

# MADE IN CHINA

Despite a tough economic climate, local talent is shining through at Shanghai Fashion Week, where the event and its designers are under the spotlight as never before.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK

On March 31, Chinese brand Shushu/Tong closed out the autumn 2025 season of Shanghai Fashion Week with a blockbuster show celebrating its 10-year anniversary. Founded by friends Liushu Lei and Yutong Jiang in 2015, the brand, known for its unabashed femininity and explorations of girlhood – think coquettish bows, ballerinas and ruffles galore – has become one of the most anticipated shows of the week. Tipped to become China's next megabrand, Shushu/Tong not only counts three domestic standalone stores and a thriving network of stockists around the world, but also a celebrity fanbase that includes Olivia Rodrigo, Jennie Kim and Alexa Chung.

Given its ability to create an utterly contemporary yet oh-so-pretty wardrobe that feels relatable – case in point was the autumn '25 collection, with models carrying bags with baguettes, books and flowers coming out of them – it's no surprise the brand has amassed a cult following. The only thing usual about Shushu/Tong's global success is that it's been achieved without ever showing outside of Shanghai Fashion Week.

Shushu/Tong's trajectory mirrors that of other young Chinese designers who are increasingly attracting a global following, all thanks to a greater spotlight at Shanghai Fashion Week. Once a local affair, nowadays brands on the schedule can achieve as much coverage for a show as in London or New York, thanks to the number of international media titles covering the week, explains Bohan Qiu, founder of the Shanghai-based consultancy agency Boh Projects.

Although according to Qiu the week hasn't yet returned to pre-pandemic levels in terms of shows and events – Shanghai had a second lockdown in 2022, forcing the week to go digital for the second time – he reflects on autumn '25 season thus: "International exchanges are rebounding more strongly, thanks to the visa-free policy. There's been a surge of Korean influencers, Thai media and stylists, and even American

and Italian journalists coming over, creating fun activations and diversifying the week's programme."

The latest edition featured 200 brands on the schedule, 11 certified showrooms and 15,000 square metres of trade space, with more than half coming from abroad – exceeding Paris in scale. And while few are immune to the slowdown in consumer spending that's affecting the fashion industry worldwide, not to mention the threat of Trump's tariffs, Qiu explains, "[In Shanghai] we've accepted the economic downturn as a norm and adjusted to it. Designers are thinking about how to build things that are more sustainable and consistent rather than a one-hit miracle." And says Hong Kong designer and Ponder.er founder Derek Cheng, who visits each season, "I saw





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Shushu/Tong autumn 2025*



industry players and brands regrouping and coming together to find new ways to navigate this challenging landscape." According to the organisers, showroom traffic was up nearly 20 percent compared to last season.

While weeks in the big-four fashion capitals are dominated by LVMH and Kering-owned businesses or legacy houses, Shanghai's schedule by contrast is mostly made up of independent brands helmed by Gen Z and Millennial founders. Many of those were started by designers forced to return home during the pandemic, whereas in the past, Chinese graduates of top fashion schools would have stayed in the West to work for larger brands.

One of the best places to witness young Chinese talent is Labelhood, the brand incubator-cum-retailer founded by Tasha Liu in 2016, which runs an official showcasing sector during the week and owns a network of boutiques dedicated to independent brands. "Since its launch, platforms like Labelhood have allowed emerging designers

to tell their brand stories and create community-building events that are both fresh and inspiring," explains Ponder.er's Cheng. In 2021, Liu had scouted designer Louis Shengtao Chen on Instagram – and in the short time since then, Chen's become one of the event's most anticipated names, even scooping up the 2024 *Vogue* China Fashion Fund award.

It's this kind of support that's led young designers to choose Shanghai as their base over other fashion capitals. One such designer is Yayi Chen Zhou, who established her brand Yayi in New York in 2022. Raised in Madrid by Chinese émigré parents, she references her multicultural upbringing in her designs and was named an LVMH Prize semi-finalist in 2024. "After my first collection debuted in New York, I relocated the brand to Shanghai with the support provided by Labelhood, particularly the showroom space and connections to buyers," she explains. "I'm grateful for the support at Shanghai Fashion Week and the role it has in expanding opportunities for Asian designers on a global stage." Her autumn '25 collection, *Whispers of the Valley*, draws inspiration from the ways women in the Navarre region of Northern Spain adapt their wardrobes to their surroundings.

Another designer who started his brand in New York but has since decamped to Shanghai is Mark Gong, who's recently been enjoying a global moment after dressing Blackpink's Lisa for the Oscars in March. Known for his ability to combine humour with sophisticated design, in the Labelhood sector this season, Gong referenced the tabloid culture of the 2000s in a show featuring a mirrored set with newspapers strewn across the floor. His women have always exuded attitude, but this season his approach felt more mature in a standout collection that combined slick tailoring with low-slung jeans and fur accessories, cementing his reputation as one of Shanghai's star designers. "I was excited to see what he'd bring us after the Oscars moment," reflects Tracey Cheng, head of merchandising at IT, who cites Gong's show as her season highlight. "I love the way he created these strong and elegant Gong Girls."

Other highlights from the Labelhood sector this season include Oude Waag, founded by Royal College of Art graduate Jingwei Yin, who's known for his restrained yet sensual collections that meld fluid draping with cut-out silhouettes. This season, Yin presented more daywear options – long



*Mark Gong*



*Jacques Wei*

skirts and jackets – but continued his streamlined aesthetic. And Yirantian, by local designer Yirantian Guo, whose utterly elegant autumn '25 proposition drew on the idea of a female agent's wardrobe. Named Cypher, the collection balances high-octane glamour with wearable corporate codes – think sleek patent raincoats, fur boleros and grey wool separates.

Aside from the prevailing grown-up and sophisticated mood this season, designers are increasingly finding ways to reference their Chinese heritage through a contemporary lens. Rather than being a dirty word, this new generation of designers are made in China and proud of it.

A young brand that does this well and is growing in popularity is Jacques Wei, founded by Donghui Wei and stylist Austin



*Whispers of the Valley by Yayi*

Feng, which is now stocked exclusively at Harvey Nichols Hong Kong, whose merchandising manager Cynthia Yeung has been witnessing a growing appetite for Chinese brands. “Jacques Wei’s unique bold aesthetic and high versatility caught my eye,” she says. “The brand infuses traditional Chinese heritage with contemporary designs to offer a unique perspective in the world of womenswear.” For autumn '25, Jacques Wei held its show on the top floor of a skyscraper with views over the Bund, presenting a truly seductive collection where oriental silks were beautifully combined with lace, leopard print and fur. If there’s a place for a Yves Saint Laurent of the East, the brand could very well occupy it.

Other brands that deftly balance heritage while keeping a global audience in mind include Samuel Gui Yang, the brand founded by Erik Litzén and Samuel Yang in 2015, which is based between London and Shanghai. By referencing Chinese and Western codes in their designs, their mission



*Designer Yayi Chen Zhou of Yayi*



*Samuel Gui Yang*

is to prove that made in China can go hand in hand with artistry, and the duo have a growing fanbase. For autumn 2025, their inspirations ranged from Patti Smith to author Eileen Chang, in a collection where the influence of the qipao on the garments was clear but presented in a way that

emphasised ease and movement. A black velvet two-piece with Chinese frog closures felt especially Armani-esque.

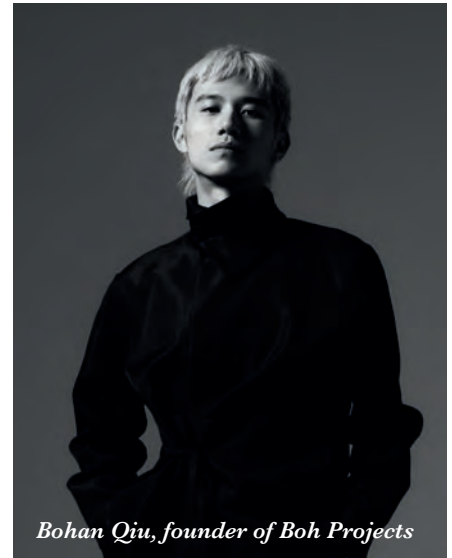
Ao Yes, the young brand founded by Austin Wang and Yansong Liu in 2022, continues to make a name for itself, referencing traditional Chinese clothing and uniforms through a 21st-century sensibility. This season, they presented modern interpretations of Mao jackets and looks inspired by Maggie Cheung's wardrobe from *In the Mood for Love*.

Adding to the line-up of independent labels, it's now commonplace for Western brands to host activations during the week, hoping to capitalise on the momentum and reach new audiences. Economic slowdown or not, China still represents the world's largest consumer base. During October's spring '25 week, Moncler staged its megawatt Moncler Genius fashion event, bringing co-collaborators such as Rick Owens and A\$AP Rocky to the city, while Vivienne Westwood held a one off show. This season, Prada opened Mi Shang, the Wong Kar Wai-designed café in its Rong Zhai residence, which coincided with the openings of brand exhibitions by Loro Piana and Gucci.



Western brands have sought more thoughtful ways to engage with the local fashion community too. This season Nike hosted a show titled Victory Lap featuring celebrated Chinese athletes and debuting designs created in collaboration with four young designers, including Susan Fang and Markgong. Meanwhile, to celebrate 30 years of *Toy Story*, Disney engaged 10 local designers – including Ponder.er – to create a high-fashion spin on the franchise characters.

March also saw the inaugural edition of the Sustasia Fashion Prize, created by ex-editor and sustainability advocate Shaway Yeh, which is helping to break down barriers between designers in Asia. The eight finalists, hailing from as far afield as Vietnam and Indonesia, were tasked with using sustainable and innovative materials for a final showcase during the week. One of the finalists was Hong Kong designer Karmuel Young, who



*Bohan Qiu, founder of Boh Projects*

created a jumpsuit that can be transformed into a coat, jacket or trousers. "The biggest challenge was creating a garment that transforms in a seamless way, he says, while adding that he views sustainability as "realistic, practical and versatile".

The winner, Chinese designer Ruohan Nie, was selected by a judging panel that included *Vogue* Thailand's editor-in-chief, Mills Fabrica general manager Cintia Nunes and Esquel managing director Dee Poon. According to Bohan Qiu, the award is an example of "greater multi-dimensional exchanges happening at Shanghai Fashion Week that are helping to attract more international designers and suppliers".

Aside from emerging as Asia's fashion capital, there's a growing sense that Shanghai is increasingly becoming a more level playing field with the West. According to Cheng of Ponder.er. "I think Shanghai has found its niche for becoming one of the most exciting fashion weeks to visit, not only in Asia but also globally."

As the big four fashion weeks start to lose their shine – with New York's legacy designers continuing to prefer off-schedule shows and suggestions that London Fashion Week take place annually due to its increasingly slim line-up – this poses an opportunity for Shanghai, where the talent pool undeniably possesses global potential, which the standout autumn 25 collections only helped to reinforce.

The mark of a young brand ready to take things to the next level was once considered a coveted spot on the Paris Fashion Week schedule. But for now, it seems that Shanghai and its star designers are right where they need to be. 📍