

Portland looks to lure a newly fashionable China and its manufacturing muscle

By [Kristi Turnquist, The Oregonian](#)
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The conversation, in Mandarin and English, is spirited. Smiles beam across the room, as black-suited men and conservatively dressed women prepare to eat lunch in a meeting room at the Benson Hotel. The opening course – a cup of cream of asparagus soup – is sampled, then left to cool.

May Tee, a fashion designer who grew up in Malaysia and Singapore and first moved to Portland in 1996, slips into Mandarin to ask why. "They don't eat much cream in China," she explains.

The main course, grilled chicken with noodles and vegetables seasoned for American palates, comes next. "The food's so salty!" Tee exclaims, then lowers her voice: "I don't think the Benson knows how to cook Asian cuisine."

All right, there may be some gaps in cultural knowledge at the moment. But according to the group in this room – and many others – the Rose City and the People's Republic of China stand at the crossroads of a beautiful cross-cultural friendship.



Montoya Nakamura/The OregonianMembers of a delegation from the Chinese fashion industry shop at Mario's, in downtown Portland. From left, Jin Fuxin; Zhao Sunli, trying on a jacket; and Li Xianwei.

If these visitors and their Portland hosts have their way, they'll connect over fashion, mixing tastes that nourish East and West. Portland could export high-end fashions to Chinese consumers willing to pay for cutting-edge, made-in-America design. China could tap Portland's creative juices, adding an element missing from their well-established manufacturing muscle.

The nearly 20 visitors who leave today after almost a week are from the Henan Province, a leader in apparel manufacturing. Henan is famous for women's pants, accounting for roughly half of those made in China -- and sold mainly there. Thousands of factories in Henan employ more than a million workers.

The visitors – including factory owners, educators and designers – were invited by

Portland Fashion Synergy, a non-profit that bolsters education, training and business opportunities for the city's growing apparel industry.

During their stay, despite jet lag and language barriers, the Henan contingent gamely visited local shops; met with Mayor Sam Adams; talked exchange with the Art Institute of Portland; and attended a Friday-night black-tie fashion show at the Portland Art Museum, which featured Chinese and Portland designers.

The trip also marks the first step in what will be a season in which Portland may get to know China as never before. The China Design Now exhibit at the Portland Art Museum (Oct. 10-Jan. 17, 2010) will fill 9,000 square feet with architectural, interior, graphic and fashion design from China.

Portland Fashion Synergy will present a Chinese fashion exhibit for the opening gala Oct. 9. In addition, events around town will explore how China is developing within its borders while impacting economics and culture on a global -- and local -- scale.

The cities in Henan Province aren't high-fashion capitals like Beijing or Shanghai. But then neither is Portland the garment powerhouse that New York or Los Angeles are. So how did this happen?

The roots of the Portland-Henan connection date back to spring. Jewelry designer Kerry Yu grew up in China and settled in Portland two years ago. She had worked in TV and movie production in China, and made contacts with numerous business people including Li Gang, head of the Henan fashion industry association. With that connection, Yu and Portlander Jillian Rabe, who works in modeling and events production, staged a runway show featuring Portland designers' work in Henan in April.

"Our show made the front-page of the local paper the next day," Yu recalls. "Portland was on every street corner."

Through an interpreter, Daniel Nieh, Li agreed. "Portland is famous in Henan now."

Yu and Rabe worked with Tee, founder of Portland Fashion Synergy, to bring Li and his colleagues to Portland.

On Thursday, the visitors' first full day in Portland, Thomas DeSouza was optimistic. He launched fashionpeddler.com, an "online trade show," where vendors upload images of their collections for retail buyers.

DeSouza predicts benefits all the way around. "They're known for being notoriously mediocre in the design, but fantastic in manufacturing."

The idea isn't about outsourcing production to China, Tee says. Just the opposite. "We need to get our own manufacturing, and sell to them," she says. "We want them to come over here and invest in our infrastructure. It's a paradigm shift."

While Portland is internationally known for Nike, Adidas and Columbia Sportswear, Tee says we could go even further. "Why couldn't we have our own Donna Karan, or Calvin Klein?" Tee, wearing a smart, fitted, midnight-blue dress from her own line, gets impatient with Portlanders' casual approach to fashion.

"I see people wearing jeans to the opera, and I think, what am I going to do with you?" says Tee.

At lunch, Tee translates comments from Shao Xianwei, dean of the fashion design department at the Henan Institute of Engineering, with 25,000 students. Shao came to town to discuss student exchange programs, with the Art Institute of Portland.

Another visitor, Zhao Sunli, owns manufacturing plants and retail stores -- 1,500 exclusive stores and another 200 counters in department stores.

"The numbers are so huge," Tee says. "If we can get one percent of the population buying our product, we're done."

A growing class of affluent Chinese consumers will pay \$2,000 for a Prada coat. "They love anything made in Italy, or America. 'Sex and the City' is huge over there, they love the fashion aspect of it." Portland designers using sustainably grown, organic materials could also stake a niche.

Tee and Kerry Yu plan a follow-up trip to Henan at the end of October or November. Which sounds quick to Tee, if not her Chinese associates.

"They all look at me," she says, "like, 'That's too long! Can't you come tomorrow?'"

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