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OPPOSITE
KOYO WILLIAM

JEAN GENE

Koyo William is now an internationally recognised fashion designer with his own label, but his story began at the HKDI, where he first understood the power of creativity and jeans that fit in all the right places.

His instincts were so on the money that he now has, well, lots of it: Money that is. Or, at the very least, he has a very successful business with branches in over 100 cities on the Chinese Mainland, two in Paris and stores in Hong Kong. Although none of that had come to pass in the early 1990s when Koyo went to work as a designer for a fashion wholesaler in Sham Shui Po.

THEY SAY THAT empires are born in the strangest of places. For Koyo William his empire-to-be was born in the changing room of a jean store.

His employer let him make lots of business decisions and he frequently found himself required to place orders for millions of dollars. It was a very big jump into the deep, deep end of fashion's business side, but it helped him to build the international business he has today.

"I was trying on some American jeans and they just didn't fit me right," says Koyo from the headquarters of his fashion company Koyo Jeans in Cheung Sha Wan. "I realised that they were not cut for my kind of body." From that realisation came a desire to make jeans that were just right for the Asian body type, but then he added another factor as well.

"I once bought thousands of dollars worth of Nike labels and then discovered they were counterfeits," he says. "I found a design solution by sewing multiple labels onto the same pair of shorts, so it looked quite trendy. We sold them at quite a high price and made a handsome profit."

"I wanted my jeans to be the right shape for Asians," he says, adjusting his trademark sunglasses even though the lights in his studio have the candlepower of several suns. "But I also wanted to make my jeans to embody an Asian aesthetic, to have features that appeal to an Asian aesthetic."

Before long Koyo had bought his employer's old shop but a trip to Paris in the late 90s showed him that the products he was making were not yet good enough for the world market. Back in Hong Kong he bought lots of different designer jeans and tore them apart to assess

KOYO WILLIAM



LEFT A KOYO JEANS
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"Koyo William Cheung shows what I really want," he says. "It's high class fashion for performers, for the stage. It helps to carry the brand name to a different level."

Koyo has learned that building a successful fashion brand is as much about strategy as it is about innovative design. He has studied many of the top designers and has a particular fondness for the work of Karl Lagerfeld at Chanel and Nicolas Ghesquière at Balenciaga, who share some of his Goth sensibility, but the most influential designer in his life comes from closer to home.

"My idol is my father," says Koyo. "My father is a carpenter and I used to watch him at work and the precision with which he made things, the craftsmanship, that's something I find very inspiring."

Koyo has worked hard to move himself toward the centre of the international fashion world but he still keeps a close eye on HKDI. He was one of the major participants in the *Miao's Culture & Sustainable Design* project and exhibition staged by the Institute in 2010 and he sees such initiatives as an important step toward enhancing the HKDI's international reputation.

"I think the HKDI designers get better every year. I think the way that HKDI thinks about the market and how they think about clothing design should be more commercial. Students need to open their eyes and develop a strong connection to the market. The many exchanges that the HKDI now has with Europe are important. Students need to go to Paris and have their eyes opened."

Which is a voyage that worked very well for Koyo. He now makes jeans for thousands of European customers every year, adjusting the Asian cut of his original jeans to fit the European frame, a case of reverse engineering the impulse that drove him into the jeans business two decades ago. ☺

the way the fabric was cut and sewn. He also visited many factories to see how design and production could be better integrated.

In 2002 the HKDI graduate set up a new company and in 2004 used it as a launching pad for his high-end menswear series. By 2006 he was ready to return to Paris and launch his Koyo Jeans. Fifty buyers signed up to take his product and he became the first Hong Kong based designer to have his jeans displayed at the prestigious Galeries Lafayette.

"Competition is important," he says. "If I hadn't gone to France the first time, I would not have opened my eyes. Seeing the world is important."

It was in France that Koyo began to develop the distinctive Gothic look with which his brand is now most closely associated. And the inspiration didn't come from another designer but from the beautiful medieval buildings he saw all around him in Paris.

"I like the Gothic Rock style," he says. "I don't want hip hop it is not my style. I stayed in Paris for a long time and I was inspired by Gothic style architecture, that's where a lot of my Goth signatures in shapes and motifs come from."

Koyo has now developed two distinct brands: Koyo Jeans and Koyo William Cheung. The first serves the mass market, but the second is aimed at the one that is closest to Koyo's heart.

KOYO WILLIAM

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