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BANGKOK BECKONS

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Taipei's young fashion
designers turn old into new

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By **Dana Ter**
Photography **Joe Russo**



A

From modern qipao dresses to temple-inspired ensembles,

CUT

the work of Taipei's new fashion designers draws

ABOVE

from a strong sense of cultural identity and aesthetics

TO WALK IN LUZHOU, A RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT OF NEW TAIPEI CITY,

is to encounter a slower pace of life. A woman hangs laundry on a balcony's iron grills; a store owner removes a red Lunar New Year poster from his garage door weeks after the holiday; potted plants and ferns dangling from balconies partially conceal exposed cable wires. Here, dressed in high-waisted flare pants and a striped turtleneck and with short, blue-dyed hair, Jenn Lee meets me at her sixth-floor workshop in a large red building. Inside the spacious workshop, decorated with secondhand sofas and vintage posters, tailors and tie-dye artists prepare to ship Lee's latest collection to China for Shanghai Fashion Week.

"People might think our streets are ugly, but I don't see it that way," the London College of Fashion graduate tells me. Lee's eponymous handmade womenswear label draws inspiration from Taipei's streets. Beads draped across crumpled hand-dyed dresses evoke cable wires. Shirts are emblazoned with stickers that resemble billboard signs found on many stores, including for job listings and cooking oil advertisements.

Lee recalls a cab ride on a hot day where the driver affixed pieces of masking tape to the windows to prevent sunlight from seeping in – a fast and unique solution. "That, to me, is so Taiwan!" Lee captures this sensibility in knee-length skirts held together by strips of denim that have been torn apart and re-sewn in a seemingly haphazard lattice pattern; the result is both glamorous and grungy.

Taiwan's keen fashion sense isn't exactly new. In the 1980s, the economic boom catapulted independent designers such as Shiatzy Chen, who re-interprets Chinese motifs including dragons and flowers in bold, elegant tops and qipao dresses, to international catwalk fame in New York. Designers such as Charin Yeh, whose solid-color ensembles incorporate subtle Chinese influences and hand embroidery, did well in the local market. But the hype was short-lived, and by the 2000s, high street brands such as H&M, Zara and Uniqlo, and South Korean indie brands overran Taiwanese labels in department stores.





THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Associate professor Grace Hsieh of Shih Chien University; streets around Yongle Fabric Market; fashion designer Jenn Lee; San Ba Ji, a store which stocks Jenn Lee's designs; senior lecturer David Hsu instructs students at Shih Chien University





THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
 Designer Yifen Tsai of the
 womenswear label if&n;
 inside her studio in
 Datong district

But Lee scoffs at mass consumerism. "As a child, whenever I saw store clothes, I felt this urge to tear, twist and turn them upside down." She attributes her rebellious streak to her father, a wakeboard instructor, who taught her that it was okay to be different, something which Lee felt was difficult to express if she wore the same clothes as everyone else. Though her clothes are sold in retail stores around Taipei today, Lee admits that "just selling clothes is boring" and that capitalism makes her "dead inside".

Lee is not the only small homegrown label emerging on the market again. "The Taiwanese spirit is very individualistic and it's good to see designers reverting to this," observes David Hsu, a senior lecturer at Shih Chien University's fashion department, Taipei's pre-eminent school for fashion design.

Hsu explains that for fashion designers who create clothes in small batches, it is more cost-effective to have them done in local factories, rather than outsource manufacturing to China. He sees this as a positive change because designers are compelled to make each outfit stand out. "It encourages designers to put more thought into their own designs rather than replicate what big foreign labels are doing because they think it's what consumers want," Hsu explains.

In the verdant lawns of the university's Taipei campus, students haul mannequins and use each other as models for photo shoots. Others knit and sew in the fashion department's basement workshop. For the 2017 graduating class's final assignment, Hsu's colleague, associate professor Grace Hsieh, instructed her students to get creative with materials. "We banned them from going to fabric markets," recalls Hsieh. One student submitted a collection made with handwoven beads, a skill she learned from her Taiwanese indigenous mother, while another designed men's jackets with film negatives. "We're showing students that



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 upside down**

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they can be creative and successful even if they're educated in Taiwan," Hsieh adds.

THE NUMBER OF LOCALLY EDUCATED

fashion designers who've gained popularity at home and abroad continues to increase. Yifen Tsai, who launched the bespoke womenswear label *if&n*, has found success in the local market. A Shih Chien University graduate, Tsai's workshop is across town from campus, on the fringe of Datong, a historic district with craft stores and fabric shops.

On the second floor of a beige-tile building, the soft-spoken Tsai, who dons a simple black fleece jacket she made herself, is drawing sketches of pleated skirts and flowing dresses at her table by a wide-paneled window. Surrounding her are large fan palms in pots that add a homey touch. Deeper in the workshop is a spacious air well with large windows that reveal the studios of designers and artists that occupy the other floors.

Tsai's workshop doubles as a showroom where she does fittings for customers. During my fitting, she tucks the billowing sides of a white, off-shoulder top and flared khaki-colored pants cinched at the waist with a ribbon. "Feel free to tie, roll, do anything you want with the clothes to highlight your own personality," she tells me.

Tsai takes three months to complete one collection, which consists of 60 to 70 handmade and machine-made outfits. Because production is small-scale, her



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Hard at work inside Yifen Tsai's studio; pages from her "Loop of Jade" collection



SUIT UP

Taiwanese indie fashion is for men too – shop for retro suits and bowties at these suave labels



NE.SENSE

This sleek boutique stocks menswear from various brands, including its own sportswear label, Necessity Sense. ne-sense.com



Laio

Dandy meets Asian punk at Laio, where items include form-fitting business suits, retro eyeglass frames and suspenders. laio.com.tw



Eastream

It's vintage with a distinctly Eastern flair. Dress up a patterned suit with a cloth tie, fedora or preppy bowtie here. eastream.com.tw



Angus Chiang

The label evokes humor and cultural symbols like bubble tea and plastic bags used to carry betel nut leaves. anguschiangshop.com



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The Taiwanese spirit is very individualistic and it's good to see designers reverting to this

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approach has been to cultivate a niche market – women in their 30s who have good taste and cultural appreciation. Her latest collection, "Loop of Jade", takes inspiration from the *dudou*, a triangular-shaped, intricate-patterned bodice first worn during the Tang dynasty.

Tsai's reinterpretation incorporates minimal patterns and a subdued palette of pastel pink and asphalt blue, accentuating the female figure with folds and ruffles that conceal and reveal curves to create a similarly coy effect as the *dudou*. "While it's important to highlight my Chinese heritage, it doesn't solely define who I am or what my brand is."

OTHER DESIGNERS CONVEY THIS message in louder ways. A quick metro ride takes me to a tree-lined lane near Yongle Fabric Market. A vertical silver plate in front of a staircase reads "Just In

Case". "I wanted a humorous brand name," says designer Justin Chou. Dressed in baggy pants and a form-fitting white top rolled up to the elbows to reveal a tattoo that says "fashion sucks", Chou gives me a tour of his sleek, white-walled showroom.

Chou turned heads at New York Fashion Week in 2017 with his avant-garde menswear and womenswear that fuse traditional techniques, including embroidery and rush-grass weaving with recycled materials and street sensibilities.

"I had a traditional upbringing in the southern Taiwan countryside. It was hardcore; my family prayed at the temple three times a day" says Chou, who grew up admiring the ornate clothes worn by statues of deities and hand-embroidered runners used to cover tables where worshippers laid offerings. In junior high school, he watched a documentary about a Texas ranch where people shot holes in their old jeans with guns. "I immediately tore up one of my jeans with a screwdriver!" Chou laughs.

His latest collection – a collaboration with Taiwan's National Palace Museum, which houses priceless Chinese treasures such as paintings and porcelain ware – was launched at New York Fashion Week this year. Chou designed ensembles inspired by the museum's antiques in his signature rebel-punk style. One mannequin has on elbow-high gloves made from pig skin; images of birds are tattooed on the gloves to resemble a Chinese ink painting.



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Avant-garde designer Justin Chou; one of his collections which pairs ancient Chinese motifs with Nike shoes

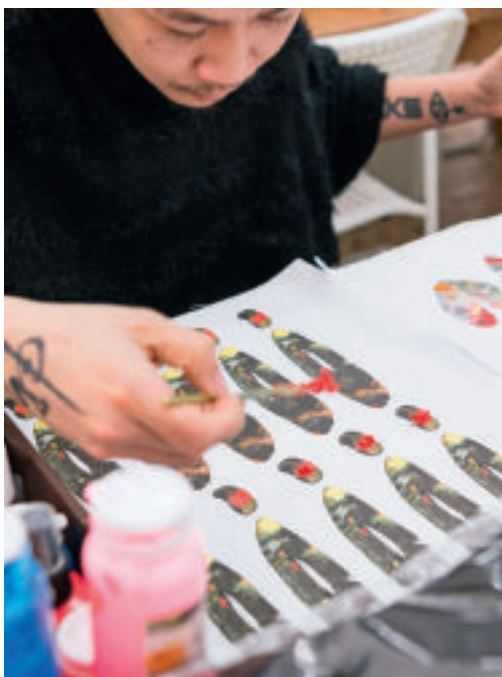


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Inside Justin Chou's
showroom; Chou at work

Another mannequin wears a dress with heavy green ruffles that evoke the museum's 19th-century jadeite cabbage. Heels are made with red embroidered buttons usually found on the qipao, Taiwan's national costume.

For Chou, fashion is about presenting uniqueness in ways that are universally relatable. "For instance, instead of opening a hamburger shop in New York, a Taiwanese chef might consider opening a *gua bao* shop," Chou says, referring to the street delicacy consisting of pork belly sandwiched by a white bun. "We ate *gua bao* when we were children, then we ate hamburgers. It's time to try *gua bao* again."

Indeed, dabbling with tradition is more than a passing fad. As slow fashion regains its footing, it also becomes clearer exactly what Taiwanese style is. Handmade or bespoke, clean-cut or avant-garde, Taipei's independent fashion designers are creating collections that have a strong sense of place, a deep awareness of history and an enticing sense of rebellion.



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OVERSEAS FAVORITES

Check out these
Taiwanese indie labels
around PAL's network



Douchanglee
Vancouver

Founded by husband-and-wife duo Stephane Dou and Changlee Yugin in 1995, this classy urban womenswear label just opened its first North American outlet in Vancouver's Park Royal. Douchanglee was one of the first Taiwanese brands to move away from overt and elaborate Chinese imagery. douchanglee.com

Jamie Wei Huang
London

Jamie Wei Huang is known for her elongated dresses and pants that come to life as billowing silhouettes when models strut down the runway. Huang's apparel appeals to the modern working woman, and her eponymous label is stocked in Dover Street Market and Harvey Nichols. jamieweihuang.com

TAIPEI