



From left, Yeohlee Tang, Anna Sui and Vivienne Tam. They were some of the first Asian designers to colonize U.S. fashion.

Women pioneered East meets West

By Suzy Menkes

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NEW YORK: The first Asian designers to colonize U.S. fashion were mostly women: the Chinese-Tahitian Anna Sui; Vera Wang, of Chinese parentage; Yeohlee Tang, who came to America from Malaysia; and Vivienne Tam, whose Hong Kong background made her a fashion pioneer of East meets West.

Gladys Perint Palmer, director of the Academy of Art University in California, traces the origins of Asian fashion influence to the Obiko store that opened in San Francisco in the 1970s and to the creative craft work of Kaisik Wong.

For Perint Palmer, whose graduating students showed their work Friday as part of New York Fashion Week, "Asians are not better, worse or different from others in terms of fabric, modern architectural shapes or work ethic." Some of this year's graduates came from Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan and Singapore, carrying on a tradition at the university, which is embraced by the Pacific Rim and has several Asian teachers.

Sui, 53, has been the most successful Asian-American designer in terms of building a brand in the Far East. Her dark, droll, dolly-girl style, founded on a kooky 1960s London look, started in the 1980s and is now on sale across China. Her arrangement with Wella for fragrances and a successful partnership in Japan also have led to rapid growth.

There are now nine stores in China, the country that her artistic parents fled, via the Sorbonne in Paris.

"My parents sacrificed everything for education," says Sui, who goes back to China every year to visit the family burial site.

Vera Wang, 59, built an empire on Western wedding dresses, after having been an editor at Vogue, and has created a lifestyle brand with a best-selling "Princess" fragrance.

When Yeohlee Teng received the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award for fashion design in 2004, it was in recognition of her intellectual fashion work, which has been displayed from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art to London's Victoria & Albert.

Vivienne Tam, raised in Hong Kong, has created modern chinoiserie by playing with everything from a statue of Buddha to the image of Chairman Mao to create what she called in the title of her book "China chic."

Despite her success in China, Sui has no illusions about how Asian emigrants are regarded "back home."

"They see me as American," Sui says. "If you are not born there and don't live there, they call you 'bamboo.' Chinese on the outside, but nothing inside."