

JEWELRY

Kering's Qeelin jewelry brand is symbol of China's growing pride for domestic champions

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Liu Shishi is the new brand ambassador of Qeelin. Image credit: Qeelin, Kering

By LUXURY DAILY NEWS SERVICE

While French, Italian and U.S. jewelry brands hog the limelight, emerging talent elsewhere is starting to shine. Case in point: Kering's Qeelin is stepping out with more muscle in its stride.

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The 15-year-old brand is the brainchild of Dennis Chan, who blends Chinese heritage with modern design and a whimsical spirit to create jewelry pieces that are resonating in China. Mr. Chan, now creative director after French luxury conglomerate Kering bought the brand in 2013, dialogued with Christophe Artaux, CEO of Qeelin.

"We are very focused on Chinese customers, especially Chinese millennials, in mainland China in particular, but also when they travel," Mr. Artaux said in an interview hosted by Kering.

"And millennials travel," he said. "They are connected on social media, and they are the group that spend the most money. We see that they are happy to wear modern Chinese jewelry. And we see that Qeelin is becoming an alternative to the well-established Western brands. It calls to the heart of our clientele.

"Qeelin is a Chinese brand with an international impact."

Qeelin is part of a Kering portfolio of jewelry brands that includes Pomellato and DoDo, as well as other sector names such as Gucci, Bottega Veneta, Alexander McQueen and Saint Laurent.



From left: Dennis Chan, founder and creative director of Qeelin, with CEO Christophe Artaux. Image credit: Kering, Qeelin

In this dialogue, Mr. Chan and Mr. Artaux discuss the Qeelin's evolution, reconciling innovation and tradition, customer base, roadmap for the brand and priorities for the future. Please read the discussion as conducted by Kering:

How has Qeelin evolved since its creation fifteen years ago?

Dennis Chan: The concept hasn't changed: to bring Chinese heritage to the modern world.

I worked on this concept for seven years before launching Qeelin in 2004, and in these past 15 years we've gotten to know our customers better, more intimately, and that has influenced our business.

For example, our offerings are more focused and we've broadened our price points so that our brand can be more accessible to younger customers.

How do you reconcile innovation and tradition in your creative process?

Dennis Chan: It's not easy like walking a tightrope. It's about the yin-yang balance between heritage and modernity, but the origin remains 5,000 years of Chinese culture.

For example, the *Wulu*, our bestseller, which is in the classic design of a Chinese gourd, has strong meaning for all Asian people, not just Chinese good luck, happiness. It was introduced internationally at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004 when Chinese actress Maggie Cheung wore it.

We've been building on this design, constantly evolving to keep it trendy, synchronizing with the changing consumer lifestyle. The shape doesn't change, but we add Chinese elements such as jade and red agate in the center or we create intricate patterns inside the *Wulu*.

The *Bo Bo* Panda bear is more playful and interactive, with innovative features such as the *Fashion Bo Bo* that lets you change its clothes, or the *Hip Bo Bo* with changeable hand gestures that let you express your mood.

The *Yu Yi*, named after the "Ruyi" lock which symbolizes dreams come true, was refreshed with a petite red agate and nicknamed "The Little Red Lock" to celebrate the very important Chinese Valentine's Day, Qixi, thus gaining popularity as a gift of love.

Another innovation representation of Chinese micro-craftsmanship is the micro-magnets in the mouths of our Qin Qin goldfish collection, enabling them to join with their "partner" as though in a loving kiss.

They're all designs that we can adjust to taste, more or less, to make the Qeelin range wearable and accessible with a bit of whimsy. You can wear the *Wulu* to the supermarket during the day, but also that night with an evening gown.



Qeelin's *Wulu*, *Je t'aime Bo Bo* pendant and *Qin Qin* pendants. Image credit: Kering, Qeelin

Who are Qeelin's clients?

Dennis Chan: After 15 years, I have come to know many of them, and some have become close friends. They are modern Chinese women trendsetters, not trend-followers who know what they want. They appreciate not only beauty, but the symbolic meaning behind the design, and Qeelin is the first to present to the international luxury aficionado precious jewelry with a very strong Chinese heart.

This is important because Chinese pride is getting stronger, and our customers like our combination of Chinese design and international execution with this modern element of playfulness and versatility.

Twenty years ago, people thought of jewelry as something that doesn't change, something to be handed down.

Today, especially among millennials, clients tend to be less interested in an investment and more interested in rewarding themselves.

The younger ones want to be able to splurge on something they can wear now, something fashionable.

Of course, jewelry is an investment but it should be worn, not locked up in a safe.

Christophe Artaux: We are very focused on Chinese customers especially Chinese millennials in mainland China in particular, but also when they travel.

And millennials travel. They are connected on social media, and they are the group that spend the most money.

We see that they are happy to wear modern Chinese jewelry. And we see that Qeelin is becoming an alternative to the well-established Western brands. It calls to the heart of our clientele.

Qeelin is a Chinese brand with an international impact.

What has been the key Qeelin roadmap so far?

Christophe Artaux: We are very pragmatic in the way we manage the brand: we want to stay in contact with the modern Chinese woman wherever she is.

In China, this means malls, ecommerce sites such as Alibaba's Tmall and social platforms such as WeChat.

We've opened dozens of points of sales in China in the past five years.

In July 2019 we opened the boutique on Place Vendôme, in Paris, which puts us on the map of luxury jewelry.

And our latest brand ambassador, Chinese actress Liu Shishi is regarded as a top-tier celebrity with national awareness in China across all age groups. She embodies the Qeelin woman's DNA a modern Asian beauty, independent, confident, with an inner beauty combining sophistication and humility, and with credible achievements in her career and family life.

We are proud to have her be part of Qeelin's mission to share the beauty of Chinese culture with the world.



In 2019, Qeelin became the first Chinese jeweler with a store on the prestigious Place Vendôme in Paris. Image credit: Kering, Qeelin Eric Sander

Dennis Chan: Also, Qeelin was one of the brands to recognize the compelling influence male celebrities could have in marketing our women's jewelry collections and our unisex pieces.

Qeelin's 2019 male brand ambassador, Sean Xiao, was a great success. Through his ambassadorship, his many younger female fans were introduced to Qeelin and soon became enthusiastic customers.

In addition, we also ensure Qeelin's continued international flair by outfitting global talents such as Korean pop artists Somi and Ailee.

Finally, what are the most important priorities going forward?

Christophe Artaux: It's all about unlocking the huge potential of the brand, so our top priority is to continue raising Qeelin's brand awareness and appeal in China.

We will continue to communicate vigorously digitally and we will ensure continued novelty with new designs and materials.

For example, we recently launched Wulu color rings in a series in bold colors such as red agate, black onyx and jade. But, in conjunction with this, we will continue to rationalize our offerings and price positioning, while expanding our stores in China's tier 1 and 2 cities.

Qeelin today is part of the trend that has been gaining much momentum as Chinese industries started becoming sector leaders. And this trend is only beginning.

Qeelin's grand opening of the boutique on the Place Vendôme in Paris