



GRACE CHEN on

The Economist: The World Ahead

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In this episode of The Economist future-gazing podcast, we consider speculative scenarios and provocative prophecies by asking forward looking questions inspired by the world in 2019, the Economist annual publication that considers the year ahead. We discuss how an often-ignored region in Africa seems set grow in prominence, the implications of genomic risk-scoring in health care, **and we look at the rise of the couture designer in China.** Tom Standage, deputy editor at The Economist, hosts.

17:00 –

Tom:

From designing babies to the somewhat less controversial practice of designing clothes...In China, couture design is in big demand and a couple of Chinese designers are starting to gain influence in fashion around the world. To discuss this, I am joined in the studio by Head of Economist Radio, Ann McElvoy, who recently went to China to find out about this for herself.

Ann:

This is a rise in interest in very top-end, home-made Chinese couture. It's different from luxury goods, which we've often written about in the context of China as wealth has risen and their prodigious consumers of luxury goods, but mainly made in the West by those big Western brands that we all know.

Grace Chen, who I dropped in on in Shanghai, has a very beautiful studio there. ***She is the go-to, very classical, elegant, high-end Chinese couturier. She is worn by wives of leading politicians. But most interestingly I thought, as we look forward – her customer base is women who have made her own money.*** Lots of money. The top 3% she says. That's a lot of noughts.

Tom:

So there are a lot of Chinese, female, billionaires. In fact, there are more than any other country. So, this is the brand that they favour?

Ann:

There are roughly two-thirds of the richest self-made women in the world are thought to be Chinese. Of course, they'll have different styles and different taste in things, certainly they can afford it. So, a lot of them will be sticking with those old luxury brands. But ***I think what Grace Chen is onto here – she keeps using the word "Powerfulness". She means power and femininity combined. I think it's the sense that the Chinese consumer enjoys being part of a renaissance of Chinese design.*** When you've got the third Dior handbag (should this ever happen to me, Tom!), you maybe don't want the fourth. And you want something that is very delicate...She uses the



word “Power” and I think that’s not incidental. I think there’s a slightly soft “fashion nationalism” going on here... She says, you go abroad, you go to some fantastic event, you’re one of the best dressed women in the room, bar-none. And you can say: **“This, is Chinese couture.”**

Tom:
So, these are pieces for special occasions. What about business people who want to project this “powerfulness” and so forth. Is she also catering to that audience?

Ann:
Absolutely. That is her core audience really. It is the people who are going to come back again and again. We went into a room of “quieter” clothes - not so much of the bling or sequins or silver, but fantastically made suits and coats. And she said to me: **This is for when you launch your IPO.** Come that happy day, I’ll think of going back there – but it was very interesting, I don’t think anyone has ever said that to me when I’ve gone to see designers! And the idea is, it is of course very beautiful, structured, you can have it changed around every little quirk of your body or style. But **it is to say “I am here as a woman in business. I can sit alongside the men on any platform.”**

Tom:
She obviously understands her target market very well. How does the sort of service she offers them differ from what you might expect from a Western designer?

Ann:
Grace Chen has a particular way of making fashion what is called “experiential”. Which is once you have all these beautiful things, what experiences can you have with it that you didn’t have before? **In the case of her clients, I was very interested in where they wear their clothes.** She made the point that they can have great social lives, they will have a social network, but they are a little careful, particularly at the very top end of wealth – not to be showing it off too much...So what they often do is go with her – these will be her clients who come back again and again – will go off on a trip to New York, or recently to the south of France, or to Monaco...and it will be filmed, it’s made for video for them, for private use,...They go to cocktail parties, cultural events, they will wear these beautiful clothes and admire each other and look absolutely fabulous. But **the idea is the designer is trusted to curate a lifestyle experience – not just you get to copy hers. I thought this was very innovative. I thought she’s on to something there – as people want out of very high-end designer clothes, more than just the item hanging in the wardrobe waiting for the next birthday.**

To listen to the full podcast:
<https://soundcloud.com/theeconomist/the-world-ahead-shifting-sands>

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About Grace Chen Couture

Regarded as one of China's most influential fashion innovators, Grace Chen's designs has an exceptional ability to transcend time, place and culture. As the first mainland Chinese alumna of New York's Fashion Institute of Technology, Grace Chen was a designer to the stars in New York and LA for 15 years, before setting up her own label in China in 2009.

Hailed as "the Power Dresser of China" (South China Morning Post) and "China's Most Sought-After Couturier" (Hollywood Reporter), Chen has dressed an impressive list of global clientele, including Oprah Winfrey, actress Helen Mirren, Sarah Jessica Parker and Sharon Stone (under a different label), China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, Emmy Award-winning presenter and entrepreneur Yue-sai Kan, Chinese media icon Yang Lan, as well as Taiwanese actress, Lin Chi-Ling, model Sui He, Chinese actress Ni Ni and many more.

Spearheading an iconic fashion travel series titled "Around the World in 80 Dresses", Chen is on a mission to spread the image of a modern Chinese style for the world. In the past five years, she has traveled across the globe, from Tasmania to Kenya, Japan, the United States and Europe to showcase her designs to new audiences. Whether it's the mayor of Brussels or the last Princess of Russia, all seem to be able to find a piece of themselves in Grace Chen.