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EP Yaying is China's best-kept secret



Yaying takes heritage Chinese elements and update them in very contemporary ways.

Photo by Nur Adibah Ahmad Izham.

In global expansion mode, luxury women's label EP Yaying shows off the country's heritage aesthetics in contemporary ways, writes Aznim Ruhana Md Yusup

GOODS from China don't necessarily have the best reputation among consumers. In fashion, issues include poor quality and counterfeiting. Given this perception, it's easy to forget that the Chinese have a documented partiality for luxury and elegance that goes back thousands of years.

One of China's most influential contribution to fashion is silk, and its production is most famous in Jiangnan region.

This is also where EP Yaying began 30 years ago, specialising in luxury women's wear. The brand is like an insider secret with hundreds of stores in China but no presence outside of it.

Its first overseas store - the first of many I am told - opened earlier this year at Suria KLCC. It's divided into two sections; the EP section leans towards contemporary, everyday wear while Yaying focuses on evening wear and garments for special occasions.

But both EP and Yaying come together in the use and appreciation of Chinese heritage aesthetics. Silk is a key fabric for the brand while motifs of peony flowers appear repeatedly, as prints, beading or embroidery.

Peony is a traditional motif and closely linked to the brand's history. According to the Press release, there is a 100-year-old peony plant in the ancestral village of brand founder Zhang Hwaming. Over time, this memory became part of the brand's DNA.



The Yaying section with silk fans and embroideries. Photo by Nur Adibah Ahmad Izham.

DRAGONS IN FLIGHT

“We’re one of the most successful women’s wear brands in China,” says EP Yaying Vice-President Gu Haiming via a translator just prior to the launch of the KLCC store.

“We pay a lot of attention to brand building with a fashion show every year. We maintain good communication and interaction with customers and we have a very strong commercial presence through our flagship stores in all major cities.”

There are more than 500 EP Yaying stores in China, offering ready-to-wear apparel and accessories including select stores that have a personalised tailoring option. The brand is also present on e-commerce networks - a must in a country with a vibrant online retail scene.

Gu says compared to the early days of the brand, people nowadays have a different understanding and requirement when it comes to quality and beauty. They are more aware of global fashion trends and more discerning in their purchases. They also see their heritage in a new light.

In three decades, the brand has successfully expanded within China and adapted to new technology. It has done this as the country and its people went through a massive transformation that changed, among other things, the way they shop. EP Yaying has risen to the challenge, so it’s time to go global.



Contemporary designs at EP. Photo by Nur Adibah Ahmad Izham.

EUROPEAN SENSIBILITIES

Spearheading the global expansion effort is Fabio Becheri, who joined last year and brought with him more than 25 years of marketing experience at Gucci and its parent company Kering.

“It was very interesting to discover a Chinese brand positioned at the luxury level. I was surprised at the quality of the design as well the craftsmanship and material used. It’s in line with all the international brands. What’s more, what we offer is unique,” says the Italian.

“The challenge is making overseas customers understand that we offer a high standard of production and design. This has been understood in China and our mission is that this is understood globally,” he adds.

The store has all the hallmarks of a high-end boutique, with attentive employees and elegant decor. This includes a display of uncut cloth with traditional embroidered patterns, giving customers a peek into the product’s craftsmanship.

“The Yaying collection is about heritage Chinese elements repurposed in very contemporary ways and we want to show this timeless elegance of Chinese culture,” says Becheri. “The Ruyi pattern is hundreds of years old, but we have it in the recent Spring/Summer collection.”

Craftsmen at Yaying’s embroidery workshop spent 30,000 hours creating the collection, which includes suits, dresses and modern cheongsams. The overall design aesthetic is clean and uncomplicated, to better show off the detailed embroidery and rich fabrics.

“The goal for EP Yaying is to become what Ralph Lauren is to American sportswear where it represents the look of the country. We want to be like that for Chinese fashion,” says Becheri.



Accessories such as shoes, bags and scarves are also on offer at the store. Photo by Nur Adibah Ahmad Izham.

MALAYSIAN TOUCH

Responsible for the EP side of the brand is Malaysian Edmund Ooi. He studied fashion at Raffles College in Kuala Lumpur, followed by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp in Belgium. He also worked in Europe for several years before joining the company.

Design-wise, Ooi gets to be more modern and trendy at EP. While Western brands sometimes incorporate Chinese elements in their collection, it invariably comes off looking like cultural appropriation. EP's challenge is to adapt so-called western trends and stay true to its Chinese heritage.

"We start each season with research on Chinese culture," he says. "For the Spring/ Summer collection that we have in the store right now, one of the things we looked at was the traditional blue and white porcelain.

"So we turned it into a print, working with a print design company in Paris. This gives it a Western aesthetic even though it's a traditional look."

He adds that silk is also considered traditional and their location gives the brand access to very high quality silk. But there are other standards of luxury, so it also incorporates fabrics from France and Italy to suit current tastes.



(From left) Becheri, Gu and Ooi in front of the store at Suria KLCC. Photo by Nur Adibah Ahmad Izham.

(Source : <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/flair/2019/05/486981/ep-yaying-chinas-best-kept-secret>)