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时装设计系学霸 设计自己的未来

本地独立设计盛景不复，满怀热望报读时装设计专业的年轻人每年仍有人在。毕业后，他们要如何将技能与现实对接，面对严酷的产业环境？联合本报记者访问三名今年从时装设计系毕业的“学霸”，请他们“设计”自己的未来。

杨德翰的男装带有鲜明的东南亚元素，是摩登化的在地风格。（受访者提供）

王一鸣/报道
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当 时装设计师，还是很多年轻人的梦想吗？
这几年人们说：“让一个人破产，就让他/她去开书店。”但在此刻消费生态中，你几乎可以说：“让一个人破产，就让他/她去当时装设计师。”

服装零售市场不景气已不是一两天，在这股低迷的消费态势中，首当其冲受影响的便是独立设计师和品牌。价廉、款式多、大量倾销、更新迅速的快时尚（fast fashion）品牌，强攻下市场份额中最大的一块饼，连高端奢侈品牌和和中档大众品牌也无以反政，更何况本就势单力孤、姿态小众的独立设计师。

本地的独立设计盛景今已不复，目前仍在持续运作，定期推出系列，并保持营收的独立设计师或品牌，算一算基本不超过20组。而满怀热望，报读时装设计专业的年轻人每年仍有人在，是带着怎样的考量、怀着怎样的激情投入这个专业领域？毕业后，他们要如何将技能与现实对接？怎样面对这严酷的产业环境？

时报记者对话本地三所院校时装设计系毕业的三位“学霸”（top student），请他们“设计”自己的时尚未来。

选定志业以时尚表达自我

尽管长相年轻，但本月下旬刚从南洋艺术学院（NAFA）时装设计系得到学士学位的陈炯明，今年已44岁。

在南艺技术部门工作的他2004年从该校获得专科文凭，他认为人总要与时俱进，相隔10多年，完成了学士课程，他形容像是“系统更新”一般。

专科毕业后他为三个本地品牌打工七八年，过了一段纯粹为赚钱的日子，他不甘愿。“的确有被牵着鼻子走，感觉不是自己想做的，设计没什么个性。”他想起在南艺工作时被年轻学生们感染，跟他们学到很多东西，自己心底沉睡的火种都被唤醒，以后我再做设计会有态度更勇敢一点。”

而对于标准“90后”的符晗（24岁）来说，时装设

计就是要表达设计师的想法，把想法融入到设计中展示给大众。这位新加坡管理发展学院（MDIS）今年的优秀毕业生直言，大多数时装设计系学生的共同心态是：没抱着以后要赚大钱的念头读这个专业。

他不讳言曾有同学对时尚没抱持极大热情，因“吃不下去”或“意识到不能发财”，有人读不到一半就走了。

“可以说，我离时尚活不下去，我以时尚的概念包装人生的每一天。”符晗笑笑说，“像写作者注重内在一般，我们是一群同样有想法却无法用

文字来表达的人，所以会选择内或外放的表达途径，人生总该有自我表述的方法。”



在24岁的拉萨尔艺术学院（Lasalle College of the Arts）时装设计系毕业生杨德翰看来，学习设计是家族情感和技艺所点燃的火花。

“我祖母是裁缝，我虽然没跟她学过缝纫，但小时候就在一大堆布料里玩，对制衣和布料不陌生。”他说，读初级学院时，为保持优异成绩跟得辛苦，父亲不忍看他以后在“沉闷理科”中挣扎，准许他转向时装设计。

“我以前以为时装设计就是先学商，再跟着做出一个东西来。”杨德翰说，真正进入这个世界，才发现是多么感性又多么科学，多么注重技巧又多么贴合理论的一门学科。

“一切都非凭空出现，一件时装作品不是随便便便诞生的，它工序复杂，过程严谨。”

三名“学霸”一致认同，外界对时装设计师的华丽感都是错觉，个中苦辛不是一般人。但术业有专攻，明确志

向，选定志业，就义无反顾走下去。

前景堪忧消费者不再支持
不过正令人失落的是，是独立设计师目前面临的窘境。

“上世纪80年代本地消费者相当支持独立设计，甚至90年代金融危机后也没差到哪里，2010年纺织服饰商会（TaFF）的PARCO next NEX计划可能是本地设计师最后一波热潮，之后便境况惨淡至今。”陈炯明亲身经历了本地独立设计要选的几个时代，现在给他独立设计的前景打上一



个大问号。
杨德翰并不确定此刻若以独立设计师出道，未来真的能立足，因经济情势低迷，本地消费文化也不怎么“健康”。

“我的态度可能有点负面，为本地一些设计师担任实习生时，亲眼见他们作品的销量并不好，重点是本地消费者不买独立设计。”他指出，独立设计价格高出快时尚品牌许多，难以降价，因成本已然高昂。但消费者看不到这一面，宁愿用同样一笔钱去买外国品牌，甚至多买几件，也不愿意花钱买一件“没名气”的本地设计。”

符晗进一步解释，独立设计贵得真有其自：从寻找灵感到选购原料到生产制造，整个工序由设计师一手完成；另外，独立设计私人运营，找帮手很难，外界抱过不信任，即使以“跨界”为名，也不易吸引合作者，因获利有限——这些都令独立设计师步履维艰。

符晗还说：“尤其新加坡四季如夏，衣服汰换率很高，消费者要求更多款式更多选择，独立设计师必须缩短出货



周期……这些都是难题。”
他接着说：“不过站在消费者角度，这些的确不在考量之内，消费者永远在意的是物美价廉，我也在考虑如何在维持设计质量和自我风格的前提下，在价格上让利予消费者。独立设计是不是一定要贵？这个问题真得好好想一想。”

仍有生存之道不应放弃

杨德翰直言“我会再观察一下，如果本地没有了生存空间，可能考虑去国外发展。”

专精男装设计的杨德翰，作品中亚洲元素丰富，尤其是艳丽多姿东南亚元素和细节，他认为至少可吸引马来西亚、泰国、菲律宾等国家独立设计相当繁荣，政府和消费者都大力相挺，反观本地，自PARCO next NEX计划后，曾在这个时尚“孵化”计划下受惠的独立设计师只能四散东西自力求生。

来自中国的符晗想在新加坡坚持下去，正找工作她想先为时装品牌打工，积累更多设计和营销经验后再做自己的女装品牌。他的女装走幽雅、

暗黑路线，亮色添加得少，这其实比较符合本地大部分潮女讲求低调有型的品味。
他认为独立设计师的生存之道不是没有，如应开节流调节支出。“对策之一是不开实体店，这样可以节省很大一笔开销，摩登消费者多已接受网购这种购物形态。另外，进驻百货公司、买手店或多品牌店也是一个方法，这可服务一部分传统消费者，或者在手上街购物这种体验的消费者。但无论是怎样的营销策略，设计永远是重点，好设计才是王道。”

陈炯明对多品牌店寄卖方式也赞同，他之前有一个成熟风格小品牌Pilibonza，限量放在多品牌店Egg3卖，卖得还不错，不过他承认网店兴起后，实体店面销量饱受冲击，时装的网络销售尽管不能算大势所趋，仍值得独立设计师在这个领域探索。“我发觉还有一群支持本地设计的消费者，虽然人数不多，有独特品味，也愿意在精良设计上投资。”

符晗则说：“千禧世代更真实地面对自己，更大胆地满足自己、表现自己。”

——时尚风向已变，设计师岂能固守旧习？
无论消费形态改变，还是千禧世代崛起，都不是时尚设计行业单独面对的问题，你和我谁都无法置身事外。不过，当我们每天踏出门面对世界，仍需要一身最能传达个人意识，最能成功自行行的一件衣裳，在哪个时代都一样。

陈炯明在新作中意欲摆脱往日已成风格（NAFA提供）注

呼应千禧世代 有商机

说到潜在的消费者，近几年来，不少国际品牌和厂商在进行调研后，指出最有消费潜力的其实是“千禧世代”，这个族群正愈加主宰国际潮流、社会脉动和企业转型，对应了这部分人的心理，就有商机和盈利。

陈炯明说自己的同学就是一群“千禧世代”，自己在思想上挺受冲击。“我之前的设计偏向成熟，对于年轻族群的需求，以前比较忽略，以后试试做多些解构又重构的男女装作品，会更加限量，大概一两件，更直接明确地对小众消费者，在产量上“减负”，自己的成本压力也会小一点。”

符晗则是标准“90后”，了解自己也了解在消费者。杨德翰说即使世代相同，不同人在品味上各有侧重，不能划一视之，不过

他总结觉得，千禧世代总体追求基本款式和简化设计，而在细节上讲究趣味。

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陈炯明在新作中意欲摆脱往日已成风格（NAFA提供）注

Whiz kids of fashion schools: Designing your own future

By Wang Yiming

What was once the glamorous stage for independent fashion designers is now a thing of the past, but that's not stopping young aspiring wannabes from flocking to fashion design schools for their shot at the industry. However, what happens after they graduate? How do they match their skills with reality and do they have what it takes to survive in the fashion jungle? Lianhe Zaobao speaks to three "whiz kids" who graduated from fashion design programmes this year and asked them to "design" their future.

Photo: Yong De Han's menswear shines with Southeast Asian elements, a modern touch on local style.

People used to say: "If you want to be broke, go open a book store."

But given the bleak shopping scene today, you could almost say: "If you want to be broke, go be a fashion designer."

This begets the question: Do young people still dream of becoming fashion designers these days?

The prolonged fashion retail slump has taken a toll on independent fashion designers and labels. With fast fashion taking a lion's share of the market with their cheap, eclectic, high-volume and endless supply of fresh clothes, even high-end and mid-range labels are finding it tough to face the battle, let alone the minority independent designers.

What was once the glamorous stage for independent fashion designers in Singapore is now a thing of the past. Today, there are no more than 20 designers and labels that are still functioning, launching new collections regularly and still making money. There is no lack of young aspiring wannabes flocking to fashion design schools every year. What are their concerns and passions?

After they graduate, how will they apply what they learn? How do they match their skills with reality and do they have what it takes to survive in the fashion jungle?

Lianhe Zaobao's fashion correspondent speaks to three fashion design graduates who topped their cohorts and asks them to "design" their future.

Taking the plunge: Fashion is an expression

Don't be fooled by his baby face. Chen Shiming, who graduated early last month from NAFA's fashion studies programme with a bachelor's degree, is 44 years old this year.

Chen works at NAFA's technical department and obtained a specialist diploma from the same school in 2004. Not one to lag behind the times, he got a degree more than 10 years after that, which he called a "system upgrade".

After getting his diploma, Chen recounted that he spent eight years working for three local fashion labels just for the sake of making money. He was not satisfied.

“I did feel like I was being led by the nose. I felt that I was not doing what I wanted to do and my designs were devoid of character,” said Chen.

He admitted that when he was working at NAFA, he was influenced by the young students and learnt a lot from them. The experience reignited his passion for the business.

“The next time I design again, I will show more attitude and boldness,” said Chen.

To Fu Han, a 24-year-old typical post-millennial, fashion design is about expressing the views of a designer and blending those views into his work to show the masses. Fu, an MDIS top graduate this year, said that most fashion design students did not join this course for the sake of making big money.

Some students, he noted plainly, were not passionate about fashion and when they felt that the industry was too tough or realized that they would not get rich in this business, they quit the programme.

“You can say that I won’t be able to live if I leave fashion. I shape every day of my life with fashion concepts.”

“Like writers who emphasise inner beauty, we are a group of people who also have ideas but aren’t able to express them in words, so we choose to express ourselves outwardly,” he laughed.

“There should be a way of expressing oneself in life.”

In the words of LASALLE College of the Arts fashion design graduate Yong De Han, learning design is all about family sentiments and the sparks that the skills ignite.

“My grandmother was a tailor. Although I never learnt sewing from her, I used to play among piles of fabrics, so I’m no stranger to clothes making and fabrics,” said the 24-year-old.

He recalled having a hard time studying during his days in junior college to maintain his excellent scores. His father, who could not bear to see him struggling in “boring subjects”, allowed him to switch to fashion design.

“I used to think that fashion design is about looking at something and making a copy of it,” said Yong.

But once he stepped into the world of fashion, he discovered that the fashion discipline is about sensuality, science, skills and theory.

“None of this appears out of thin air. A work of fashion is not born randomly. The sequence is complex and the process is rigorous.”

All the three top students agree that outsiders have the wrong impression that fashion designers are all about being foppish and fail to see the hard work behind the

scenes. But to these designers, once they have chosen this path, there will be no turning back.

Worrying outlook: No consumer support

Independent designers are in a tight spot today, falling victim to the changing retail landscape.

“In the 1980s, local consumers were rather supportive of independent designs. That didn’t change much even during the 1990s financial crisis. The PARCO next NEXT project organised by the [Textile and Fashion Federation](#) (TaFf) in 2010 could have been the last wave of local design. After that, the situation has been gloomy even up till today,” said Chen, who went through the good and bad times of local design and said a big question mark overhangs the industry today.

Given the economic downturn and “unhealthy” consumption culture in Singapore, Yong is uncertain if he will be able to stand on his own feet if he enters the industry as an independent designer now.

“My attitude may be a little negative. When I was working as an intern for some designers here, I witnessed how their works did not sell well. The key point is local consumers are not buying independent designs.”

Yong pointed out that independent designs are priced much higher than fast fashion, but the designers are unable to lower their prices because their costs are high. But consumers do not see this and will rather spend the same amount of money, or even more, on foreign labels, as they are not willing to pay for clothes made by “unknown” local designers.

Fu further explained why independent designs are expensive: The designer would oversee the entire process of clothes making, from seeking inspiration to picking the materials and producing the clothes. On top of that, independent design labels are private operations as it is difficult to find sponsors and funding. They also face problems in drawing collaborators even in the name of “crossover”, as the gains are very limited. These are the many struggles of independent designers, said Fu.

“Especially in Singapore where it’s summer all year round, clothes replacement rate is high. Consumers want more designs and more choices, so independent designers have to shorten their delivery cycle... these are tricky problems,” Fu added.

“However from the consumers’ point of view, these are not their consideration. Consumers would always be concerned about getting the best at the lowest prices. I’m also considering how to maintain the quality of my designs and personal style, while giving the best prices to consumers. Must independent designs be expensive? I must really spend some time to think about this issue.”

There’s still a way: Don’t give up

Yong admitted: “I will observe a while longer. If there is no more room for survival here, I may consider advancing my career abroad.”

The works of Yong, who specialises in menswear, are profuse in Asian elements, especially the bright and diverse elements and details of Southeast Asia, so he

believes he will be able to attract Malaysian and Thai male buyers. The independent design markets in Asia, such as Malaysia and Thailand, are thriving, thanks to strong support from the government and consumers; whereas in Singapore, after the PARCO next NEXT, designers who once benefited under this fashion incubator project have dispersed and are now on their own.

Fu, who hails from China, hopes to persist with his dream in Singapore. He is now looking for a job and wants to work for a fashion label to accumulate more experience in design and sales before introducing his own women's wear label. His style is about elegance and dark hues with limited bright colours for embellishment, which caters to the taste of most fashionistas in Singapore who go for a low-key and stylish look.

He thinks that there are ways for independent designers to survive, including diversifying and cost-cutting.

"One of the strategies is not to open a physical store. This will help to save a lot of money and most modern-day consumers have accepted online shopping as a norm. Besides this, going into department stores, select stores or multi-brand boutiques is also another way. We can serve some of the traditional consumers or those who care about the experience of shopping on the streets. But no matter which sales strategy we use, design will always be the key. A good design rules."

Chen agreed that selling through multi-brand boutiques is feasible. Previously he owned a small-scale mature-styled label Ribbonz whose limited pieces sold well at lifestyle concept boutique Egg3. But sales at the store took a hit when online shops emerged. Although selling clothes online is not yet a mainstream trend, it is worth exploring by independent designers.

"I discovered there is still a group of consumers who support local designs. They may be small in numbers, but they have a unique taste and are willing to invest in fine design."

Calling all millennials: A business opportunity

In recent years, many international labels and manufacturers conducted surveys and found that the millennials, or Generation Y, have the biggest potential as consumers. This group of people is increasingly leading international trends, social pulse and corporate transformations, and once designers are able to win their hearts, opportunities and money will start to roll in.

Chen said his thinking was affected dramatically by his Generation Y classmates.

"My previous designs were more mature and pretty much overlooked the needs of the younger people. I will try to make more deconstructed and reconstructed clothes for men and women. The quantity will be even more limited, with perhaps one or two pieces to more directly and specifically target a niche market. By reducing my production quantity, I will also have lesser cost pressure."

Yong and Fu are typical post-millennials who understand themselves and the potential buyers well. Yong said that even if they come from the same generation, he cannot group everyone together as their tastes are different. But he concluded that

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millennials overall pursue basic style and clean design as well as interesting small details.

“Millennials are more true to themselves, more daring to satisfy themselves and express themselves,” said Fu.

The wind has changed for fashion, so designers should also adjust their sails.

Changing consumer behaviour and the rising wave of millennial consumers do not affect only the fashion industry, but all of us. Whenever we step out of the house to face the world, what we wear should best convey our individualities and sell ourselves – no matter which generation you come from.