

# Shopping & Style

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IMAGES: ANGEL CHANG AND SUNNY LEE

## Minority report

American-Chinese designer Angel Chang has spent the past five years battling to preserve traditional Miao textile crafts and give them a place in the modern fashion industry. As her Kickstarter-funded collection goes into production, she tells **Selena Schleh** how she did it

Angel Chang's finger traces the blue and white geometric zigzags running through the fabric of her 'Danzhai' biker jacket. It's cut from indigo damask that has been hand-dyed and woven by the Dong tribe of Hongzhou, a tiny village in Guizhou province, for hundreds of years. Up close, the pattern is stunning, almost hypnotic, with a hidden layer of meaning. 'With no written language, these tribes tell their stories through textiles,' explains Chang. 'This particular pattern symbolises the mountains they would have crossed during migration.' It could just as easily represent the ups and downs of Chang's own journey to produce a modern womenswear collection using the ancient artisan techniques of China's ethnic minorities.

Five years in the making, Chang's project has taken her from New York and Paris to southwest China's most isolated communities. The all-natural dyes and handcrafted elements are a far cry from her first 'wearable technology' collection, whose colour-changing

prints, self-heating linings and light-up fabrics won her a Cartier Women's Initiative Award in 1997. A random visit to the Ethnic Minorities Gallery at the Shanghai Museum (see *Minority fashion in Shanghai*, right), where she fell in love with the exquisite workmanship of the traditional Miao costumes, caused her to radically reassess her design aesthetic.

Though born to Chinese parents (her mother is Shanghaiese, her father from Fujian), Chang had never visited the Mainland and didn't speak a word of Mandarin – let alone the myriad local dialects – when she made her inaugural trip to Guizhou province to delve into the textile culture. There, in the villages of Gulong, Zhaoxing and Xijiang, she discovered grandmothers sewing 'world-class embroidery' in dirt-floor huts by the light of a single naked bulb, growing their own cotton,

raising their own silkworms and creating vibrant, chemical-free dyes from forest plants.

Her interpreter at the time, who also acts for the British Museum, told her these crafts were likely to die out 'within five to ten years'. The young people either weren't interested or felt they didn't have the time to learn the old techniques, lured instead to neighbouring cities by the promise of readily available, albeit low-paid, jobs in factories or KTV parlours. 'It was the same story in every village we visited,' says Chang.

Nonetheless, the more 'couture quality' pieces she saw, the more the idea of creating a modern, globally appealing collection that incorporated these local fabric-making, dyeing and embroidery practices took root. 'I hoped that if we could give these people financial

motivation, if they could attach a value to the craft, then they would want to learn,' says Chang. Her target workforce was young mothers, who would naturally prefer to stay in their home villages to raise their families should job opportunities arise.

After securing the support of industry heavyweights such as Jiang Qiong Er, the creative director of Hermes-owned luxury brand Shang Xia, as well as funding from Stella Luna and Pernod Ricard's corporate responsibility programmes, Chang

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With no written language, the Miao tell their stories through textiles





established a base in China, teaming up with local government officials and NGOs and scouring Guizhou in search of craftspeople to realise her dream. 'Each village has its specific know-how, which we wanted to combine,' she says. Lishanzhai village supplied a pattern silk weaving specialist; the barrel-pleating technique comes from the Buyi people of Guiding; organic cotton is woven in nearby Zhaoxing. Meanwhile, a Shanghai-based expert was brought in to train locals in the art of shamanistic dyeing using the naturally-fallen petals, leaves and fruits of persimmon, pomegranate, madder and indigo plants.

In 2012 Chang finally set up her atelier at Dimen Dong Cultural Eco-Museum, an NGO workshop in Dimen village, creating a 40-strong capsule collection with her handpicked team of artisans. Nestled into a lushly forested hillside and isolated from the tour buses and KTVs which have started to colonise more accessible neighbours like Zhaoxing, the 20-room workshop is bordered by indigo and cotton fields for a real 'farm-to-fabric' experience (all the raw materials are organic and sourced within a 70-mile radius to reduce carbon footprint). Production has a slow, seasonal flow. Silkworms are raised in June, when they can be fed fresh mulberry leaves; black dye is made in July, when bark can be removed without damaging trees.

It hasn't all been bucolic bliss, though; a major issue was agreeing a fair price for the artisans' work, as pieces are traditionally created as family heirlooms rather than for commercial gain. Another headache was that the different stages of production of a single type of fabric, such as woven silk, were often split between several villagers due to the competing demands of farming and family. 'We once spent four hours with a totally bemused government official deciding how much to pay the granny who'd be raising the silkworms, versus the auntie who'd be weaving it,' remembers Chang. 'In the end we agreed on a daily rate.'

Scaling up production of the time-consuming work required some thought. 'Done in the old, traditional way, a jacket can take up to two years to complete, and [workers] aren't going to make any money off it in



**Tribal trends** (Clockwise from main) Angel Chang with a local artisan in Dimen village; natural-dyed cloth drying in the sun; traditional Miao embroidery. (Inset) Items from Chang's capsule collection.



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## Grandmothers were sewing world class embroidery in dirt floor huts

the meantime,' explains Chang. The workshops are equipped with hand looms, but even the speedier models can only crank out ten metres of fabric a day. Modernisation is necessary – 'it's a living, breathing craft after all' – but not at the expense of losing the heritage. Chang's solution has been to incorporate smaller elements – confining ornate embroidery to a collar rather than covering an entire top – and switching to faster methods such as hand-printing, rather than embroidering, characteristic patterns such as a series of concentric circles.

Currently, the capsule collection and Kickstarter line (which went into production last month) are only available online, though a trunk show at Beijing's BNC store is planned for November. Chang hopes that by generating a buzz in the West, this will 'legitimise' ethnic-influenced fashion in the eyes of Chinese consumers, and inspire younger generations of the Miao and Dong as well: 'I want to see the collection on international fashion blogs, because those images will filter back to the village kids. Hopefully then they'll think it's cool and want to learn how to create it themselves.'

**Angel Chang** is available from [www.ahalife.com](http://www.ahalife.com), priced from 350USD. For more information, see [www.angelchang.com](http://www.angelchang.com).

## Minority fashion in Shanghai

### Brocade Country

Despite appearing in tourist bibles such as *Lonely Planet* and *Frommers*, this charming little boutique specialising in antique and modern Miao clothing, tapestries and hammered silver jewellery goes largely overlooked by long-term Shanghai residents. Owner Liu Xiaolan hails from Guizhou and makes frequent trips to her home province to stock up on collectors' items dating from the 1970s. 616 *Julu Lu*, near *Xiangyang Bei Lu*, *Jingan district* (6279 2677). Open 10.30am-7pm daily. ☎ *Shaanxi Nan Lu*. 静安区巨鹿路616号, 近襄阳北路

### Chinese Minority Nationalities Art Gallery

For a comprehensive, engaging introduction to the history, methods and mythology behind minority textiles – as well as some jaw-droppingly ornate examples of costumes, masks and jewellery – head to the second floor of the Shanghai Museum. Spanning the provinces of Tibet, Yunnan, Guizhou and Xinjiang, the exhibition delves into the ancient crafts of *za ran* (tie-dyeing), *la ran* (batik), *zhi jin* (interweaving coloured silk and cotton thread) and metalwork, with intricate brocade pieces from the Dai, Zhuang, Tong and Tujia tribes being the highlights.

Second Floor, Shanghai Museum, 201 *People's Avenue*, near *Huangpi Bei Lu*, *Huangpu district* (6372 5300). Open 9am-5pm daily (last entry 4pm). ☎ *People's Square*. 黄浦区人民大道201号, 近黄陂北路

### Dongtai Lu Antiques Market

Seek out the handful of stalls selling contemporary copies of the accordion-pleat skirts traditionally worn by the Miao people of Guangxi. While the fabrics and dyes are artificial and the trims machine-stitched, at 150-400RMB they make for an affordable way to sport a little minority flair. *Dongtai Lu*, near *Fuxing Zhong Lu*, *Huangpu district* (no tel). Open 9am-5pm daily. ☎ *Laoximen*. 黄浦区东台路, 近复兴中路

### Hart Jackets

Former *That's Shanghai* lifestyle editor Hart Huguet Hagerty has turned her love of artisanal textiles into a fledgling fashion label built around one-of-a-kind, customisable garments. Her inaugural collection reworks embroidered Miao aprons and belts into striking back panels and ornate cuffs on utilitarian jackets and vests. <http://harthagerty.com>

### Metersbonwe Costume Museum

Founded by the Chinese fast fashion chain, this small gallery draws its rotating selection of exhibits from a vast private collection. The standout piece in the ethnic minorities section is a summer 'suit', historically worn by the Hezhe fishermen of Heilongjiang province, crafted from dried trout skin. 800 *Kangqiao Dong Lu*, near *Shenjiang Lu*, *Pudong* (3811 9999 ext 8135; [www.mbmuseum.org](http://www.mbmuseum.org)). Open by appointment only (two days' advance notice required). ☎ *Luoshan Lu*. 浦东康桥东路800号, 近申江路

