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<Writer>Alexandra Kohut-Cole  
<Head>Who's the Godfather of Asian Couture?

Last week at the haute couture shows in Paris, headlines lamented the absence of Russian buyers from the front row. It was put down to economics and Ulyana Sergeienko showed only by appointment. "Our fiercest competition is not another design house it is the decline of the economies of so many of the nations who supported our art" says Asian Couture Federation Couturier Extraordinaire and one of Japan's most prolific designers, Yumi Katsura.

Fashion is witnessing an Asian couture 'moment'. "The fresh new wave of Asian couture will definitely strengthen further its presence in the global market » says Dubai-based Filipino couturier and Asian Couturier Extraordinaire, Michael Cinco, who was recently honoured with the 2014 Presidential Award for Outstanding Filipinos and Organisation Overseas by President Benigno Aquino III in Manila. "Asian couture is definitely making its presence felt and will slowly and yet surely dominate the market. And with the Asian Couture Federation, that is not a far-fetched dream... »

"Haute couture has evolved so much to meet the needs of the modern lifestyle" says ACF Couturier Extraordinaire, the Korean couturier Lie Sang Bong. "It was the people who were wearing haute couture who made the designers adopt the change in lifestyle. Otherwise, it might have been difficult to maintain the vitality as the market has already been matured for a long time. On the other hand, Asian couture is being developed with more current environment and speaking to a bigger potential market which has more room to grow" he explains.

These major fashion houses face fierce competition. They have to nurture the heritage of the house but they need a diamond creative at the helm. Established couture houses therefore play musical chairs with creative directors and it's hard to keep track of who shows where nowadays - Valentino showed his couture in New York last December. Couture is evolving to explore Asia as a key market. "Asian Couture needs to show in Europe so much more than European couture to show in Asia." Says Cinco.

This East-West inspiration is a cross pollination of Asia/European couture influences. Asian couturiers are inspired by the Europeans and vice versa. "I believe that Europe still epitomises what couture means in terms of heritage, savoir faire, excellence and creativity. It is very interesting to see the emergence of designers all around the world that draw their inspiration from couture and mix it with local traditions and know how" says Chinese-born Paris-based couturier Yinqing Yin. She is strongly inspired by the "secular heritage of Chinese garments, ornamental craftsmanship and fabrics especially silk in all its facets" alongside French the couturiers Madame Gres and Madame Vionnet.

Asian couture catapulted to the forefront of global fashion consciousness when the Asian Couture Federation was inaugurated in Singapore in October 2013. The occasion was during the first dedicated haute couture week held outside Paris and hosted by FIDe Fashion Weeks - whose chairman is ACF founder Frank Cintamani. Its mission - the non-profit body was based on Paris' Chambre Syndicale and Italy's AltaRoma "to promote and nurture the very best couture talent in the region".

The ACF board of 14 governors boasts an impressive roll call of fashion heavyweights, including: Kullawit Laosuksri, editor-in-chief of Vogue Thailand, Satoshi Onuma, the former president of Bunka Fashion College, Japan's leading fashion school, Kim Sung-Joo, chairman of Sungjoo Group and owner of the MCM fashion label; Zio Song of the South Korean men's wear brand Songzio. Kenzo Takada, as an earlier pioneer of Asian fashion, is honorary president. "He understands the need for Asia to now stake a claim in this industry", said Cintamani at the inauguration. The ACF now represents 10 countries in the region.

One year on, the feedback is positive “There has been regional and worldwide recognition that such a platform was both necessary and timely” said Cintamani, who lost no time in getting a world tour off the ground, starting with Perth, Western Australia in September 2014. The collaboration with the Telstra Perth Fashion Festival as part of its ‘gateway to Asia’ initiative took ACF couturiers Sebastian Gunawan, Michael Cinco and Singapore’s Frederick Lee to Perth to show collections at the event. Alvin Fernandez of the label A’elkemi, was appointed Invited Member and RH Lisa Scaffidi as Governor.

In December 2014, the ACF held the first Vietnam International Fashion Week and appointed Le Thi Quynh Trang, one of Vietnam’s most respected fashion industry leaders as Governor. For the event, the ACF collaborated with AltaRoma and Atelier Chardon Savard.

“Over the last few years, Vietnam has emerged as one of the most dynamic countries in Asia, with significant year on year growth, as well as a rapidly expanding consumer market for fashion. What is perhaps less apparent is that it has a rich heritage and with its developed artistry for textiles and fabrics, Vietnam is in fact one of the world’s leading producers in this respect. Not surprisingly, it has some incredibly talented designers though many of them have not gained attention beyond their own market” said Cintamani.

The selection criteria, he explained, recognizes “the very best couture talent in the region... dependent on a clear process of recommendation and approval from within the Executive Board and Governors Committee”. Over the last year, couture talent has been appointed from Thailand (Roj Singhakul of the label Issue), Mongolia (Tsolo Munkh an alumna of Atelier Chardon Savard, Paris), Vietnam (Hoang Minh Ha who won the first prize in Project Runway Vietnam 2013), and Nguyen Cong Tri as ACF Couturier Extraordinaire – who, in 2013 became the first Vietnamese to launch a dedicated House of Couture. Another, Tex Saverio, has been invariably described as the “Alexander McQueen of Indonesia”.

Yiqing Yin, sees “The change we are facing right now is more a change of customers and evolution in consumer habits than in the essence of couture, which remains an extraordinary playground for unleashed creativity, nobility and experimentation” – next year Yin will be the first Chinese-born couturier to obtain the haute couture label. “China is a very exciting market, continues Cintamani “Beyond being one of the largest consumers of luxury fashion, it is also increasingly being recognised for its own homegrown creative talent. The Asian Couture Federation has a firm commitment to this market and this may well translate to further appointments of both new Governors to the Governors Committee as well as the induction of designers”.

And one of Malaysia’s most influential couturiers, Melinda Looi, also sees a massive potential for her couture in China “We are only about to start that journey” currently she has a strong customer base in the Middle East as well as Malaysia. Looi is busy harnessing the power of 3D. “Innovation is the new trend. We have launched in 2013 the first 3D printed fashion collection in Asia together with Belgium’s Materialise a world market leader in 3D technology and later this year we will launch our new 3D collection”.

Yet, Looi fears there is still prejudice against ‘made in Asia’, “Internationally, we sometimes have to still fight with the prejudice that made in Asia is cheap, which is a bit sad as Asian couturiers are surely equally committed as their Western counterpart to always put quality and creativity first.”

In Japan, Tamae Hirokawa of the label Somarta, and ACF Invited Member, has embraced ‘Technoculture’. “The philosophy of SOMARTA is to create a dream of body by using “Technoculture” a hybrid of artisan work and the latest digital technology under the concept of “possibility of garment for body”. In this case the body means not only of human being but all natural object and manmade

substance, and couture means the dress which wraps space, environment and even the thought. They metamorphose into another creature by wearing a new couture”.

She learned how to design textiles while at Issey Miyake (in charge of Issey Miyake men and Issey Miyake) “I was designing mainly knit items and I had to design from the textile level by choosing yarns and knitting patterns as well as designing the clothes”. Her dream is for the future use of technology in textile design and for the textile industry “Textile industry and artisans have been shrinking in Japan. In 30 or 50 years, we might find no more skills remaining to make the Kimono”.

Has Cintamani identified a couture buying shift? “Buyers remain in the Middle East and Asia” he says, “The world has become a lot more interconnected largely thanks to social media...couture buyers have become far more sophisticated, a few years ago the slew of new wealthy buyers were making ‘trophy’ couture acquisitions, they have been much more selective”. And he is pleased that fashion styling is featuring a mix of French, Middle Eastern and Asian couture pieces in the same story. “This certainly helps to elevate non-Paris couture, but also an affirmation that couture level designers and talent do reside outside France”.

And red carpet choices are more diverse now. “At present Asians are the fastest growing demographic in terms of couture purchasing” says Yumi Katsura, “Asian couture should not be pitted against European /haute couture but I can see it complementing haute couture. I would like for Asian couture to garner the same respect from the fashion world that it gives to the haute couture market. It just expands the offerings to the haute couture customer and provides a more diverse perspective on fashion.”

The couture client is more savvy and sophisticated now “With the saturation of Western luxury in the region, a growing number of Asian buyers are now looking to their own region for inspiration. There is also a developing confidence and pride in Asian creativity and that is increasingly translating to couture buyers who are eschewing the Paris based designers for that designed by Asian couturiers” explains Cintamani.

So who is the new couture client? The strong, stylish and powerful woman in Asia who is rich enough to buy not just the dress but the company as well. The Kazakh, Goga Ashkenazi bought the House of Vionnet, became creative director and chairwoman because she could, and briskly installed wunderkind Hussein Chalayan in charge of demi-couture – she pulled off quite a coup.

But social media can also have a negative effect on couture – Dian Muljadi, ACF Governor and couture client, a fan of Sebastian Gunawan, Valentino and Elie Saab explains, “Nowadays it is hardly impossible for couture pieces as an investment, because of the social media effect, since after we wore the dress and it got uploaded in the social media, then it is impossible to wear it for the second time since usually the design is too exclusive so it is easily remembered by the public”. ACF Vice-President, Emily Hwang buys Sebastian Gunawan, Michael Cinco, Frederick Lee and Nguyen Cong Tri. “Their pieces are certainly ones that I feel very comfortable wearing and which draw admiring comments and glances” she also buys in China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam and Paris and Rome are often regular destinations”.

A new commercial model – opening an atelier within a department store - highlighted by British couturiers Ralph & Russo (the first British brand officially welcomed to the Paris couture schedule in over 100 years) just this week launched at Harrods in London. Could this be a viable model for young Asian couturiers to set up an atelier?

Indian Couture Week which takes place in Delhi also features highly successful and popular couture by Rohit Bal, Suneet Verma and Manish Arora for example. Yet, the style is not necessarily appealing to the Western client as it is highly embellished and often dedicated to the Indian wedding. Many

Lebanese couturiers are hugely popular globally, such as Rafih Kayrouz, Georges Hobeika, Elie Saab. They tend to be based mostly in both Beirut and Paris.

Some say the term 'haute couture' is just a legality... "This has been a topic of a lot of discussion and debate over recent years, and I'm glad for it. The debate highlights the value and importance that should be placed on the qualifiers of 'haute couture'. I believe that 'haute couture' is in fact an art and a skill that should not be referred to lightly. It is the Ph.D., if you will, of fashion design, and should be respected as such" says Georges Hobeika.

It depends who you talk to. Its certainly up for debate in London, "To be honest I know nothing about Asian Couture..." opines Hywel Davies, the BA/MA fashion communication course director at [Central Saint Martins], "...to me couture is only based in Paris and is steeped with the history and traditions of dress making and this is uniquely French".

Yet, Sebastian Gunawan visualizes couture as being "more diversified. It does not only exist in Paris... but it is well adapted around the world. Renowned designers in their home country might have a European or North American education but decided to return to their hometown - to make a difference. It doesn't mean that locally renowned designers have inferior skills compared to a Parisian couturier. Couture might very well be present in almost any country that has the lifestyle for it".

Frank Cintamani hopes "that when talking about couture, we see a move away from a traditionally 'Eurocentric' perspective to one that embraces a broader appreciation for global couture and of course in particular, Asia and the member designers of the Asian Couture Federation" and is delighted that this has already begun. "Added to this, the most gratifying aspect of the World Tour so far has been the tremendous interest shown in the ACF designers. The recognition they have received for their creativity, artistry and ability has been overwhelming".

Finding new clients doesn't have to mean finding Western clients. Hirowaka has a positive take on it, "Taking advantage of having a background from which there are various ethnic costumes in Asian countries, should bring a new Asian couture to Europe. And of course having European-based couture in Asia will activate an interactive communication between two. Basically, fashion is the thing we can enjoy without any borders or language barrier".