



Stylish leather clothing from the Shiatzy Chen autumn-winter 2012 collection with typical Chinese design motifs cut into the leather.
PHOTO: SHIATZY CHEN



Visitors to Shanghai's most famous thoroughfare, The Bund, will have noticed a local name among the stellar boutiques that seek to attract wealthy shoppers. Shiatzy Chen continues to expand across China and internationally thanks to its ability to combine Chinese culture and beauty with western fashion techniques and craftsmanship in its clothes, shoes and accessories.

A love of fashion and a love for China

So found a fashion house and call it the 'New Chic of China' was to give the world of haute couture a warning to expect something different. This is the meaning of the name Shiatzy Chen, whose boutiques and catwalk shows have been catching the eyes of the international fashion industry of late. But the creation of Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia started out in her native Taipei as long as go as 1978; Ms Wang clearly had an earlier insight than most people into the changes that were coming to Chinese culture and commerce. She is still the company's creative director.

Shiatzy Chen now has 40 stores in different parts of Taiwan, but it also has 13 stores in China, including three each in Beijing and Shanghai. There are two in Dalian, and one each at the moment in Qingdao, Tianjin, Hangzhou, Nanjing and Shenzhen. Chengdu also has one store, but a second will open soon, as will an outlet store in Shanghai. There are also three outlets in Hong Kong and two in Macao. There is a store in Malaysia, and one own-brand and two authorised boutique partners in Europe. Plans include openings in the US, Singapore and Japan next year. However, since Wang Chen Tsai-Hsia launched the company, China has come from nowhere to become one of the most important markets for luxury fashion in the world.

And with the enormous changes that have taken place in China since the late 1970s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Shiatzy Chen chose Shanghai to house

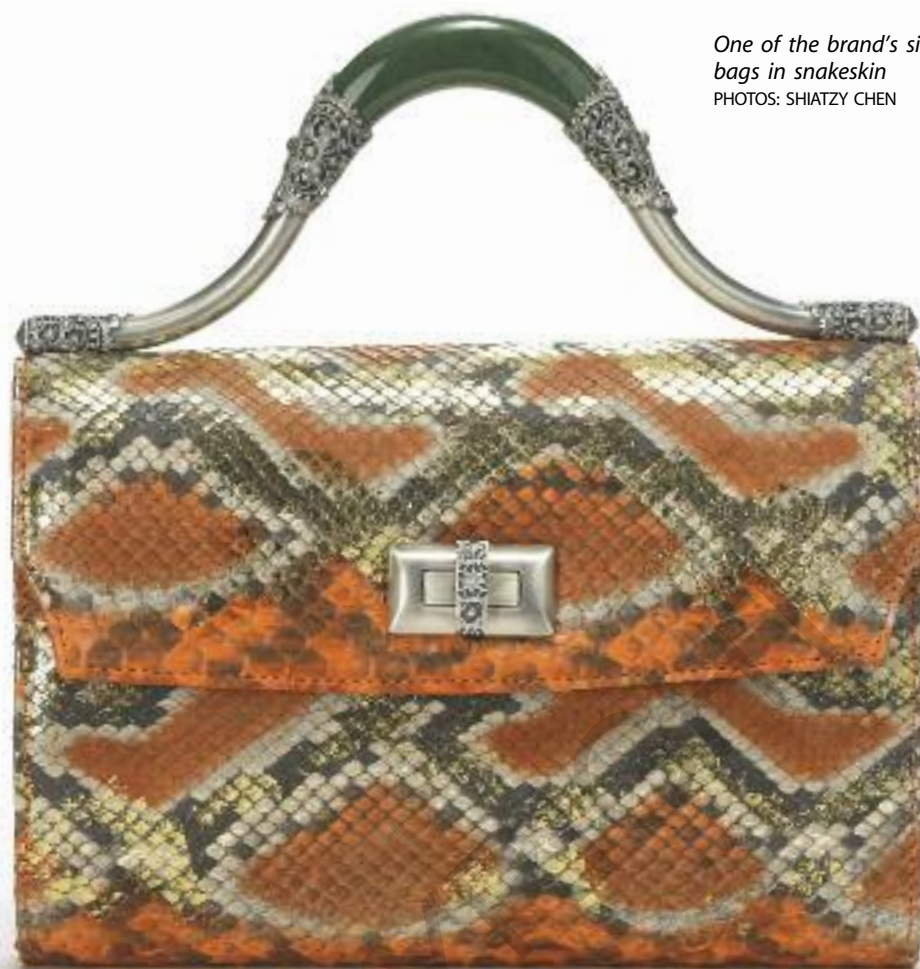


With a combination of culture and tradition from China and artisan skills from Italy, Shiatzy Chen's footwear and bags offer the best of both worlds.

PHOTOS: SHIATZY CHEN

its operations centre. The facility in the Minhang district of the city was designed by German architect Johannes Hartfuss to provide "a delicate and exquisite ambiance to stimulate inspiration and creativity". It integrates antique Shanghai bricks with granite and wood, blending oriental and western elements and this is something of a metaphor for Shiatzy Chen. The company says oriental images

and literary inspirations infuse its collections. But much of its material sourcing takes place in Europe and it is from Europe, specifically from Italy, that the brand brings in most of its shoes and leathers. It also favours western models in much of its advertising campaign imagery, including the displays at its flagship store on The Bund in downtown Shanghai.



One of the brand's signature Jade-Handle bags in snakeskin

PHOTOS: SHIATZY CHEN

It is at this sumptuous boutique (other flagship stores are in Taipei and Paris, and the French capital has also been home to a Shiatzy Chen studio since 1990) that the brand's public relations manager, Lisa Chen, meets us to show us some of the leather highlights of current Shiatzy Chen collections. There are many.

Jade and leather in bags

The bag she describes as the company's signature bag is just called the Jade-Handle bag. It comes in various shapes and colour combinations in bovine and sometimes exotic leather such as snakeskin with pigskin linings, and in some instances lambskin with 'scale' effects cut into the design to create an exotic look. In all cases, the handle really is made of jade. Black is popular, but a red version that combines gold-coloured metal fastenings either side of the jade in the centre with red leather at the extremities of the handle, where it joins the body of the bag, takes the breath away (*see the front cover of this*

issue). "This bag is the perfect size for our ideal customers, wealthy women who do not have to work," Ms Chen says. "Jade is one of Chinese people's favourite materials. Its nature keeps it warm in winter, and cool in summer, which is perfect for a woman to carry in her hand." Many Chinese people also wear jade bracelets on their wrists, in keeping with an ancient tradition, and one of the things Lisa Chen emphasises is that the jade changes over time to adapt to the body of the person wearing it, just like leather does. Wear over a long period of time personalises jade and leather to the body of their owner, making the combination in the Shiatzy Chen bags even more appropriate.

In some versions, there is also silk embroidery on the surface of the leather, with design elements including tiny baubles of the material; their shininess contrasts beautifully with the matt finish of the Italian leather. "This one is especially popular," says Ms Chen. "It's compact, but very useful for formal events. You can just

put your wallet and telephone in there and go to the party or evening function."

Silk and leather in shoes

Shiatzy Chen shoes show their Italian origins on the sole, with 'Vero Cuoio – Made In Italy' clearly visible. But here too the design elements show links to Chinese tastes and culture. A series of elegant peep-toe slippers with a five-centimetre heel combine a leather sole and leather piping shell along the perimeter of the upper. Between the sections of leather piping, there is a lacy, transparent textile material with elaborate floral designs, with a distinctly oriental feel, hand-embroidered in coloured silk (purple, ruby, black, bronze, rose and silver are the colour options). In each case, a matching leather bow sits on top.

Five-centimetre heels are high enough for the brand's customers, Lisa Chen says, because they have already achieved a position of status and no longer need to wear high heels in an attempt to stand out. "High heels are not really that comfortable,"

Shoes for the summer. A leather outline and hand-embroidered silk sections in between suggest oriental beauty.

PHOTOS: SHIATZY CHEN



she continues. "I would say they are more for young girls who want to look fashionable on a special occasion. But when you are rich, you prefer something more comfortable."

More than wealth

There is more to all this than wealth. Shiatzy Chen is high on design but low on ostentatious branding, so its customers are necessarily women with a high level of class and taste and vision, as well as financial standing. Lisa Chen believes that even in Shanghai, China's style capital, around 90% of women will put a higher priority on the label than on the design of a product. "They don't see the point of buying expensive shoes or bags if other people cannot tell which big-name brand they are wearing or carrying," she explains. "Shiatzy Chen has chosen not to do that because, I think, of the emphasis that people in Taiwan put on traditional Chinese culture. We thought there would still be a good number of people in China with the same taste, so we entered the Chinese market in 2003. And it's

true: there are still people who realise how important Chinese culture is."

Any customer who sees Shiatzy Chen shoes she likes has to move fast to secure them because each of the Chinese stores is likely to stock only a few pairs in each style, and there may often be as few as 20 pairs across the whole country. Orders for each model at the company's partner footwear manufacturers in Italy are, therefore, low in volume and once the style is gone, it's gone, even for the most important of the VIP customers (there is no question of sending in a special one-off extra order, but Ms Chen says the clients know this and like the fact that they are unlikely to see anyone else wearing the same shoes or carrying the same bag). The connections to Italy go back many years now. For at least a decade, Shiatzy Chen has chosen Italian fabrics for many of its clothes and extended its contacts in that country to suppliers of leather and of finished footwear too.

Leather has also made its way into the

autumn-winter 2012-2013 clothing collection in the shape of fabulous black and red leather jackets that incorporate embroidered design shapes cut into the material. Specifically for this season, the company has sought to highlight "the highly artistic and valuable yet vanishing culture of traditional Miao embroidery", part of its wider effort to celebrate the richness of Chinese culture in the world of fashion. The Miao people are an ethnic minority living mostly in the south of the country. Patterns including butterflies in flight, mythical beasts, or "rhythmic waves" that represent elegance, spirituality and tranquility.

Lisa Chen says these design elements appeal more to Chinese customers than to overseas ones at the moment, but she says the brand has high hopes of attracting a bigger international following, including in Europe and the US. Its commitment to Chinese culture and design and to western craftsmanship remains high. It wants to continue to have the best of both worlds. ●