else.

This is a far cry from Yau's days as a student in Paris in the late 1990s. She studied at the ESMOD International Fashion University, an institution that has been producing some of the world's most renowned designers since establishing in 1841.

She had an interest in art as a child and dreamed of one day becoming a fashion designer. In primary school, Yau was a fitting model for a fashion house. She took a summer course in Paris and later went back to study haute couture,

which refers to exclusive custom-fitted, high-fashion clothing.

Yau was part of a wave that helped raise haute couture in Hong Kong, a tough task when trying to appeal to consumers in a city constantly on the move.

"The mentality of people who live in this city makes a difference. Hong Kong is a well-established city for finance and tourism," says Yau, speaking quietly, in eloquent but slightly accented English.

There is an enormous contrast in the attitudes toward design in Hong Kong and Paris, she says. It is a contrast she misses, even a decade and a half after returning from Paris.

For her particular industry, Paris is the center of the universe.

"Paris is (different). To live in that city is crucial. When you live there, fashion is in your blood and your everyday things," she says. "You have fashion every day and (take) inspiration from people, from the city, from the scenes."

"What I remember from that time is sitting in a cafe, watching people and getting inspiration," she says. "But Hong Kong is too busy. People don't really

have time to sit back and really think about whether it is (worth) it to do something."

Although Yau shies away from saying which Asian city she believes is leading in the fashion stakes, she does examine the contrasts between Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea — the latter having emerged as a global source of unique fashion and styles.

"Singapore is more relaxed," she says. "They really think about what they should do and the government helps them solve all the problems."

South Korea may be leading the way in the region in terms of creativity and design, she adds. "When they believe in something, they really believe in it and find a way to execute it," she says of South Korean fashion designers, including those she met while studying in Paris.

And yet, Hong Kong does have a style that fits the city: "Hong Kong style is fast," she says.

If Hong Kong wants to lead the Asian fashion market, she says, young people must think about what they truly love and focus on it.

Yau believes Hong Kong is often too practical with its fashion styles.

"Hong Kong, compared to Paris, is much younger," she says. "But this can be an advantage also. This is a great opportunity for young people and fashion designers. It is a great opportunity to work it out.

"You have to carry on year after year so the market becomes more sophisticated."

Yau would like to see more emphasis on nurturing the industry in the city, but there are challenges that must be tackled. Rent is a major one.

"Rent is expensive in Hong Kong. Great ideas are great ideas, but you need a platform to showcase them. Unfortunately, Hong Kong is Hong Kong for (high) rentals."

When she started her business, Yau did not yet have her store but only a workshop space. She was lucky enough to accumulate customers before her expenses rose. It is difficult to say whether she would be able to do the same thing today.

"To rent (as a company starting out today) is not realistic, but of course

(each) different stage will have different politics in government."

She mentions PMQ — Hong Kong's former Police Married Headquarters which has recently been transformed into a complex of studios and stores for creative industries — as a great addition to the city for designers.

"I think (PMQ) is a positive project from the HKDC (Hong Kong Trade Development Council) and the government. I hope we see more like that," she says. "Substantially, they have to do something."

And then there is the link to the Chinese mainland.

"(The mainland) is a very big market," she says. International fashion brands are increasingly aiming for the Chinese mainland, aware that it will become the biggest consumer of luxury items.

"If we don't influence them, they will influence us. The best thing is to not worry about it. There is no point comparing."

It is hard to say who is influencing whom. "It seems that there are no boundaries at all," she concludes. ■

CECILIA YAU

Founder, Cecilia Yau Couture

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS:

2013: Selected as one of Ten Outstanding Young Persons in Hong Kong and winner of the Outstanding Greater China Designs award

2008: Winner of The Ten Outstanding Designers award

1999: Launched Cecilia Yau Couture. Overall Winner at Hong Kong Fashion Designers' Contest

QUICK TAKES:

What advice would you have for young designers?

Young people have to think about what they truly love. Ask yourself: What do you want to create? Is it something that you love?

What are key attributes of designers?

You need to have the know-how, the technique and the understanding to fully understand the history and the background of your customers.

What is creativity for a designer?

Creativity is something very personal. It reflects your inner side. The product is just a projection of your inner side. Thinking about who you want to be, what kind of person you want to be, is very important.

