



Taking an almost journalistic approach, the designers spotlight one pressing social topic each season: for example, their Not a Gun over-the-shoulder bag that comes in the shape of a gun holster is a nod to America's ever-rising gun violence; and wide-brimmed hats in autumn-winter 2021 that pay tribute to immigrants from China's Pearl River Delta, whose labour supported the 19th-century gold rush in the western US. And Private Policy New York's activism goes beyond aesthetics. As well as supporting coral reef conservation by partnering with marine conservation charity Reef Life Foundation, the brand's collections have raised funds for the Museum of Chinese in America and the Ali Forney Center, which provides shelter for LGBTQ+ youths experiencing homelessness. For its campaign Powerful Women, Private Policy New York also rallied female leaders of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) heritage from across creative industries. "Fashion is our outlet to express creativity, build community and inspire meaningful conversations," Li tells *Tatler*. "We want to make a real difference in the industry."

Li and Qiu, who are both of mainland Chinese origin, met during their studies at The New School's Parsons School of Design. Inspired by the unapologetic free-thinkers that they encountered in the Big Apple, the duo started the purpose-led label, which tends to follow a blueprint of utilitarian and

# Mission First

For purpose-led independent label Private Policy New York, no social topic is off limits—even for its Shanghai Fashion Week debut *By Madeleine Mak*

Every fashion collection contains elements of storytelling, but for Private Policy New York, it's at the crux of everything it does. For the independent label's co-founders Haoran Li and Siying Qiu, its genderless designs are a vehicle to address hard-hitting topics, from enslaved South Asian fishermen to our future with AI and the pitfalls of the US's big pharma industry.

club culture silhouettes, after graduating in 2016. “We felt that there were no brands talking about social and political issues at the time,” says Li. “Living in New York, everything is happening around us. We had a lot of friends with very strong opinions about what’s happening around the world. That’s what drove us to start the brand.”

With its rebellious positioning as not just a clothing brand but also a cultural commentator, Private Policy New York has garnered recognition beyond socially conscious fashion lovers. The brand has scored collaborations with Coca-Cola and Casetify, as well as industry recognition. In 2021, its founders were named among Fashion Asia Hong Kong’s 10 Asian Designers to Watch. Just

over two years later, Li and Qiu were recognised in the inaugural CFDA x Genesis House AAPI Design + Innovation Grant, an initiative set up by the Council of Fashion Designers America and creative hub Genesis House that shines a light on the next generation of AAPI designers. They’re finding fans in the form of trailblazing entertainers from across the globe too: K-pop stars Rosé from Blackpink and Yeji from Itzy, and American actors Chloe Bailey and Shailene Woodley are a few of the famous faces to be spotted in the brand.

While Li admits that his experience in the US is “always going to be part of the brand”, neither he nor Qiu have lost sight of their roots. Along with regularly being on the New York

Fashion Week circuit since its founding in 2016, Private Policy New York started hosting repeat shows at Shanghai Fashion Week since 2017. In April this year, the label cemented its must-have status in the blossoming Chinese fashion scene by debuting its autumn-winter 2025 collection in the bustling city.

For Li, this decision to set the brand’s sights on Shanghai Fashion Week was driven by a mix of practical and emotional reasons—he spent a lot of time in the city during the pandemic years, then again, earlier this year, while waiting for his green card. The design duo also felt the urge to give back to the community they’ve cultivated among Shanghai’s fashion community through

the years. “The Chinese economy is not as strong as it was before. People are kind of depressed around me in Shanghai,” Li says. “Since fashion is a medium that creates dreams, I thought it was a very good and important time to show in Shanghai.”

For autumn-winter 2025, the design duo dived into how global economic uncertainties influence the fashion choices of younger generations. Specifically, they took notice of the rise of the “old money” aesthetic—a trend that defines luxury through preppy and logo-free silhouettes previously associated with individuals in the west with family wealth. After resurging in the west in 2023, the style went viral on the popular Chinese social media app Little Red Book. “People



Finale of Private Policy New York autumn-winter 2025 show at Shanghai Fashion Week.

**Opposite page:** Behind the scenes at the Private Policy New York autumn-winter 2025 show





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are really insecure about their financial situation and future,” Li says. “From our perspective, that’s why they are trying to dress old money style, to have some sense of security.”

The collection saw Li and Qiu reinterpret characteristic old money elements through Private Policy New York’s raw, edgy lens. Pearls were reimagined as metal beads, while silk scarves were made utilitarian with canvas fabric. The wax jacket—a workwear silhouette first popularised by the British elite and in particular by the brand Barbour—took centre stage in untraditional cropped and tailored forms. Further deconstructing the coat’s typical waxed surface, the duo also make a tongue-in-cheek statement about modern luxury—or “new money”—looks; for example, by using

unconventional materials, such as the gummed flaps of regular brown envelopes, to construct a pair of trousers.

The reactions to the collection’s debut tended to focus on Private Policy New York’s defining American origins. Li says this view of the brand is unique to its Chinese audience: “When we show in Shanghai, people see us as being Americana in style. They say: we can see that your DNA and blood is from America.” But rather than trying to control the narrative or seeing this as a negative, Li embraces this cross-cultural dialogue. “I like to hear what people have to say about the brand. I’m also learning about who I am through what people tell me.”

Next year, Private Policy New York will celebrate a decade in the industry. Despite the

thought-provoking and at times emotionally difficult topics that the brand has dared to tackle, Li says such activism is one of the brand's key elements. "It's been very natural since day one; I think that's why we started the concept in the first place. [We haven't found] any topic particularly hard to translate into fashion."

They do struggle, however, with the growing pains shared by many independent brands who strive to make their mark in the highly competitive industry. When they started Private Policy New York as fresh graduates, Li and Qiu had little business acumen. And despite both having degrees in fashion design, Li admits that they didn't know enough about garment construction. He highlights the brand's current experimentation with denim and canvas washes, something they "never could have done at the start of the brand". Today, finances continue to be a hurdle, partially motivating the ongoing theme of money and financial security that have oriented their collections like in autumn-winter 2025. "We are really trying hard to survive in this economy. I think that might be the hardest part—all the day-to-day things," Li says.

Despite the difficulties, the design duo are gearing up for the brand's next chapter. Recently, Li moved back to New York and with this comes shifts in the brand's guiding force. "We are going through a lot of changes nowadays. There's also a lot of changes that come with being Asian in America, especially as a

Chinese person," Li says. "We really want to dive into this topic again."

In an industry too often criticised for being superficial, Private Policy New York is proof that garments can be more than just commodities—they can be mechanisms for meaningful dialogue and an expression of one's values. And perhaps this is what luxury should be: a statement about who you truly are below the surface.



Private Policy New York autumn-winter 2025 collection. **Opposite page, from top:** Pearl-inspired metal bead details on baseball caps pearl necklace made with metal beads