

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

## How Hong Kong's designers are navigating COVID-19

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*A fear of COVID-19 is gripping people around the globe, but fashion continues to march forward, and Hong Kong's smart, optimistic designers will not be dismayed. Image courtesy of NowFashion*

By [Gemma A. Williams](#)

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This past week, many of the world's most stylish fashion fans eagerly descended upon the Paris' [Fashion Farm Foundation](#) showcase at the Libration building on Rue Branger.

While they were there, temperatures were taken and hand sanitizer was dispensed an unusual turn of events for a Paris Fashion Week, but there has not been anything normal about this entire fashion season.

Amidst the [COVID-19](#) epidemic, which already changed the face of [Milan's Fashion Week](#) just days earlier, international brands such as APC and Agns B were canceling their runway shows in the capital of fashion, and others including [Dries Van Noten](#) handed out protective masks at their shows.

Chinese brands such as Shiatzy Chen, Masha Ma and [Icicle](#) canceled events while designer Uma Wang salvaged her show by holding a press viewing of her fall/winter 20 collection at her showroom.

Yet despite these and other setbacks during this year's fashion week, Create Hong Kong an agency within Hong Kong's Commerce and Economic Development Bureau that was added to help power the city's creative industries chose to bravely move forward with its Fashion Farm Foundation showcase.

The message from Edith Law, chairperson of the Chinese nonprofit, during her opening address was clear: "With this uncertainty, it was difficult to know how we should proceed," she stated. "But we didn't want to miss a season. We wanted to give the message that, as you can see, our designers are strong."

And Ms. Law, who has helmed the platform since its inception in 2009, even went on to claim that this season's event was their most attended yet. "This is one of the best turnouts," Ms. Law said. "People made an extra effort this time to come here and to stay longer. Many even said they really want to show support to Hong Kong designers as they know what they are going through at the moment."

Over the previous decade, Hong Kong's star has been dimming thanks to a shift in fortunes toward the predominantly cashless, forward-thinking Chinese mainland and the region has struggled to maintain its relevance

because of it.

By the end of a devastating 2019, Hong Kong had been plagued by ongoing protests, an economic recession, soaring residential prices and major disruptions to its retail economy.

At the end of the year, *Jing Daily* reported that some brands had adopted a wait-and-see strategy due to the riots while others such as Prada and Tag Heuer chose to shutter their stores. And while many were hopeful about 2020, the explosion of the COVID-19 epidemic on the mainland only exacerbated Hong Kong's precarious position.

Yet, the mood was overwhelmingly optimistic during Paris Fashion Week. The event took place at its signature home: the four-story, former headquarters of the Libration newspaper with its stunning views of Paris.

The group of curated Hong Kong-based designers included a mix of presentations (Ka Way, From Another Planets) and exhibits (Anas Jourden, Cynthia & Xiao, From Clothing Of, W;nk, Yah!, and Yeung China). *Jing Daily* spoke with this season's brands to find out how they are navigating this challenging time in fashion.

#### W;nk Atelier

Maureen Hung, a creative upcycler and the designer for W;nk Atelier, creates handmade jewelry from disposable plastic, mixing it with more expensive materials such as gold.

As this was her first time showing in Paris with her new brand, Ms. Hung chose to self-isolate in London weeks prior to the event.

"Hong Kong has been going through a very critical period, and everyone is tense," Ms. Hung explained. "My designs are based on creating space with transparent material like a painting with negative space. Everyone [in Hong Kong] is a bit depressed at the moment, but this is about being uplifting and positive."

In fact, one does get a sense of flora or confectionary while looking at Ms. Hung's fanciful, colorful designs.

"People don't want to go out at the moment," she said, "and everything is shifting to online. But we have been through SARS, so I know we are fully capable of beating this."



*Ka Way Key's vibrant and colorful collection explored the opposing phases of adult and childhood. Image courtesy of NowFashion Ready To Wear Collection fall/winter 2020 in Paris*

#### Kay Wa Key

The design duo Kay Wa Key are no strangers to this platform, as this was their fourth time presenting their genderless fashion line at the Fashion Farm Foundation.

Based on the celebrated French novella *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupry, their collection was an exploration of opposing life stages (childhood versus adulthood) that was built in Kay Wa Key's unique, whimsical style.

Clearly enjoying the runway, the duo's well-choreographed combined presentation of menswear and womenswear in colorful, layered separates was both playful and dreamy, and it offered a welcome escape from the current climate.

"We all have to be careful and cautious, yes, but life still has to go on," said cofounder Jarno Leppanen after the event. "We have to do normal things. The virus is having such a massive effect, and this fashion week was relatively quiet, but it was really brave to organize the event at this time."

"For Hong Kong fashion and designers, it's been very difficult over the past six months," he said. "Events like this and platforms like Fashion Farm Foundation do a brilliant job of making things work."

Hong Kong-born Ka Wa Key Chow, the brand's other cofounder, explained that supply chains were also an issue.

"Luckily, we are an independent brand, and we could react quite quickly and be quite flexible," he said. "We reacted in time and shifted some of the sampling production in-house when our supply chains were affected and had delays in delivery and production."

And, with no clear end to the epidemic in sight, the duo has quietly prepared for production as well.

"We use a diverse selection of factories, so we have these backup plans in place," Mr. Chow said, "but in this situation, China's factories are starting to open up and we are confident things will go back to normal soon."

Yah!

Yah! is made up of the brother-sister duo Nap Yee and Shu Kit Au as well as designer Mei Yee Yeung.

The brand is known for using unique vintage fabrics to create new collections. Each fabric is unique, but by honing their designs, prints, and color palettes while adopting a "think before sourcing" mantra, the brand is able to satisfy its buyer demands.

This slow and sustainable approach is winning fans around the world, and the brand has been picked up by Opening Ceremony in both the U.S. and Japan.

"I think in a few more months hopefully everything will be OK," Nap Yee Au stated cautiously. "However, we are pretty much unaffected as we do all our production in-house. We source our fabrics in Hong Kong, France, Thailand and Japan, which means I travel a lot."

Travel has, of course, been impacted, but Ms. Au remained positive, adding, "With the protests and what we are going through now, we'll just have to face it. We need to fight for our dreams and our freedom too."

Yeung Chin

Designer Yeung Chin created a big impression at [London Fashion Week](#) last season when he debuted his fall/winter 2020 collection, and he continued in a similarly provocative vein in Paris by asking, "Is Hong Kong too dark?" His accessible designs, which were inspired by the corset, explore deconstruction through a variety of techniques.

Like many other Hong Kong designers, Mr. Yeung is lucky to operate a Made in Hong Kong business model, so he was able to produce his collection despite fabric limitations on orders from the mainland.



*Models wearing From Another Planets' fall/winter '20 walk through the vast former Libration building on Rue Branger during Paris Fashion Week. Image courtesy of NowFashion*

From Another Planets

From Another Planets' founder, Kenax Leung, made his Paris debut this season with a deconstructed, asymmetrically tailored collection rich in both its colors and fabrics.

"We do all the sampling by ourselves, so this is why we were ready," Mr. Leung said, "but some materials and some knitwear were stuck in China, and we had to find different ways to finish the collection."

But when it comes to scaling, he added, he does not think it will be a problem because the brand will "support local

factories to get the collection made. I think at this time, we are all facing different difficulties, so I think we need to trust in ourselves to find a way through this and be optimistic."

Cynthia & Xiao

Cynthia & Xiao is a graphic knitwear brand based between Hong Kong and Canada that pushes the boundaries of knitwear by creating unexpected garments, including this season's commercial line, which features endangered species rendered in pixelated prints.

Due to their highly-organized business model, the duo had sampling and collection production finished before this year's early Chinese New Year and is therefore unaffected by the epidemic.

However, Hong Kong-based co-founder Cynthia Mak is still apprehensive about the upcoming season.

"I am very concerned about the future," she said openly, "but there's not much we can do right now. Although we are doing what we can to get buyers to promote the brand, we understand that no one wants to shop in this situation."

In essence, Ms. Mak said they just wanted to get through the season and hopefully put the virus behind them soon.

"In Hong Kong, everywhere we go we have to have our temperature taken it's to that level," she said, "but then at least we are allowed to go out. I'm allowed to fly. It's not as bad as the media is portraying in Hong Kong. It's still a pretty good city."

**Chinese brands** face hefty challenges at this time, but their combined optimism in Paris stood as an inspirational beacon.

As Fashion Farm Foundation drew to a close and the sun slowly sunk behind a freezing city, their enormous efforts showed the West precisely why China has battled the virus so effectively thus far. The show went on as it always must.

*Please note: Designer Anas Jourden was absent from the event as she was preparing for her separate runway show on March 1.*

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