

Huishan Zhang wants to break the stereotype that made in China clothes are inferior. The 29-year-old is on the road to success with his fusion designs. **Tiffany Tan** caught up with him in Beijing.

The perfect blend

To many of his middle school classmates, Huishan Zhang is still "the guy who was always wearing an ugly orange jumper". Little do they know that to fashion insiders, this guy has become a couture designer to watch.

His fresh, delicate, Chinese-inspired pieces have put Zhang in the winning circle of the British Fashion Council's New Gen sponsorship scheme for emerging designers. As part of the award, the 29-year-old will be unveiling his spring summer 2013 collection in a debut presentation at the London Fashion Week this fall.

"When I first met him, I thought he was the first young designer who was a perfect creative fusion between East and West... a voice we've been waiting to hear," says Sarah Mower, chairwoman of the New Gen committee and contributing editor to US Vogue.

"It was an eye-opener that he was able to produce such beautiful embroidery and lace.

"Up till then, we associated Chinese manufacturing with mass-production, and perhaps inferior quality, but Huishan is proving to the West that hand-craft skills still exist in the mainland," she says. "Till then we believed that kind of embroidery work could only come out of Paris or India."

Zhang, who hails from the eastern coastal city of Qingdao and now lives in London, wants to change perceptions about his native country's craft and design. The materials for his clothes all come from China, and the garments themselves are sewn in his hometown.

"Everybody thinks Chinese design can be cliched, or made in China is supposed to be cheap, but it's not," Zhang says on the sidelines of a meeting with clients in Beijing. "We have such a long history of culture, everything is so beautiful.

"I feel it's not represented right, it just hasn't shown through enough. So I'm just trying to use my own way to show that it can be very elegant, it can be so well made."

Zhang already knew in middle school that he wanted to be a fashion designer. In his last year of high school, inspired by the attire of ethnic groups he saw during travels around China, the young man honed in on what would become his design signature.

His first couture collection — after graduating from London's Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design with a bachelor's degree in fashion design and a master's in pattern cutting in 2010 — was a reconstruction of the *qipao*, or cheongsam. A fusion of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) fashion and early 20th century Western tailoring, Zhang re-created the dress using sheer silk, embroidered lace and sequins with reflective patterns.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has acquired one piece from his collection — a white organza with black lace embroidery of flower petals and a dragon. The museum says the dress was meant to complement and update its collection of dragon robes and 20th century *qipao*.

Again, it was Zhang's blend-



PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Huishan Zhang's reconstructed *qipao* acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.



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COUTURE DESIGNER

ing of Eastern and Western elements in a modern package that caught the attention of the V&A, regarded as the world's leading museum of art and design.

"Though Chinese in spirit, Huishan Zhang's designs have an international appeal, which I feel is important," says Helen Persson, curator of the museum's Asian department, who discovered Zhang's work on the pages of Elle UK and British Vogue.

"Furthermore, his work promotes high-quality traditional Chinese craftsmanship," she says.

Though Zhang draws heavily from Chinese culture, he does not want to beam a spotlight on that creative inspiration.

"The beauty of this Chinese and Western cultural combination is, it is not really obvious," the designer says. "Also, this is modern life. We're creating something new, rather than something costume. That's why lots of times the spirit (of the culture) should be there, but not really the actual form."

Zhang is among a new breed of mainland designers, including Uma Wang and Masha Ma, who are beginning to make ripples in the European fashion scene. But, analysts say, there's still a lot of work ahead for Chinese designers who want to capture that market.

"At the moment, the perception in Europe is that Chinese designers will do updated versions of 'Chinese traditional', and consumers still don't see them having the credibility of brands like Prada, Gucci, Versace and so on," Sandra Halliday, editor in chief of the London-based fashion trend analysis and research service WGSN, says.

"For most European consumers, the focus is still on European or American brands, with Chinese labels still a quirky option with a 'dressing up' feel to them."

In the past 12 years, Zhang has lived in New Zealand, France (where he interned at Christian Dior for a year) and England. The designer's long-term goal is to bring his label back to China — but he wants to do more prep work first.

"I want to impress people here more," he says. "It's a very big market. There are lots of driving forces here. It's like sailing. If you have a small boat in a very big sea, you have a very high chance of sinking. But if you're driving a big, big boat, then it's safer."

Despite falling in love with the creations of Miuccia Prada and Yohji Yamamoto (he was wearing a navy blue Prada top during the interview), Zhang has not forgotten the notorious orange jumper from his youth.

"I just love to be different," he says. "I was always the one who went to school without a uniform, who always ended up standing in the corner because I didn't follow the rules."

"Many classmates nowadays don't remember my name. But they remember the guy who was always wearing the ugly orange jumper."

That rebellious streak, stemming from a creative impulse to make his distinctive mark, has served Zhang well.

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Italian masters educate me on the rights of the lord and lining up

By JOHN CLARK
For China Daily

There was a loud altercation at the head of the line. A big Chinese chap was shouting angrily and stabbing his finger at museum attendants. Everyone turned to look and I thought a fight was going to break out. Our Chinese friend explained the man was protesting about someone cutting in line.

We could appreciate his annoyance. We were at the very end of the line, which snaked up and down the National Museum of China. We were all waiting to see the latest exhibition, *Renaissance in Florence: Masterpieces and their Protagonists*.

Several hundred people, mostly young Chinese, were ahead of us in the line, which hardly seemed to be moving.

People stood patiently or rested on benches between intervals of shuffling ahead a meter at a time. A group of four people sat playing cards on a bench. Were they in the line or simply enjoying the air-conditioning on a sweltering July day?

A huge child lolled on his mother's lap. His father stood in the line with the baby's stroller. An elegant young woman in a green dress sat on the bench to rest. Her toenails were painted gold. She was busy on her two mobile phones. "One for work, one for personal calls," our friend murmured.

It's funny what you notice while lining up. After an hour the attendant announced that those near the head of the line should go to the desk and buy entrance tickets, price 10 yuan (\$1.57).

Immediately a second line formed. Us British are used to lining up like sheep and have a word for it, queuing. I've noticed that Chinese people have a more cavalier attitude and will push right in whether shopping at 7/11 or getting on or off buses.

Personal space doesn't come into the equation. Unless you are right up close to the person in front, someone is going to squeeze in front of you.

We debated whether or not to seek a refund and come back another day. After all, the exhibition runs until April next year. We decided to tough it out.

After 90 minutes we were almost at the head of the line. But someone said the exhibition closed at 4 pm and it was 3.40 pm. The next 10 minutes dragged by, and then we were in. We learned the gallery didn't close until 4.30 pm.

Now, I'm not an art critic, but the canvases were breathtaking. The colors were so bright they were luminous. How can paintings nearly 500 years old retain their vivid colors?

Aside from photos, I had never seen works by Botticelli or Raffaello. Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of a young woman's head was perfection. A bronze of two wrestlers, Hercules and Anteus, was powerful and lifelike. Michelangelo's *David-Apollo* was sweet, although most women would probably consider him not well endowed. A portrait of Leonardo shows him with long hair and a gray beard down to his chest. There's a mad glint in his eye, or is it genius?

We realized why we had to wait so long. The gallery space was too small. You had to squeeze past people to read the explanatory notes on the paintings and sculptures. While the overall effect of the exhibition was stunning in its concentration of masterpieces, it needed more space to allow people to mill around.

After 25 minutes I slipped out of the gallery and sat down on a bench with my wife. There were probably still 50 people in the line, even though the museum was about to close.

Just then a party of about a dozen Westerners led by Chinese museum officials breezed past the line and entered the exhibition via the exit. People looked on, dumbfounded. "Probably embassy people," remarked my wife.

I said it shouldn't be allowed. Our friend said it made her angry. Minutes later there was an announcement that the gallery was closing. Outside, in the bright sunshine three vehicles were drawn up: an ambassadorial limousine with a flag, another car and a people carrier.

I strolled across to examine the flag. It was a tricolor in green, white and red — the Italian national flag. The phrase *droit du seigneur* — "right of the lord" — comes to mind.

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