

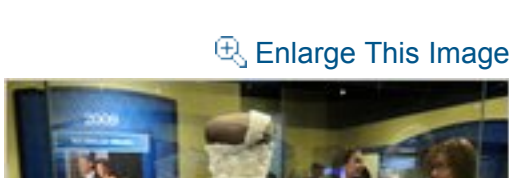
Asian-Americans Climb Fashion Industry Ladder



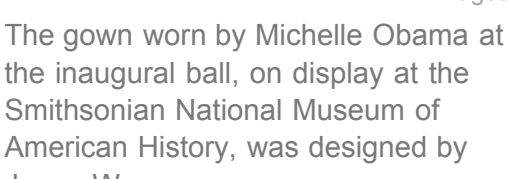
Jason Wu after his runway show at New York Fashion Week in February.

By [ERIC WILSON](#)
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The mood was set early at the American fashion awards ceremony at Lincoln Center in June, an event often likened to the Oscars of the fashion world, with a guest list that included celebrities like Sarah Jessica Parker and [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) and almost every top designer.



Enlarge This Image
The gown worn by Michelle Obama at the inaugural ball, on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, was designed by Jason Wu.



Enlarge This Image
Jason Wu, Richard Chai and Alexander Wang, from left, after winning best new designer awards at an industry ceremony in June.

In quick succession, three men were called to the stage to accept their awards as the best new designers of the year: Richard Chai for men's wear, Jason Wu for women's wear and Alexander Wang for accessories.

It was the first time that all three prizes given by the [Council of Fashion Designers of America](#) were awarded to designers who are Asian-American. That same night, the fashion council announced three scholarships, each for \$25,000, won by student designers of Asian heritage.

"It's so exciting," said Mr. Wu, who became a household name not only in this country, but also in his native Taiwan, when his dress was selected by [Michelle Obama](#) for her husband's [inauguration](#). "Not too long ago, [Donna Karan](#) and [Michael Kors](#) were the young designers of America. Now there are a lot of firsts for all of us as Asian-American designers."

Their ascent to the top tier of New York fashion represents an important demographic shift on Seventh Avenue. At the [Fashion Week](#) that begins here on Thursday, many of the most promising new designers are of Asian descent, a group that includes Mr. Wang and Mr. Wu; Thakoon

Panichgul, one of the stars of the documentary "The September Issue," about Vogue magazine; Prabal Gurung; Phillip Lim; and Derek Lam — names that are increasingly likely to represent the future of fashion.

Major design schools around the world have seen an influx of Asian-American and Asian-born students since the 1990s, partly through their own recruitment efforts in countries with rapidly developing fashion industries, like South Korea and Japan, and partly because of changing attitudes in those countries about fashion careers. At Parsons the New School for Design, roughly 70 percent of its international students enrolled in the school of fashion now come from Asia, according to school officials. At the [Fashion Institute of Technology](#), 23 percent of the nearly 1,200 students now enrolled are either Asian or Asian-American.

"F.I.T. is a pretty diverse place, but this is the most obvious change we have seen," said Joanne Arbuckle, the dean of its school of art and design. "It is remarkable when you compare it to many years ago. I don't think we ever had these numbers of students from Asian countries or Asian-American students. And it is a growing population."

The rise of Asian designers in America has actually come in several smaller waves, including one that marked the emergence of [Anna Sui](#) and Vera Wang in the 1980s. In the last few years, however, as a new generation of designers has asserted itself in New York, Asian-Americans have been at the forefront. In 1995, there were only about 10 Asian-American members of the Council of Fashion Designers of America. Today there are at least 35.

This has happened largely for the same reason that the New York fashion industry, through the '80s, was populated most visibly by designers of Jewish heritage, like Calvin Klein, Ms. Karan, [Ralph Lauren](#), [Marc Jacobs](#) and Mr. Kors. Throughout the 20th century, generations of Jewish immigrants had created a thriving garment district in New York, first as laborers, then as factory owners, manufacturers, retailers and, eventually, as designers. Many of today's Asian-American designers say they experienced a similar evolution from the factory to the catwalk, since some of their parents and grandparents were once involved in the production of clothes.

Mr. Lam, whose luxury ready-to-wear collections evoke a classically uptown ideal, is a designer of Chinese descent who came to New York by way of San Francisco. His grandparents owned a factory there producing bridal gowns. His father imported clothing from Hong Kong, but Mr. Lam said he wanted to pursue a more creative course and enrolled in Parsons, graduating in 1990. Before starting his label in 2002, he worked for Mr. Kors in New York.

"I grew up around clothes," Mr. Lam said. "It was like a default. Fashion became one of the few outlets for Asian-Americans who wanted to put their name out there."

When he went out on his own, Mr. Lam, though well received, faced a difficult road. No one bought his first collection, and he and his business partner had invested their savings in the business.

But after several seasons, the collection took off. He has since won several awards, including the accessories prize from the fashion council in 2007; opened two stores in Manhattan; and developed a clothing and accessories line for the luxury brand Tod's. During a recent trip to Shanghai and Beijing, he said, he was stunned by the level of awareness of his work there.

"There is this understanding that there is a group of Asian-American designers who are coming up in the world, and there is a sense of pride," Mr. Lam said.

The cultural changes that have enabled would-be designers to pursue their chosen careers have happened slowly. Ms. Sui told The International Herald Tribune in 2008 that designers of her generation were often asked by their families, "Why do you want to be a dressmaker when you could be a doctor?"

Mr. Wu said those pressures were still there as recently as a decade ago. "When I was applying to Parsons, my mother had never heard of it," he said. "Now, everyone in the generation after me wants to go to Parsons. Fashion has become a more prominent career in the eyes of Asian parents."

Unlike the avant-garde work of [Yohji Yamamoto](#), [Rei Kawakubo](#) and [Issey Miyake](#) — Japanese designers who took Paris by storm in the 1980s — there is no discernible aesthetic connection among the designs of Asian-Americans. Alexander Wang's street style looks nothing like Mr. Lam's polished dresses, nor the colorful mash-up prints of Peter Som, who also consults on sportswear for [Tommy Hilfiger](#). None would care to identify their styles as "Asian-American." Carmen Chen Wu, a Parsons student who received one of the fashion scholarships this year, noted that she is of Chinese descent, but was born in Spain, "so technically, I'm a Spaniard."

But one thing their heightened visibility has done for them as a group is to create opportunities in Asia, where the realm of luxury fashion had long been exclusive to traditional European houses like Louis Vuitton and Chanel.

Since his triumph with Mrs. Obama, Mr. Wu has been invited to return to Taiwan in October to help design a residential building, and he is developing a line of eye shadows with Shiseido that will be sold throughout China. Mr. Som said his business was growing faster in Asia than anywhere else, noting that the speed of information today has made consumers in South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand as knowledgeable about new designers as they are about the historically major brands. Mr. Lam said he had been invited to return to China next month to appear as a judge on "Creative Sky," a popular new reality television competition.

On that show, aspiring fashion designers compete in a series of runway challenges, much like those on "Project Runway" in the United States. The major difference is that the ultimate prize is not the chance to show a collection at Fashion Week, but something that is now becoming far more prestigious in Asia.

The winner gets the opportunity to go to Parsons — as a student.

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