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Asian jewellery designers harbour global ambitions

By Ming Liu



From left: pieces by Farah Khan, Nirav Modi and Bao Bao Wan

The Taiwan-born jeweller **Anna Hu** had an extremely good year in 2013.

First, she set a world auction record at Christie's for the highest price paid for the work of a Chinese contemporary jeweller.

Her jadeite, diamond and emerald Orpheus ring sold for nearly \$2.6m in Hong Kong – five times its estimate.

Six months later, when her Côte d'Azur brooch went under the hammer in Geneva it sold for nearly \$4.6m, breaking two world auction records, including the highest price for work by a contemporary designer, previously held by JAR (Joel Arthur Rosenthal), the Paris-based jeweller.

Ms Hu is one of a wave of Asian designers making their mark, not only in the region but also worldwide.

Many have a family link to gems, including Ms Hu, who is a second-generation jeweller. She trained as a cellist, playing with Yo-Yo Ma as a teenager.

A shoulder injury led her to focus on jewellery, though she says her classical training still influences her work.

"I apply the music theory I learned as a child to jewellery composition," she says.

Chinese motifs recur. A bamboo design on earrings references the Chinese "Four Gentlemen" theme of plants, but the earrings are fashioned in hoops, more commonly found in western jewellery – "more fun", says Ms Hu. "I think it's not sophisticated to only use the outline of a Chinese motif. This is my own interpretation."

Ms Hu's work shares similarities with that of **Dickson Yewn**, a Chinese designer favoured by Michelle Obama, the US first lady. Both Ms Hu and Mr Yewn studied at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology – but Mr Yewn regards himself as a China purist in his aesthetic.

"My brand's tagline is 'Continuing the Beauty of China'," he says. His work relies heavily on imperial-era gems and craftsmanship, such as a bejewelled amulet and sword collection that he hammered using 18th-century techniques first employed during the reign of Emperor Qianlong.

Mr Yewn's biggest markets are Greater China, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, followed by the US, Russia and southeast Asia. But China, he says, remains the main source of growth.

Beijing-based jeweller **Bao Bao Wan** is the granddaughter of a former chairman of the National People's Congress. She studied in the US, Europe and Hong Kong, and like Ms Hu her designs fuse Chinese and western themes.

Structured pagoda rings in yellow gold and diamonds, and fan-motif bangles, for example, reference Beijing architecture, while the names of her collections – such as La Maison de Mon Enfance – draw on influences from later years spent in France.

The cross-cultural appeal of her work is reflected in the number of western outlets that stock her designs. Harrods, the London department store, sells her fine jewellery alongside her And The Little Ones pendant necklaces of Chinese motifs, such as diamond-inlaid yin-yang and pandas, and newer pistol and sunglasses designs.

Online retailers Matchesfashion.com, Yoox and the US's Latest Revival also sell her designs.



Michelle Obama wearing a ring by Dickson Yewn

Asian markets account for 60 per cent of Ms Wan's sales, where sales doubled between the fourth quarter of 2013 and first quarter of 2014. In Europe, which accounts for the bulk of the remaining 40 per cent of sales, revenues were up 34 per cent year on year in the first quarter of 2014.

Further south in Bangkok, **Shar-Linn Liew** and her husband and business partner **Nuttapon Yongkiettakul**, create angular, versatile gems under their brand Kavant & Sharart.

The couple say the brand's largest markets are southeast Asia (mainly Singapore) and the US – with Asia the biggest source of growth.



Pendant by Dickson Yewn

Japanese origami and art deco design were the influences for a pair of diamond and jade earrings, which retail at \$25,800. Reminiscent of a Japanese crane, the 18-carat white-gold creation can be worn in multiple ways.

It also, says Ms Liew, characterises her collaboration with her husband, a third-generation jeweller with a background in manufacturing.

"I came up with the design but he came up with the idea of wearing it in five different ways," she says.

Meanwhile in India, **Farah Khan** has designed gems for 21 years, and manufactured for the past two. Her pieces are produced in her 9,200 sq ft factory in Mumbai where, alongside nature and animals, Indian motifs feature in her work – in particular moguls and the jewels of maharajas.

"I combine vintage motifs into an international aesthetic so my clients can wear a piece of India that is classical yet contemporary," she says.



Earrings by Kavant & Sharart

Emeralds, rubies and tanzanite are prominent in designs such as the pearl, diamond and emerald earrings and ring exhibited at India International Jewellery Week in July.

Ms Khan has also created a more accessible collection, where prices start at \$500.

Seventy per cent of turnover is in India, with the remainder in the Middle East, South America and Europe.

Ms Khan expects the business to grow by 70-100 per cent year on year in the next two years.

"India is a young country and the youth are aspiring to have cutting-edge designs," she says. "They are much more aware of what is happening around the world, and experimenting with jewellery that can be worn anywhere, not just for formal occasions."

Diamantaire **Nirav Modi** is another Indian designer with a global outlook. His eponymous brand falls under parent company Firestar, a manufacturing and wholesale business with \$1.6bn in global sales, and of which he is also chief executive.

Mr Modi attracted attention in 2010, when his Golconda Lotus necklace, designed around a 12.29-carat royal Indian diamond

surrounded by pink diamonds and diamond links, sold at Christie's Hong Kong for \$3.75m.

Mr Modi regards himself not as an ethnic brand but one “with a heritage of very fine jewellery in India” – and retail is strong on his agenda. The company has shops in Delhi, with plans to open in Mumbai and New York's Madison Avenue in the coming months.

“In 10 years from now I'd like to have 100 retail locations,” he says.

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