

Tailored for a big market

Designer aims to create distinctive silk brand

By YU NAN
China Daily staff

Wannan, 35, has made an effort to keep her distance from the mass media for years, even though her designs have been regarded by some of the leading fashion designers the world over.

Too publicity would break the tranquility she needs to create her beautiful designs.

The number of her clients has kept growing by word of mouth. These change from the wives of the country's stars and of foreign ambassadors to a distinguished film and pop stars finance experts to academic scholars.

"Her name why we choose her because it is so woven," one of her clients said.

What distinguishes Wang from other fashion designers is that Wang uses silk as the main material for her clothes.

"It's true silk!" Wang said emotionally when asked with the fact that wool, cotton and have been better favoured by other designers. "Silk was once the 'queen of fabric' now, silk is sold cheaply, designed and ignored by most of the leading designers!"

The revival of silk thus became Wang's crusade as the main reason that she has unveiled her work to the media in recent times.

"I did nothing but to arouse people's concern about silk," she said.

Glory again

Silk, that precious textile material in ancient times, was reserved exclusively for use by families for a long time since it was first discovered 5,000 years ago.

But it is that silk in modern society no longer retains the glory it enjoyed in ancient times. Silk has almost disappeared from the modern world of fashion but can easily be found in stands everywhere at a cheap price especially in Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces of East China — the home of silk.

"I don't know that the popularity of silk has fallen," Wang said. "But silk has lost its status to the world fashion market. Foreign designers want silk sporadically, buy it from Italy, from Japan, from, but not from China — the home of silk."

"Machinery is the world that discovered comes to replace hands when it substitutes hands when it makes silk."

But they are unable to see the true value of silk. Wang said with regret. "The only reason that has brought about the decline of silk. A lack of respectivity over the past 100 years has ruined the whole image of silk."

Wang added. "The decline of silk is an unpleasant encounter East China Province in 1995."

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silk production — picking mulberry leaves, feeding silkworms, reeling silk from cocoons, weaving, dyeing and printing silk.

She feels she is better acquainted with the material.

"Silk's dignity comes from the process of producing it. From mulberry to silkworm, from cocoon to silk, each step is joined and filled with sentiment between human beings and nature," Wang said.

Source of inspiration

Having been devoted to the field of fashion design for more than 10 years, Wang said she has finally found the root of her creativity in China. And silk, she believes, can best demonstrate her creativity.

Born in Beijing in 1966, Wang's memories of her childhood are filled with the turbulence and unpleasant experiences that her family went through during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76).

But the making of silk dresses, inherited from her grandma, remains a comfort to her. "To me at that time, the silk shined like a gem. It evoked hope in my heart," Wang said. "I kept one of the silk dresses with me all along. Although many years have passed, it is still as beautiful as before."

Wang admitted that some of her inspiration came from her grandma, who grew up in an old noble family of the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Wang liked to watch her

design styles in Europe, Japan and Hong Kong. Ironically, her designs were always ahead of the latest fashion.

"Once I saw pictures in a magazine of clothes designed by master Gianni Versace. I cried. I had drawn the same style almost three years ago when I was still at school," she said.

Luck came to her when her designs were discovered by a French fashion company, which later invited her to work in France. Although Wang gained much experience during her five years in France, she prefers not to talk too much about it.

"I don't deny I benefited a lot from my experience in France," she said. "But I also know that all my inspiration is rooted in China, without which I couldn't have drawn anything in France."

Due respect

One thing that Wang still cannot bear is watching other people belittle Chinese silk.

Once in a silk museum in Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province, she encountered a foreign tourist who was bargaining with the staff of a museum about one piece of yellow silk. It seemed to her that the staff members were preparing to lower the price.

Wang knew the true value of the silk was far higher as it was woven by hand using a technique from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). So she stopped the bargaining at once and insisted that she buy the silk at its original price.

"Someone would think I was crazy, but I just wanted to tell people that silk is not a common product that can be reduced," Wang said. "Now, most museums realize the high value of hand-knitted silk and they have raised the price again."

Wang said she once showed some silk that she had collected to an Italian fabric businessman who was willing to invite Wang to be chief designer for his company. "The Italian expert just couldn't believe such great silk was still available in China today," Wang recalled.

Revival ready

Wang clearly knows that only innovative and fashionable designs can save Chinese silk.

Wang said, in the eyes of Western designers, the image of silk design is still the style of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), which mainly includes *qipao* (cheongsam), a close-fitting women's dress with a high neck and slit skirt, *daijin* (Chinese-style jacket with buttons down the front) and *xiao'ao* (a short close-fitting jacket).

"Chinese designers haven't contributed anything new to world fashion for nearly 100 years," Wang said. "So no wonder silk has gone downhill these years."

"Following world fashion or imitating old Chinese styles cannot save Chinese silk. Combining the silk with advanced design techniques is the only way."

Wang said she has no doubt about the ability of Chinese designers.

"Many of our designers already have the ability to surprise the world. The only thing we lack is our own world-class fashion brand to show our creativity."

Wang has finished more than 100 pictures of fashionable silk dresses. A number of fashion companies have shown interest in her designs but she has decided to keep them a secret for now because none of the companies have agreed to her terms.

Her terms of negotiation sound difficult. One, only use Chinese silk as a textile material; Two, give the item a Chinese name.

Most of the negotiators would not agree to the second term because they do not believe a Chinese name would help lead the clothes into the fashion world.

Wang decided to wait.

She said she would continue to wait for a Chinese company to support her dream.



Queen of fabric: Wang Yannan gently arranges a silk cheongsam — one of her own designs.

making colourful and delicate embroidery at home when she was a little girl.

"I will never forget the gentleness, serenity but nobleness in my grandma's eyes when she was embroidering. I am putting this kind of feeling into my designs of silk dresses now."

Wang believes her inspiration also comes from her deep understanding of both Chinese and Western culture.

Wang majored in Western art history at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Northeast China's Liaoning Province, where she developed a great interest in costume design.

Through self-study, she made many designs in college and was praised by professors for her work, which they called "innovative and meteoric."

After graduating in 1989, Wang worked as a fashion designer for a Chinese clothes company.

But she soon found her advanced and innovative designs were not liked by companies because they were different from fashion

NOTES

From Xinhua and Staff

BEIJING

Wolf Knight

The 40-part TV serial *Wolf Knight* (Lang Xia) is being shot in Lijiang, an ancient city in Southwest China's Yunnan Province.

Produced by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Audio-Video Press, the ancient costume TV drama features a legendary hero — *Wolf Knight*.

The story is about a young couple who give their new-born child a tattoo featuring the sign of the wolf god before they are killed by their enemies.

Their enemies later throw the baby to the wolves. But mysteriously, the beasts do not harm the baby. Instead, they deliver the baby to an old man, who names the baby Shuai Tianxing.

Shuai grows up into a fearless youth who excels in martial arts. He defends others against injustice and is generous towards those in need.

He is an ordinary citizen by day but at night he is transformed into a knight who punishes evil-doers.

The show is different from other martial arts serials which are flooding TV stations in China with their state-of-the-art technology.

The China Federation of Literary Art Circles Audio-Video Press is a Beijing-based TV play production company that has turned out many acclaimed TV series.

NANJING

Dragon-boat race

The 2002 Sheraton Dragon Boat Competition was held at Mochou Lake in Nanjing, the capital of East China's Jiangsu Province at the weekend.

About 40 teams, largely made up of multinational corporations, took part in the race. It provides an opportunity for Sheraton Hotel staff and foreigners to experience one of the many aspects of Chinese culture.



Scholar Su Ya teaches Hui teachers the way
WANG GUANGZHANG/Xinhua
Su Ya, a student at the Tongxing School of the Arabic Region, teaches as an intern at an elementary school in the northwest of Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. She graduated in 1985 with sponsorship from the Islamic Bank, the Tongxing School is the first mid-level school for foreign languages for the Hui ethnic group's female graduates in elementary school at rural schools in Xihai.

Elegant: A silk dress with beautiful embroidery is just one of the many works created by Wang Yannan. File photos

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