

# Out of the EAST

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

MOVE over ALADDIN SANE. *Half a CENTURY after JAPANESE fashion designer KANSAI YAMAMOTO achieved POP CULTURE immortality dressing DAVID BOWIE on stage, a new FASHION ENERGY is RISING out of Asia. BAZAAR Australia explores the MUST-KNOW NAMES who are DRIVING its MOMENTUM*

Photography: Carlos and Alyse. Stylist: Stephanie Major. Hair: Ryan Humpage. Model: Daisy Parker.



Grace Ling's signature Square Lowerback Plate Pillar Skirt.

In recent years, the perception of ‘Made in China’ – with its manifold connotations – both locally and further afield, has undergone a radical recalibration. “[Historically], many [in China] held the view that foreign products and designs were superior,” says Qiqi Yuan of Buerlangma, a brand founded in 2020 in Beijing, whose designs have been worn by, among others, Beyoncé and Julia Fox. “Nowadays, Chinese consumers are more inclined to recognise and appreciate the works of domestic designers. As we grow more confident in our own cultural heritage, more creative individuals are emboldened to infuse traditional Chinese elements into modern designs.”

Case in point: Buerlangma’s Spring/Summer Capsule 5 collection, presented at London Fashion Week in September 2024, riffed on traditional artforms like Chinese origami and classical Manchu masks. “Chinese culture is always in my work,” muses Yuan, who draws inspiration from “ancient paintings in museums, the teapot at teatime and the old buildings seen everywhere on Beijing’s streets”.

Currently, it is “an extremely buoyant moment for Asian design”, according to Brandon Wen, the creative director of the Fashion Department of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp, the institution responsible for producing the Antwerp Six designers in the ’80s, which included Dries Van Noten and Ann Demeulemeester. “Countries like China and Korea do not have a contemporary fashion design history in the same way that Europe, the US and Japan do,” says Wen. “There are a handful of pioneers from the last few decades but the foundation of how we will define contemporary Chinese and Korean fashion design is being built up by the designers who are currently working there. It is happening right now.”

Among the academy’s many renowned alumni is South Korean Minju Kim, who established her namesake brand after winning the H&M Design Award in 2013 and being shortlisted for the LVMH Prize in 2014. She was featured as part of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Fashion in Motion series in 2023.

As Wen hints at, there is already a well-established tradition of Japanese designers winning over Western fashion capitals. It began with the late Hanae Mori, who founded her brand in 1951, spending her early career crafting costumes in the Japanese film industry. She opened a showroom on New York’s Seventh Avenue in 1973 and an atelier on Paris’ Avenue Montaigne in 1977, becoming in the same year the first Asian designer to gain membership to the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (now the Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode), the organisation that tightly controls the use of the term *haute couture*.

Also among the Japanese designers who decamped to Europe and the US in the ’60s and ’70s were Issey Miyake, Kenzō Takada and Kansai Yamamoto. Yamamoto was beloved by David Bowie, who tasked him with creating the now-iconic outfits of his Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane tours in the ’70s. In 1981, Yohji Yamamoto (no relation to Kansai) shared a runway in Paris with Comme des Garçons, helmed by his then romantic partner Rei Kawakubo (latterly of Dover Street Market) in a show that rocked the Western fashion establishment – newspaper critics at the time famously deriding the collections as “Hiroshima chic”.

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The clothing featured tears and unfinished hems in a near all-black colour palette, doing away with conventional approaches to symmetry, proportion and discreetly divided gender roles.

Among the most influential players of Asian design right now is Beijing-born couturier Guo Pei, who is arguably best known for the golden embroidered gown with a sweeping circular train that was worn by Rihanna to the 2015 Met Gala. Swiftly dubbed the ‘Omelette Dress’, it went viral on social media. Guo Pei: Fashioning Imagination, a retrospective of the designer’s near three-decade long career, is currently taking place at Hong Kong’s M+ museum until April 6.

Coming up behind her are a number of emerging talents, including Khoki, a collective of young Japanese designers known for their intricate intarsia knits and quilted outerwear who made the LVMH Prize’s 2024 shortlist. Also Chet Lo, an Asian American designer and alumnus of Central Saint Martins, now based in London. His Spring/Summer 2025 collection was an homage to his mother, Mai-Wah Cheung, who carved a successful career in the traditionally male-dominated field of computer science; it featured his self-described “glitch” print that adorned a number of the pieces in a nod to her. Rui Zhou, the Chinese designer of streetwear outfit RUIbuilt, was a joint winner of the 2021 LVMH Karl Lagerfeld Prize (recognising “creativity of a young brand”) whose designs, famed for their signature cobweb-inspired cutouts, have found favour with Cardi B and Blackpink’s Jennie Kim.

Singaporean designer Grace Ling, currently living in New York City, produces sleek, striking occasionwear that incorporates sculptural 3D-printed metallic breastplates and corsetry; her tongue-in-cheek, fan favourite ‘Butt Bag’ – a tiny sterling silver minaudière in the shape of a derrière – also deserves a mention. In 2022, she joined Net-a-Porter’s Vanguard program, a mentorship and financial support initiative that nurtures emerging womenswear designers. Debuting at New York Fashion Week in 2023, her designs have been worn by Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez.

With the third season of *The White Lotus* set to air this year, much attention will turn to Thailand, which was confirmed in early 2024 as the shoot location for the season, with filming taking place in Phuket, Koh Samui and Bangkok (at the city’s legendary Mandarin Oriental hotel, *BAZAAR* learned during a trip there in October). Mook Attakanwong worked at Jason Wu and Narciso Rodriguez in New York before returning to her native Thailand in 2019 as co-founder and creative director of ATT 19, a multidisciplinary space in Bangkok that houses a concept store, a café and a gallery showcasing budding Thai

Photography: Li Minghua, courtesy Guo Pei.

Guo Pei’s Da Jin dress (The Magnificent Gold), 2005, at the Threads of Time: Travel, Trade & Textiles exhibition, 2023, at the Auckland Art Gallery.





'Butt Bag' by Grace Ling.

artists. "In Thailand, we are rich in techniques and young designers are very much focused on showcasing what our artisans can do," reflects Attakanwong.

Attakanwong is a fan of Bangkok-born Shone Puipia, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp who crafts evening and bridalwear that's elegant, with an edge. "[He] brings the most sophisticated execution of details with an air of freshness," says Attakanwong. Also on her list is Bangkok-based Fah Chakshuvej, designer of Fah Chak WO+MAN. A graduate of The Royal College of Art in London, Chakshuvej was formerly a menswear designer at Maison Margiela. "Fah Chak [make] sleek everyday wear and gowns with zero-waste patterns," offers Attakanwong. "Keep an eye out for their special jeans collection that comes out every year with cheeky designs" – namely, "x-ray" patterns with a suggestive handprint across the rear.

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Stefan Siegel founded Not Just A Label (NJAL), an online platform that showcases up-and-coming designers from across 150 countries, in 2008, in a bid to build said brands' exposure and to connect them with customers and the wider fashion community. As for fresh talent out of Indonesia, NJAL's Siegel rates Erlina Erlina, an experimental ready-to-wear line founded in 2023 and Laurencia Irena, a graduate of London's Istituto Marangoni fashion school who makes romantic, monochromatic dresses with a gothic streak.

"The rise of emerging and avant-garde designers from Asia is no surprise," reflects Siegel. "These regions are rooted in centuries, if not millennia, of talent and history, and generations of design and manufacturing techniques. What's new to the global fashion industry is how today's Asian design talent has mastered the art of blending traditional craftsmanship, once tailored for local markets (think festive evening wear and ornate gowns) with a competitive edge that appeals to a much wider audience globally." HB