

# CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATION

Designer SAMUEL YANG, whose inspirations range from Anita Mui to the Soong sisters, is defining the future of Chinese creativity.

Words: MADELAINE CLARK

*Samuel Gui Yang*  
*spring/summer 2025*

Despite his brand being recognised as the bellwether of the so-called neo-Chinese style – the term, which is currently trending in fashion circles and social-media hashtags, describes modern interpretations of traditional Chinese clothing – designer Samuel Yang never thought he'd be inspired by his own heritage.

"When I was at fashion school, I never really paid attention to where I came from," explains the Shenzhen-born Central Saint Martins graduate. "Before I started my brand, there was never any type of encouragement or promotion to say, 'I'm from China; I'm a Chinese designer.'"

Yang established his eponymous brand in 2015; he's now co-creative director alongside his partner Erik Litzén. Since then the womenswear label, which is based between London and Shanghai, has gained recognition for merging Eastern and Western codes, creating an authentic and contemporary design language that bridges historical Chinese references with the present.

In recent seasons the duo has emerged as one of the most exciting names at Shanghai Fashion Week – one that caters to a new generation of consumers interested in their heritage. Beloved by top stylists in the mainland, their designs have landed *Vogue* covers and been photographed on everyone from actor Fan Bingbing to supermodel Liu Wen. In 2020 the designers were named LVMH prize semi-finalists, and last year they collaborated with Adidas on a Chinese New Year capsule collection.

"The Chinese market has recently been embracing this new, so-called 'Chinese identity' and what it's about. From style to eating, what you consume and how you behave," Yang explains.

While a teenager in Shenzhen, Yang's view of fashion was quite different from what it is today. "I grew up seeing only manufacturing and the mass production of the garment-making industry," he says. "It was never really that inspiring. In Japan, for example, there's a strong narrative of Japanese designers and the ways they shaped fashion, but there was never a history of a Chinese contribution."

After leaving school, Yang relocated to the UK with aspirations of becoming an artist.

However, in London he began to discover the "cool British culture," particularly the punk and rock movements. This led him to the work of punk priestess Vivienne Westwood and later Yoji Yamamoto, which steered him towards a career in fashion.

He enrolled at Central Saint Martins,

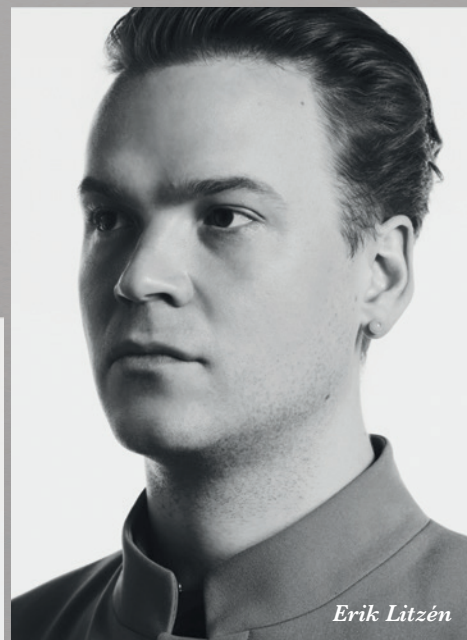


Samuel Gui Yang

where he met Swedish-born Litzén on the MA programme. After graduating, Yang struck out on his own while Litzén spent two years working at JW Anderson before joining as co-creative director. Yang describes Litzén's arrival as "quite seamless", as he was already spending his evenings helping Yang in his studio after work.

"Once Erik came on board, building the brand together helped guide our direction to pay tribute to the east and west," Yang explains, adding that this was the catalyst for him to begin exploring his own heritage.

"What you've been through, or where you come from, can never truly be erased; it's something that's always there," he explains. "My generation was fortunate to study abroad, and just being able to travel and meet more people has helped us create our own way of seeing what being modern Chinese is and, maybe more importantly,



Erik Litzén

how to bring a new aspect of what Chinese creativity is and can be for the future."

If there's a blueprint for modern Chinese creativity, it can perhaps be found on Samuel Gui Yang's catwalk. Yang and Litzén's designs riff off traditional *qipao*, *tang* and *mao* shapes, creating a cross-pollinated design language with a modern sensibility. If traditional Chinese garments are known for being restrictive, Yang and Litzén's designs stand out for their easy elegance, in which airy and flowing fabrics create highly wearable pieces. Take their spring 2025 collection, for example, where the pairing of a vibrant red *qipao*-style top with a flowing skirt added a contemporary spin to the dress; ditto a roomy A-line skirt in varying shades of red and purple worn with a cheongsam-inspired top with rolled-up sleeves.

Asked to describe the Samuel Gui Yang woman, he replies: "Quite confident and contemporary, a strong character with attitude. She's living and travelling in and out of many different places, but she also has a strong appreciation of different cultures, especially Chinese culture."

No wonder, then, that a scroll through the brand's Instagram account, in which the designers share snapshots from their mood boards, provides a glimpse of the women who inspire their vision, with portraits of strong characters such as author Nien Cheng, and artists Ruth

Asawa and English painter Bridget Riley. There are also images of Maggie Cheung and Anita Mui – growing up as a Cantonese-speaker, Yang explains he was heavily influenced by Hong Kong culture.

For autumn 2025, alongside singer and poet Patti Smith and author Eileen Chang, a key influence were the three Soong sisters, who became highly influential in 20th-century China thanks to their marriages to figures such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. One look, featuring a spiky white chrysanthemum flower print, was inspired by similar pattern worn by the eldest Soong Ai-ling – “It was unusual to see that pattern in a traditional dress,” explains Yang – while a qipao dress named the Mei-ling, with buttons on either side of the neck closure, is inspired by a portrait of the youngest Soong Mei-ling wearing an identical style.



*Above: the Soong Sisters.  
Right: the Samuel Gui  
Yang x Adidas Lunar  
New Year capsule*



*Look from  
autumn/winter 2025*



Titled Frames, the collection reflects on themes of identity – “the frame of a window, the frame of personality, a frame of who you are in current society”, says Yang. It also references the windowpanes of their former studio in Seven Sisters, London, especially in the print of a black and silver-grey two-piece.

The brand operates with small teams in London, where the focus is more on the creative aspect and design development, and Shanghai, which is more business-oriented with an emphasis on sales and marketing. Maintaining the collaborative rhythm, Yang travels to London five times a year, while Litzén visits Shanghai twice yearly for the shows.

Choosing Shanghai over London Fashion Week is part of brand-building efforts to “put our focus in one place,” says Yang, who explains that as well as being their main market, the city is a place that represents them fully. “The last three shows have been a new turning point for us. The city has been



*Look inspired by the brand's studio window in Seven Sisters, Lodon*



*Looks from the Samuel Gui Yang spring 2025 show, named East Wind*

*“Part of our goal is to change the perception of ‘made in China’”*

really welcoming and is now understanding our narrative even better. The energy is finally back to what it used to be, so it's quite positive."

Almost 90 percent of the brand's garments are produced in China, where Yang says the manufacturing quality and fabrication choices are getting "better and better". He even describes his homeland as a "pioneer" when it comes to the development of sustainable materials. "Part of our goal is to change the perception of 'made in China,'" he says.

Although some international brands have recently moved production out of China to countries such as Vietnam, where it's cheaper, or to others that aren't so threatened by Trump's tariffs, Yang says this has granted them an unexpected opportunity, as factories now have greater capacity to work with independent labels. "Our production partners also see the benefit of being able to work with someone like us, to create something better. So from a creative point of view, they see the potential."

The designers are currently busy on the spring/summer 2026 collection, to be presented at Shanghai Fashion Week in October. As the show will also celebrate the brand's 10-year anniversary, they're planning a kind of retrospective exhibition as well, "just to give people an overview of what we've been creating the past years", Yang says. Pop-ups outside of China are also

in the works, with more collaborations on the horizon.

As to how his team is meeting the challenge of the current downturn in Chinese consumer confidence, Yang is focusing on the long term. "Over the past few years," he says, "we've learned how to face uncertainty and unpredictability, and adapt. We're more careful with the materials and fabrics we use and try to be very precise and not wasteful."

"While we're still small, we're focused on maintaining our brand for another 10 years. It's almost like a boat; we're trying to keep it steady so we don't sink, but still produce exciting and beautiful things. And I hope after the 10-year anniversary show we can show more people what we can offer the industry. So for now, what we can do is just continue to be honest, keep this balance and hope we reach that bigger boat." ■