

MATCHA FROM JAPAN

Text by NAOMI MORRIS OMORI

For centuries, matcha has been more than just an ingredient for tea – it has been a symbol of the purity of nature itself. The vividly green, finely ground powder is made from specially-cultivated green tea leaves which are hidden from direct sunlight. This slows growth and increases chlorophyll levels in the plants, giving the powder its deep green colouring. Japanese culture has long-appreciated the delicious tea for its calming and energising properties.

Time slows down during a Japanese tea ceremony. The cleansing and purifying of the implements and the delicacy and care with which they are handled is mesmerising. Two spoons of the vibrant powder are measured and placed in the chawan, or the tea bowl. In the silence, your ears attune to the echoing sound of the water splashing as it is poured onto the matcha. Steam rises from the hot water, making the thick koicha tea. The chasen, or the tea whisk, is used delicately and then briefly with great speed, frothing the water and the matcha so that it looks like ocean waves lapping at the shore. The tea bowl and implements are carefully washed and cleaned again after use.

Matcha and the Chinese method of preparing powdered tea were brought to Japan in the tenth Century by the Zen Buddhist monk Eisai. Today, the ingredient is a symbol of traditional Japanese tea ceremonies, as well as Japanese culture and history. Richer in colour and taste than ordinary green tea, it is indulgent in a different way. Because the ceremony focuses so much energy on the preparation of the tea,

your taste buds have a heightened sense of appreciation for its essence. Time feels like a luxury. The ceremony gives you the temporal space to meditate and appreciate.

Matcha adds a mellow, bitter taste as an ingredient and traditionally it has been used as a flavouring for soba noodles and Japanese sweets, such as monju and wagashi. It is now a popular flavour for a variety of food products and beverages, from Kit Kats and frozen yoghurt, to lattes and milkshakes.

Traditionalists might argue that the sensation of the silky simplicity of matcha is lost in a rough, icy milkshake, but nevertheless it is certainly refreshing because it adds a subtle, savoury sharpness to the sweet drink.

In contemporary culture, matcha is often talked about for its high levels of antioxidants and nutritional properties. In a way, this echoes the traditional manner in which it was appreciated, helping drinkers to slow down for a moment and to appreciate the tea and what it represents. The ways in which it has been used as a flavouring for all kinds of modern confectionary, snacks and cakes perhaps contradict what matcha has traditionally represented in Japanese food culture.

However, if the modern diner pauses to enjoy and appreciate the sensation of the matcha flavour as they crunch on their matcha Kit Kat or sip their matcha green tea beer, the spirit of the traditions will live on.

HAIYAN

Home to a world-class university, 88 Nobel Prizes, and famous residents spanning from Stephen Hawking to Charles Darwin and Emma Thompson, the city of Cambridge is world-renowned. Over the last few decades, the British town has also set out to become the European leader in the field of new technologies, with Amazon, Apple, and Samsung opening research centres there. Microsoft set up a lab there in 1997, and now employs a total of 1000 people and 140 researchers. Every day, computer scientists, physicists, engineers, academics, and mathematicians join forces to try and solve a wide range of problems using technological innovation, with the aim to produce “some of Microsoft’s most successful products and services.”

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ZHANG

Haiyan Zhang, a Chinese-born designer and engineer, is one of the brilliant minds at Microsoft Cambridge. Zhang joined Microsoft in 2013 and is now Innovation Director of Microsoft Research. A leading figure in her field, Zhang has become a recognizable face of the brand since she appeared on the BBC's hit documentary *Big Life Fix* in 2017.

Haiyan Zhang, you have worked for a wide range of companies, from AT&T to British Design Council, HBO and Mattel, looking to solve their issues using new technologies. What brought to the field of computer science?

I was what you could call a very nerdy child, always playing around with computers and writing my own little programs. But I actually never thought of properly studying computer science until the last few months of high school, because I was planning on studying Law. My friends, who liked to program as well, convinced me to pursue my passion.

You then studied interactive multimedia in Canada, followed by interaction design, which were rather new disciplines at the time. Is that something you felt was important? Was it a struggle to find your way?

I worked as a software engineer for a number of years in Australia and in Canada, but my drive was really to understand the reasons behind their design and why people were creating certain features. I was interested in the function of the software, rather than simply designing it with pre-set of tasks in mind. To me it just seemed to be more important, so I decided to focus on user-centred design and innovation. The idea was to eventually help companies figure out what products they should actually make with technology.

In 2017 you took part in a BBC documentary series, *Big Life Fix*. While on the show you created the famous Emma watch, named after young graphic designer Emma Lawton, which dramatically reduces the tremors of Parkinson's disease. You also helped design a tool for visual electroencephalography, which is now used during medical operations. How do you think new technologies can help solve scientific or medical problems?

We live in a really interesting era where our research can help solve wider issues and help create tangible solution. For example, we can collaborate with people in neurosciences to improve efficacy of healthcare professionals like doctors and surgeons. Ultimately, this will improve patients' lives as well. We're just in this phase now where this is happening and it needs to happen more.

You work in a heavily male-dominated field, where very few females reach responsibilities as high as yours. Did you ever feel a glass ceiling over your head?

Definitely. I was one of a few girls in my computer science course. It has been a challenge in my studies and throughout my career... I've experienced negative reactions, prejudice, and bias. I've also had my feelings hurt. But I think overall it never really bothered me that much, I am pretty stubborn so I just kept on going without giving it much attention. At the end of the day, the only thing that mattered was to stay on course.



Biases can sometimes hide in seemingly harmless comments. Were you ever asked to justify your choices as a woman, like discussing your private life, or choosing between work and raising a family?

Well, I don't think I ever needed to justify those choices to myself. I had a child a little bit later in life so I never suffered from having to explain myself early on in my career. That being said, I think we are living in a very interesting period where the bias towards women with young children or women wanting to have a family is being recognized and it's now being called out. Whereas maybe 10 years ago, the prejudice was just sort of accepted. The problem was there, but it wasn't considered to be an issue. In that sense, we made a lot of progress. I do try to balance my personal life with my child and work. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't! I also believe in being visible with it. For example, I take Piper, my toddler, on work trips and it can make things a little bit difficult for me. Sometimes she shows up at the office or at the airport with all my

Haiyan just had a trip with her daughter in China, where she hadn't visited for about 20 years.
Shirt and pants by THEORY.

MAÏA MORGENSZTERN

Maïa is a freelance journalist and culture strategist, she is the Founder and Editor of the Franco-English digital platform CULTURE ALT.com, featuring podcast interviews of cultural icons.

colleagues, and she has a tantrum on the floor. It is not easy to manage, but in a way these moments are necessary. People need to understand society is made of a breadth of different types of life choices, and we should be accepting of all them.

The boundaries between your work and your private life seem to be quite blurred. Since you take your child to work, do you take work at home? What does your life look like after hours?

I have to admit that in my work/life balance is not very good. I'm really obsessed with my job and don't really switch off outside of the office, which is something I need to change. Life should revolve around the things that you enjoy, so it's pretty easy for me to keep on going once I leave the office! Other than that, I try to spend time with my loved ones, and tell Piper about her family and my life as a child.

You grew up in China and moved to Australia when you were eight. Did you feel some sort of disconnect between your Chinese background and your new home?

My parents moved to Australia at a time when immigration was just happening from China, so I was the only Asian kid in my primary school. There were no Asians around, and no Chinese people on TV when I was growing up, or maybe the odd Chinese News reader on a multicultural channel. When you're a child, you just absorb whatever reality you're put into without questioning it, and it does have an effect on you. It took me a long time to accept my background and my ethnicity, I think. But I have always tried to pursue the things that I want to pursue in spite of bias or prejudice. At the end of the day, it's important to have a strong mind-set and keep on going.

You married an English man. Does it make it more challenging to educate your daughter about your own heritage?

It's funny because I didn't think about it before giving birth. I never made any concrete decisions about raising Piper. I would like her to know her Chinese roots though. We just came back from China and she met all her extended cousins and my relatives. It's her

second time there in her three years of her life. I'm really excited about that.

Do you think having a child made you connect differently with Chinese culture?

Yes, absolutely. I am very bad at speaking Chinese with her, but she gets to watch Chinese cartoon Before taking my daughter to China, I hadn't been back there for about 20 years! It's funny that I have this strange relationship with my heritage. I think it has to do with the way I was brought up, and in a way, I don't want her to have that same tension understanding her identity. So I'm trying to make her feel that she can fluidly go between the Chinese and the Western cultures.

Do you have any career plans for Piper, or any preferences?

I have the secret ambition... I would love for her to colonize Mars! Although her dad is not very keen on this. It sounds quite dangerous.

Well, the *Mars One* mission is still selecting its settlers! But she would have to go alone and never see her family again... is outer space the next frontier for you?

I just think the universe is a really exciting place to explore. We're only here for a short amount of time. What are we going to do that is a really going to sort of push the boundaries and make the most of our time on this planet or in this universe?

There was this exhibition at the Victoria and Albert in London called *The Future Starts Here*. The show actually raised a lot of questions, rather than offer answers. One of the sections was called "if Mars is the answer, what is the question?" It partly dealt with the power of new technologies and what it means for our planet as well as us as a species. If we're going to Mars, does it mean we've given up hope on our planet and need to look elsewhere?

I would say that sometimes humanity wants to explore for the sake of exploration. Sometimes, it's driven by politics. We went to the moon because it was there, but



Dress by MAX MARA, photographed in her office at Microsoft Research Cambridge.

also because of this tension between the Americans and the Russians at the time. But when we got to the moon, it was this huge symbol for humanity and what we had achieved. I think sometimes there are questions worth asking because they push the boundaries of what we have achieved as a species and I think that's really important too. It doesn't mean we are giving up on who we are.

You are a role model for women, but also carved the way for the new Asian generation by becoming rather visible in English speaking media. Do you feel an added responsibility to speak for the minorities, be it female or Asian, who are struggling? In other words, is positive discrimination a necessity or creating another prejudice?

This is a very interesting and challenging question. It's rather politically loaded, too. I always say to people, "You should take the opportunities you're given, even if they might be given to you in your favour". This is quite a tough a story, ut recently a female colleague said to me that she got a promotion and some folks basically came up to her and said that they thought she got the promotion because she was a female. It really hurt her. I think it's quite shocking that people would voice that opinion to her. I kind of think, well, so what? If you get the promotion, it means you're capable of doing the job. Some people may think one way. Others may think another way. Who cares? We should just get on with it and accept the challenge. This is how I have led my life so far, and I think it has proven to be a rather good idea!