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# THE DRAGON STIRS

**MAO JIHONG** is leading the charge of new Chinese designers with his emphasis on handmade craftsmanship and Asian inspired creativity. He spoke to **DAISY ZHONG** about the rebirth of luxury manufacturing in China and the consequences for European fashion brands who have relied on easy profits in the East for too long.

It was two hours before the start of the HKDI's annual Fashion Show, a signature event that showcases work by selected graduates and has launched the careers of several Hong Kong designers.

As the minutes ticked away a team of judges stood in front of two whiteboards pasted with photographs from 24 collections, debating which student designers should be among the prizewinners.

All went smoothly until the judges hesitated over whether one collection should be awarded two prizes. The collection was distinguished by exquisite patterns that had been printed on fabric. The matter was undecided until one of the judges made a passionate plea for a principle that he regards as essential for China's resurgent fashion industry.

"Collection 23 displays excellent handling of colours and patterns," said Mao Jihong, the co-founder of Exception de Mixmind. "However, it relies on computer-generated images and the craftsmanship

LEFT LOOKS FROM THE MOYNOT 2013 AUTUMN/WINTER COLLECTION  
BELOW MAO JIHONG

has not been done by hand. If we give 23 a second prize we will be promoting a practice that creates a beautiful effect, but can never attain the uniqueness and originality of hand-painted patterns. I think as judges it's really important for us to send a signal that designers should respect work that's done by hand. It's about nurturing good habits."

High standards of production are something that Mao takes seriously. He founded Exception de MixMind on this principle and it has helped the company become one of the most highly regarded fashion brands in the world. Established by Mao and his then wife Ma Ke, the brand's innovative designer, in Guangzhou in 1996, Exception deliberately avoids mass production. All their clothing is made from natural materials such as cotton, linen, silk and wool; the use of artificial dyes and colorants is minimised, and the manufacturing process is conducted mostly through traditional techniques like spinning, weaving and sewing.

Exception's sister brand, a couture collection called Wuyong (which means useless in Chinese) was founded in 2006 and many say it represents the pinnacle of Chinese fashion design with its exclusive non-commercial feel and its avant-garde artistic use of discarded materials such as leftover tarpaulins and paint covered sheets.





For Mao, regarded as the foremost entrepreneur in China's fashion industry, a craftsmanship-based approach lies at the heart of his philosophy of design education, and he believes it is the key to establishing a thriving domestic fashion industry.

In evaluating the work at the Fashion Show Mao reiterated his hope that students will pay more attention to the importance of handcrafting their collections. "Fashion is not just about drawing designs on a computer," he says. "Designers must know how to create garments by hand, which is the most important practical skill. Young designers should go to workshops and factories, and become familiar with the environment, which will give their designs a more human element."

When Mao assesses a garment he does more than observe the details with his trained eye, he also "touches it, feels it, and thinks about its relationship to the human body." In an interview with *CKGSB Knowledge* last year, Mao noted that while Westerners use sight as their fashion sense, "The Chinese tend to favor touch and texture as a measure of beauty." According to him, this perspective is rooted in oriental values that revere unity between humanity and nature.

Although sustainability has become a popular theme for fashion brands, what distinguishes

OPPOSITE LOOKS  
FROM THE YMOYNOT  
2013 AUTUMN/  
WINTER COLLECTION



«IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT TO SEND A SIGNAL THAT DESIGNERS SHOULD RESPECT WORK THAT'S DONE BY HAND.»

Exception is that an environmentally friendly approach has been one of its core values since the beginning. This insistence on core values has given Mao a significant role in the re-emergence of China's domestic fashion design industry. According to Tomothy Parent, a fashion observer and writer on the evolution of style in China, Chinese domestic designer brands simply did not exist before the establishment of Exception.

With over 100 stores in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou and an estimated annual turnover of more

than RMB 900 million a year Exception is unquestionably a success story. The brand won global attention in March when China's first lady Peng Liyuan chose a coat, suit and handbag that had been tailor-made by Mao's company when she accompanied her husband Xi Jinping on a visit to Russia, his first official trip as China's new President.

"Because of the media coverage, people suddenly realised that China's indigenous fashion industry is doing great," says Mao. "But the process started at least 17 years ago, when people began to choose Exception as the brand they love best."

Mao believes that the renaissance of Chinese domestic luxury is closely related to the renewed strength of

the nation and the improved quality of life that many people have. China has been through a period of "savoir-faire imperialism" in which European brands, especially those from France, have tried to occupy China and persuade Chinese people they do not have the skills to make products of European quality. But in the same way that Chinese filmmakers have





now pushed Hong Kong films from the mainland market, Mao expects Chinese fashion designers to do the same to the cultural invaders from the West. Many industry experts agree arguing that the time when uninspiring brands like Tod's (which some incorrectly thought had made the bag Peng Liyuan carried to Russia) can rely on Asia to replace profits lost from Europe and the US is coming to an end.

"This trend coincides with the fact that the balance of power is shifting from the West to the East, economically and politically," says Mao. "In past decades people around the world did not think Made-in-China was a good enough label."

Although China had arguably the world's strongest

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economy for two millennia (and was the prime source of luxury products like ceramics and silk), the country only started industrialising at the end of 20th century and rapidly became the world's prime source of inexpensive labour, specialising in mass-production of low-value goods such as cheap T-shirts. The Chinese were rarely thought of as creative and mostly stereotyped as copiers and counterfeiters. But Mao says this is no longer true. "These stereotypes are changing. After having gained financial security, people naturally developed their own lifestyle, taste and preference. Chinese consumers no longer see Europe as the only place that can produce luxury."

From the very beginning Exception has considered its competitors to be well-known international brands and was fully prepared to play at their level. They have recently been joined by a host of talented young Chinese designers such as Ziggy Chen, Uma Wang, Masha Ma, Nicole Zhang and Mary Ching, all of whom Mao says have "contributed to elevating China's homegrown luxury industry".

"We have long been involved in a global market, and customers in and outside China have been making a conscious choice about quality," he says. "I don't intentionally bring my brands to the international market. It doesn't matter where you think the battlefield is, what's important is the state of mind you bring to the battle."

Simply put, the evolution of Chinese domestic luxury is as natural as the "survival of the fittest": it is shaped by choices of consumers who are increasingly sophisticated. One of the latest developments of this evolution is Mao's involvement in the launching of a new brand YMOYNOT, which has seen HKDI take a key role.

The brand, named after a play on the words "why not?", is founded by Mao and his Hong Kong counterpart Stanley Wong, with support from iconic Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto. Setting out to challenge fashion conventions with its oriental aesthetic, the brand opened its first shop in May on Hong Kong's Star Street, with 200 more shops expected to open around the region in the next two years.

HKDI's Department of Fashion and Image Design (FID) was invited to act as YMOYNOT's branding consultant with FID staff and students coordinating the fitting of the shop in Hong Kong, organising the opening event, providing PR services and overseeing daily operations.

Leung Mee Ling, senior lecturer of FID, says that

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besides branding and marketing cooperation, both YMOYNOT and Exception keep recruiting HKDI students as their fashion designers and sales trainees. "YMOYNOT wants to establish a long-term relationship with us regarding branding and product development."

Mao chose to work with HKDI because he and the design school share a passion for craftsmanship. "The HKDI's emphasis on actual practice, on the technique of making garments by hand, refined by a meticulous attitude towards research and study, is the greatest asset of the institution, distinguishing HKDI from other design institutes across Asia. This practical-oriented direction in design education is something I wholeheartedly endorse."

And with Mao supporting the upsurge in craftsmanship and creativity in mainland China while HKDI does the same in Hong Kong it may not be long before the world's fashion leaders are heading to Guangzhou and Tseung Kwan O for their inspiration instead of Milan and Paris. ①

ABOVE LEFT LOOKS FROM THE YMOYNOT 2013 AUTUMN/WINTER COLLECTION  
ABOVE RIGHT A LOOK FROM THE EXCEPTION SPRING 2006 COLLECTION