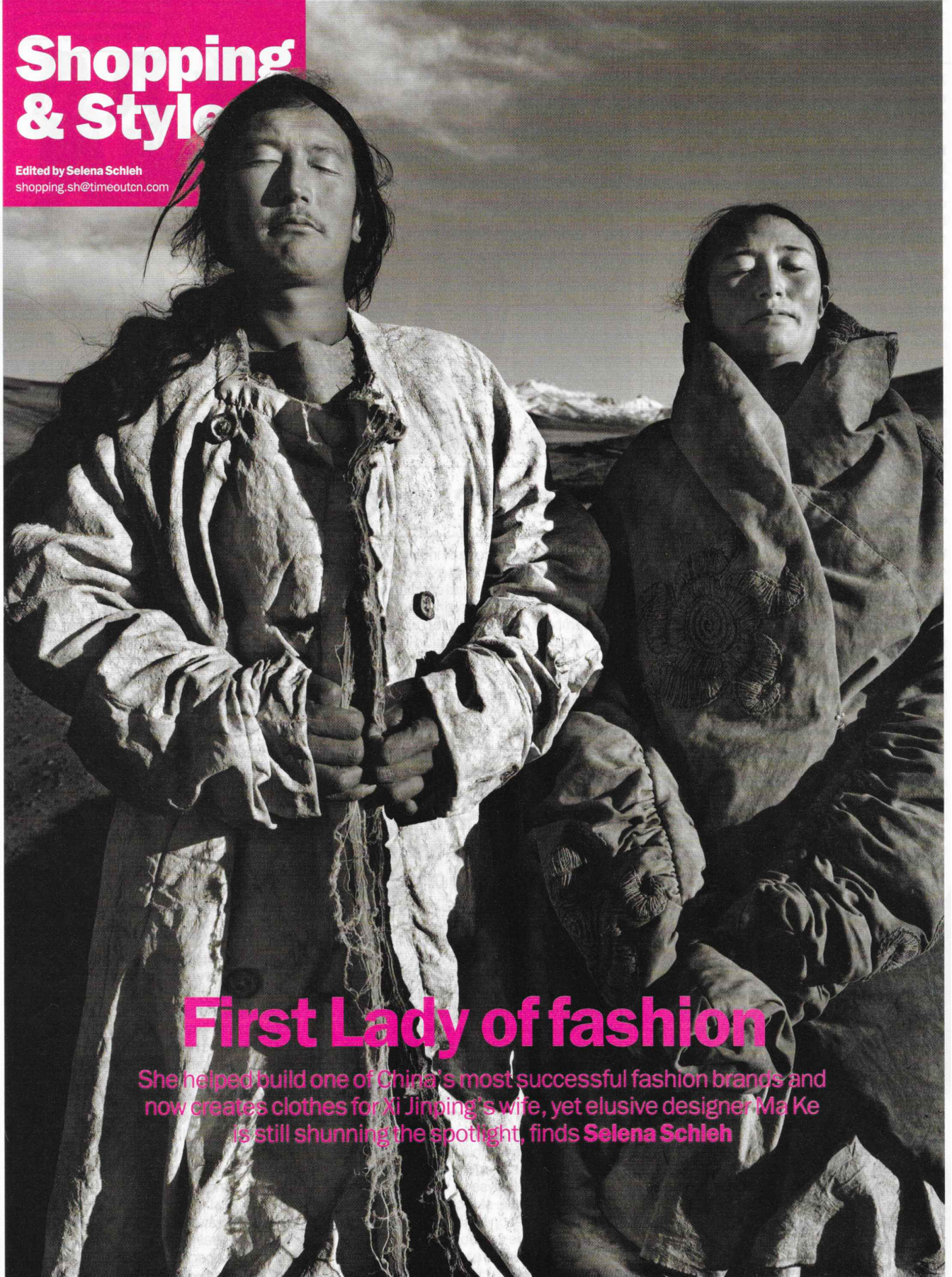


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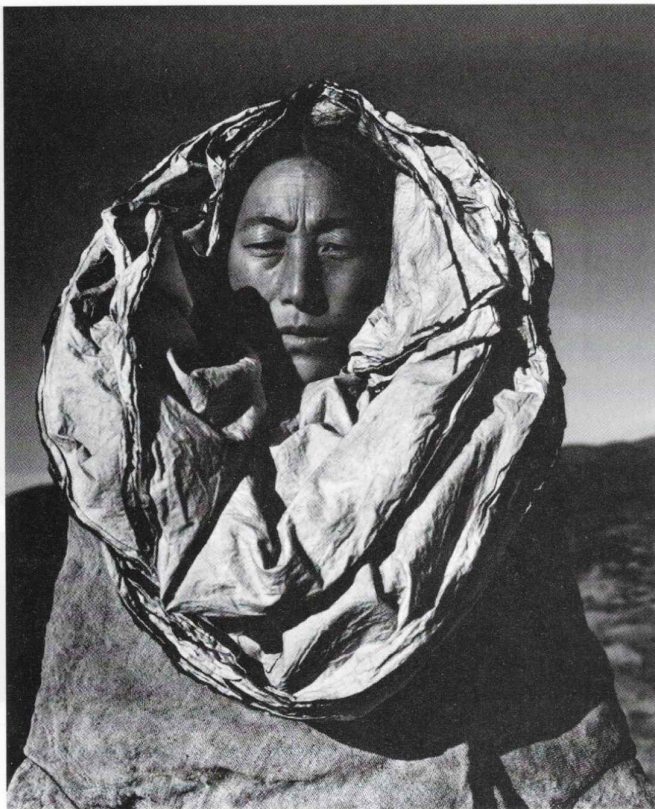
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First Lady of fashion

She helped build one of China's most successful fashion brands and now creates clothes for Xi Jinping's wife, yet elusive designer Ma Ke is still shunning the spotlight, finds **Selena Schleh**

Without exception (Clockwise from main): a Wu Yong look; Exception's current collection; Wu Yong; and (inset) Peng Liyuan in a Ma-designed outfit.



Ma Ke is a hard woman to pin down. From our initial interview request, it takes nearly two months of relentless phone calls and e-mails, during which we're bounced between various PR departments at Wu Yong, Ma's 'anti-fashion' haute couture line, before we're finally granted our answers.

Recently unveiled this year as the designer behind Peng Liyuan's wardrobe, you'd expect Ma to be making hay while the sun shines. If anything, though, the Changchun-born designer has become more elusive, even refusing to provide us with an official publicity shot: the only image available online is grainy and years out of date. As she remarked in a recent interview with *China Daily*, 'If you eat a tasty egg, why would you want to see the hen?'

It's a fair point, which in the age of 'celebrity' designers shows a refreshing focus on art over commerciality – something which has long characterised Ma's career.

After graduating from Suzhou Institute of Silk Technology, Ma set up a ready-to-wear fashion label, Exception de Mixmind, often dubbed 'China's first designer brand', with her ex-husband Mao Jihong. Despite its huge domestic success, opening more than 100 stores across the Mainland and a reported value of 1 billion RMB, Ma formally parted ways with Exception seven years ago in favour of her younger haute

couture line, Wu Yong, which has presented just two collections since its conception in 2006.

One of the reasons behind the brand's relatively limited output is its status as an NPO (non-profit organisation); another is its focus on slower, artisanal production techniques such as hand-sewing, dyeing, and weaving on antique looms. 'I set up Wu Yong to promote traditional folk crafts,' explains Ma.

'I've never understood why everyone wants things to be done taller, faster and stronger. I love handmade things, the way they take on different qualities and meanings over time.'

Ma's attitude to fast fashion is also reflected in the label's name (*wu yong* means 'useless'

in English): 'In this age of heavy commercialism... things that don't achieve instant results are often labeled useless. But we're too focused on short-term gain. The usefulness of things in the present is often different to their long term value.'

Predictably, critics have lapped up the label's anti-consumerist concept: Ma won Best Asian Fashion Designer at the 2007 *Elle* Style Awards, while her first two collections were shown at Paris Fashion Week and Paris Haute Couture Week respectively, even forming the subject of a documentary shot by award-winning filmmaker Jia Zhang Ke.

Yet the brand only really hit public consciousness in March this year, when the Premier's wife, Peng

Liyuan, was snapped on the first leg of a state tour sporting a belted navy trench coat and matching handbag (pictured below).

After much feverish re-tweeting on Weibo – with various fashion 'insiders' mistakenly attributing the outfit to Exception, a claim the older brand was naturally slow to refute – the pieces were finally identified as Ma's custom-made creations. The consequential frenzy of interest around the First Lady's style put Ma in the international spotlight.

She points out with some chagrin that it wasn't the first outfit Wu Yong had created for Peng – whom she describes as 'an independent, confident, modern Chinese lady whom I respect' – in fact, Peng has quietly been wearing their designs since the late '90s. 'To me, she's not a famous superstar or from the higher echelons of society, but a person who's contributed a lot to charity [and is] a strong advocate for environmental work. That matches my own

philosophy in life, so we'll keep on collaborating.'

And what of the near-hysterical speculation that this could be Wu Yong's 'Jason Wu' moment? (Wu's fledgling career was famously given an enormous boost when Michelle Obama wore his designs). 'There is no basis for comparison,' she says wearily. 'Michelle Obama was

well known for her interest in fashion, so it elevated Jason Wu's status when she wore his clothes, but Wu Yong was never really in the fashion industry to begin with. In fact, I'm doing things that are the complete opposite of fashion.'

Asked about plans to expand Wu Yong internationally, Ma's response is non-committal; she's happy to see how things go and 'let nature take its own course'. In a way, she says, it would be counter-productive to her own goals: 'Everyone should only purchase what they need: stop excessive and unnecessary consumption in order to save the earth.'

Additional reporting by Charis Yang.

For more information, see www.wuyonguseless.com.

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