

A QUIET DESIGNER



Ma Ke's rise to fame after dressing up first lady Peng Liyuan isn't coming in the way of her pursuing an inner purpose. **Chen Jie** reports.

Chinese fashion doyenne Ma Ke's show is staged at a factory-turned-creative space in Beijing earlier this month.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

For people like me, who dislike primping up for a fashion show but sometimes have to go owing to professional reasons, a recent event was a welcome change. The organizers insisted on a dress code, though, but it read: "Please dress in a casual and comfortable way — no tight skirts or high-heels." The fashion show was held at a factory-turned-creative space behind Beijing's National Art Museum on a Mid-Autumn Festival evening, and I wore my jeans and sandals. As soon as I arrived, I knew why high-heels were barred. We climbed up a set of steep steel steps that led us to the roof of a building, where we were served fruit in handmade bowls, traditional desserts wrapped in leaves and homemade rice liquor.

It was Chinese fashion doyenne Ma Ke's show.

Then we walked to the roof of a neighboring building, where guests sat on grass cushions on the floor to watch the show. That is why the advisory against tight skirts was issued.

There was no fancy lighting either, with a big full moon hanging in the dark sky serving as the perfect backdrop. A woman was seated by an old wooden machine, spinning cotton, while another wove clothes at a distance.

An ensemble of some 30 people aged between 6 and 70, including several from different continents, was gathered for the show. They all dressed in basic single-color handmade clothes and moved slowly from one end of the rooftop to another.

Unlike usual fashion shows that blast recorded music on speakers, this instead had one folk singer from the Kaitipul tribe, members of which live in southeastern Taiwan.

The city's neon lights were visible from where I was seated, but in a way I was lost in the quiet evening that Ma had created.

Although known in China's fashion industry for the past two decades, Ma



Ma Ke (left) works with a rural artisan on a fashion design in her Zhuhai workshop.

became a household name overnight after President Xi Jinping's wife, Peng Liyuan, wore clothes designed by Ma during Xi's first state visit to Russia in March 2013.

After media reports suggested that Ma, 43, may have designed Peng's clothes, people started to look for Ma online. Websites showed that the designer had an associa-

tion with Exception, a Guangzhou-based brand that she and her former husband created.

A few days later, Ma publicly acknowledged that she was indeed behind the first lady's look, but also clarified that she had left Exception in 2006 and had since taken a different direction.

In 1988, Ma left her home-

town, Changchun in north-eastern Jilin province, to study design at the Suzhou Silk Institute in eastern Jiangsu province.

After graduation in 1992, Ma joined a fashion company in Guangzhou in southern China's Guangdong province. After three years, she felt it was "a disaster for a designer to work in a company that only pursued profit."

And then, she met designer Mao Jihong and married him. The couple founded Exception in 1996. It is one of China's first independent fashion labels. Mao took care of marketing and branding while Ma focused on designing.

Exception produced simple yet attractive women's ready-to-wear clothes and secured a number of loyal high-end customers, including Peng.

In 2001, when Peng, then a popular singer, was performing in Guangzhou, Ma was introduced to her by a TV reporter. Ma designed the dress for Peng's performance at the 2002 China Central Television Spring Festival Gala, the popular annual TV show.

When Peng asked Ma to design a dress for her first state visit, she agreed without hesitation.



A bedroom designed with items from Ma Ke's new label Wu Yong.

"I believe if the first lady dresses in a simple but elegant way and presents unique Chinese traditions, people of the country would follow the style," she says.

Exception, meanwhile, has grown into a big company, driven by Mao's ambition. But Ma's true calling lay elsewhere.

The more she traveled through China's countryside, she says, the more she realized that traditional craftsmanship was dying in the villages and that she could help revive the heritage through alternative fashion.

In 2006, Ma moved to Zhuhai, another city in Guangdong. She and Mao divorced.

"The fashion industry pushes people to change their wardrobes every season. Actually, we don't need to. I can wear a comfortable piece for five, six or even 10 years. When I was young, my mother would wear

my grandmother's clothes and my mother passed hers to me. It still happens in villages," Ma says.

She rented a private garden that had once belonged to Tang Shaoyi (1862-1938), the first premier of the Republic of China. She turned it into a workshop and recruited some 20 rural craftsmen to spin cotton, weave and dye the clothing on machines that were used a century ago.

Ma's new label Wu Yong means "useless" in Chinese.

"Everything in nature is useful. There are many things that people consider useless and throw away, but they are in fact useful. It's dangerous to use up all of nature's resources and not recycle them," she says.

Didier Grumpach, then-chairman of the Federation Francaise de la Couture, a respected figure in world fashion, visited her in Zhuhai and invited her to

present at the Paris Fashion Week.

In 2008, at her Paris Haute Couture Week showing, models performed tai chi to Mongolian music.

The idea of offering people an eco-friendly lifestyle came to her last year after she was invited to visit the 77 Creative Industry Park in Beijing. She decided to step outside the comfort of her Zhuhai workshop and move beyond clothes.

Following months of preparation, Ma opened her new workshop at the same industry park in Beijing, where she displays clothes and household goods that are all made from natural material.

Her vision helps rural artisans too.

"I will not sell clothes in big shopping malls," Ma says.

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Actor Feng Shaofeng 'doesn't care' for Hollywood cameos

By XU FAN
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It is hard to miss Feng Shaofeng's face in large posters plastered on the walls of Beijing's subway stations, promoting *The Golden Era*, a Chinese movie that will be screened in cinemas during the country's upcoming "golden week", the National Day holidays.

Feng, 36, a mainland A-listed actor, recently made headlines with two new movies, *The Golden Era* and *Wolf Totem*.

The former movie has been selected to represent Hong Kong in the foreign films category at next year's Oscars and the latter is an animal epic by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, a Sino-French production adapted from a Chinese best-seller.

The Shanghai-born actor, who began his career in 2001, and has gained fame from starring as a Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) prince in the time-travel TV series *Palace I* in

2011, tells China Daily that he is lucky to play Xiao Jun, a left-wing author and the husband of novelist Xiao Hong (played by Tang Wei), in *The Golden Era*.

Slotted as the closing film of this year's Venice International Film Festival that ended on Sept 6, *The Golden Era* tells the story of Xiao Hong's eventful life in the most turbulent times in modern Chinese history. Her birth in 1911 in Heilongjiang province coincided with China's shift from dynastic imperial rule to becoming a modern republic.

The Golden Era's director Ann Hui, the only artist who has won Hong Kong Film Awards' Best Director four times, is his idol, Feng says. "I had wanted to work with her for many years." But when he finally met Hui in 2012, the two just had a casual chat, and the director didn't talk about the movie.

But a few days after their meeting, Feng received a script from Hui and was immediately taken by it.

"Hui didn't cast me as Xiao Jun in the beginning," Feng says. But he says he could relate to the strong personality of Xiao Jun, who saves the then-pregnant Xiao Hong when she is abandoned by her fiancé, and marries her afterward. Feng calls Xiao Jun, a man "very close to his heart" because he is never the one to hesitate in expressing love or hate.

He is glad he finally got to play the character and is proud that he didn't disappoint the 67-year-old director, who applauded his performance at a Beijing media conference in September.

He cites a scene on the set in frigid Harbin in northern China's Heilongjiang province, where he had to dump a bucket of icy water on his own head. "I almost froze, but it did have a pretty good effect," Feng recalls, smiling.

Tan Hong, the producer of *The Golden Era*, reveals that Feng had asked not to be paid to support the director he has always admired, as the budget

for the movie was only 3.7 million yuan (\$603,000), which was tight for a full-length movie starring A-list stars.

According to Chinese entertainment websites, a showbiz celebrity can easily pick up about 10 to 30 million yuan when starring in a movie. The going rate for Zhao Wei — the youngest Golden Eagle-winning actress — for example, is 30 million yuan a film.

When asked if this is a "golden era" for Chinese stars to raise their stature in more mature movie markets such as Hollywood, Feng is dismissive. "Obviously the era is different. But it's not worthwhile to appear in a movie for just a few seconds, even if it is directed by a top international director," he says.

"I don't care for cameos. I already have an excellent stage to showcase my talent in China, so why should I go to the West?"

But some industry insiders believe that Feng is among the few top Chinese mainland stars who may have a future in Hollywood.



A scene from *The Golden Era* features Feng Shaofeng as Xiao Jun and actress Tang Wei as Xiao Hong.