



Style

News Quotes Search

[Advanced search](#)

- Home
- World
- Companies
- Markets
- Global Economy
- Lex
- Comment
- Management
- Life & Arts

- Arts
- FT Magazine
- Food & Drink
- House & Home
- Style
- Books
- Pursuits
- Travel
- How To Spend It
- Tools

LUNCH WITH THE FT

February 17, 2012 9:16 pm

- Share
- Clip
- Reprints
- Print
- Email

Lunch with the FT: Shaw-Lan Wang

By David Pilling

In a rare interview, the Chinese newspaper magnate reveals to David Pilling how she revived a French fashion house



©James Ferguson

Madame Wang enters the room at some velocity. The first thing I notice are her super-large eyebrows, arched like croquet hoops above her heavily made-up eyelids. Then I take in her fashionable haircut, short with a jagged fringe. Her hair is dyed dark auburn, edged with little tufts of smoky grey. Next I register her Mandarin-collared *qipao* in leopard-skin print, slit to the thigh. I know it is a *qipao* because she later tells me emphatically in her raspy, helium-filled voice: "I always wear my Chinese dress. I am not Japanese. This is a Chinese *qipao*. It is not a kimono." Over it is a black, cowl-neck vest. The outfit is finished off – if that's the word – with a chunky lord-

mayer's-style neck chain.

Normally when journalists write about what women are wearing, they get letters complaining that they would never discuss men in the same way. That may be true. But the 70-year-old Madame Wang is the owner of Lanvin, the oldest surviving French fashion house, which she bought in 2001 and helped revive. To talk about what she is wearing seems appropriate, even essential. For the record, I am dressed in a grey suit, slightly rumpled after two cramped flights, one overnight, and a floral-patterned shirt by Marks and Spencer.

We are in Taipei, where Shaw-Lan Wang was brought up after moving to Taiwan from mainland China at the age of seven. Specifically, we are in a 34th-floor dining room in the luxurious surroundings of the Taipei World Trade

More

ON THIS STORY

Lunch with the FT [Dustin Hoffman](#)

Lunch with the FT [Kenneth Rogoff](#)

Interviews

FT MAGAZINE



The FT talks to top Russian supermodel Natalia Vodianova

FT MAGAZINE



Victoria Beckham on the transition from pop star to top fashion designer

The Banker Database
FREE 14-DAY TRIAL
www.thebankerdatabase.com/trial
 ENTER ACCESS CODE BA0711FW

Most popular in Life & Arts

1. [The tragedy of Fernando Torres](#)
2. [Curse of the Wise Child](#)
3. [New York Fashion Week](#)
4. [Football's best managers](#)
5. [Adapt or die?](#)

Lunch with the FT [Anwar Ibrahim](#)
Lunch with the FT [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#)
Lunch with the FT [Howard Hodgkin](#)

LUNCH WITH THE FT

Lunch with the FT [Pierre Dukan](#)
[Laurence Freeman](#)
[James Daunt](#)
[Barry Humphries](#)

Center Club. I had arrived early and been ushered into the private room by a posse of women in grey skirt-suits. In the room, small but perfectly appointed, is a round table with a white tablecloth already set for two.

After she catches her breath, Madame Wang, as she refers to herself, reaches into her mouth to remove a piece of gum. She secretes the little green ball in her handbag, Lanvin presumably. Wang rarely gives interviews. She seems unsure as to how this one came about. “How did you get

in touch? Through my PR in Paris?” she asks. I am not entirely sure either, since the encounter was also arranged for me. Yet somehow here we are, thrown together in this little windowless room of a Taipei skyscraper.

Madame Wang was born in 1941, the Year of the Snake. Although her family was from the coastal province of Zhejiang, she started out life in Chongqing, the wartime capital after the fall of Nanjing to the Japanese. Her father, a colonel in the army of Chiang Kai-shek, the Guomindang leader, came to Taiwan in 1947. Two years later Chiang himself led a full-scale retreat to the island after being routed by Mao Zedong’s Communist forces.

In 1951, her father founded the United Daily News, a staunch supporter of the Guomindang authoritarian government. Wang, who studied journalism in Taipei, worked as a reporter on the paper. She married an air force pilot and went to live in Switzerland with her husband, where she spent 12 to 15 years. She doesn’t remember exactly. One day, she received a phone call from her father asking her to return to Taiwan and run the paper. “I could not refuse.”

“What do you like to eat? You like kitchen or beef?” she asks. I take the former to mean chicken. Madame Wang’s English, spoken choppily and with the hint of a French accent, is less than perfect, though it is leagues ahead of my terrible Chinese. She speaks with little concession to English grammar, omitting pronouns, tenses and even verbs and nouns. Gaps are filled with the most splendid mimes. Over the course of lunch, she acts out blind, shortsighted, dizzy, happy, drunk, dead, injured, crazy, terrified and a few other things besides. Much is achieved through facial expression. On several occasions, in place of saying “good”, she jabs her upturned thumb in my direction. Once, in somewhat less generous mood, she brings her hands together and twists as if strangling a chicken.

She orders several dishes. The waitress returns with succulent cold cuts of chicken, pork and duck. As Madame Wang takes a bite of the accompanying kimchee, I ask how her newspaper is surviving competition with the internet. “It’s not enjoyable to get information from the internet,” she says. “A good book can touch your heart. But I have never had anything touch my heart on the internet.” But has the internet touched her sales? How is the paper faring in the face of online competition? “The quality of the press is going down all around the world,” she persists. “People have lost respect for the press.”

Two plates of grilled beef arrive. “Chinese style,” she announces. I abandon my internet inquiries – she isn’t sure whether her newspaper charges for its online version – and move to her more recent passion, Lanvin. How did she come to buy the struggling fashion house and how, in particular, did she come to hire Alber Elbaz, the designer whose appointment has transformed its fortunes?

Latest headlines from The Week

- [Why are dolphins beaching themselves? 4 theories](#)
- [Unemployment benefits: Should drug testing be required?](#)
- [Was MSNBC right to fire Pat Buchanan?](#)
- [Disney's 'heartwarming' live-action The Lady and the Tramp trailer](#)
- [Congress' contraceptives hearing: 'Where are the women?'](#)

Multimedia

- [Video](#)
- [Blogs](#)
- [Podcasts](#)
- [Interactive graphics](#)
- [Audio slideshows](#)
- [Picture slideshows](#)

Tools

- [Portfolio](#)
- [FT Lexicon](#)
- [FT clippings](#)
- [Currency converter](#)
- [MBA rankings](#)
- [Today's newspaper](#)
- [FT press cuttings](#)
- [FT ePaper](#)
- [Economic calendar](#)

Updates

- [Alerts Hub](#)
- [Daily briefings](#)
- [FT on your mobile](#)
- [Share prices on your phone](#)
- [Twitter feeds](#)
- [RSS feeds](#)

Quick links

- [Mergermarket](#)
- [How to spend it](#)
- [SchemeXpert.com](#)
- [Social Media hub](#)
- [The Banker](#)
- [fDi Intelligence](#)
- [Professional Wealth Management](#)
- [This is Africa](#)
- [Investors Chronicle](#)
- [MandateWire](#)
- [FTChinese.com](#)

Services

- [Subscriptions](#)
- [Corporate subscriptions](#)
- [Syndication](#)
- [Privilege Club](#)
- [Conferences](#)
- [Annual reports](#)
- [Executive job search](#)
- [Non-Executive Directors' Club](#)
- [Businesses for sale](#)
- [Contracts & tenders](#)
- [Analyst research](#)
- [Company announcements](#)

The purchase of Lanvin is easy. “I have a friend in Hong Kong and he has dressed in Lanvin for more than 30 years. I thought, ‘He would be very proud if I was the owner.’”

As for Elbaz, the Moroccan-born designer had been pushed out of Yves Saint Laurent after it was bought by Gucci. Embarking on a spiritual world odyssey, Elbaz contemplated giving up design altogether to become a doctor. Instead, he called Wang out of the blue, imploring her to bring him to Lanvin. “Please wake up the Sleeping Beauty,” he said. “I was in Cannes with a friend on a big boat,” Wang recalls. “Alber called, ‘Can I meet you?’ I say, ‘Of course. I will come to Paris.’” She had never heard of Elbaz, but has been quoted as saying she “smelt something meaty and fragrant” about him. To me she says: “He showed me his press book. The first fashion show, he called ‘Homage to Yves Saint Laurent’. Good, I thought. He knows respect. I was introduced to a lot of people. But with them I didn’t have that feeling.”

Whether or not it was the meaty smell, Wang’s instinct has served Lanvin splendidly. Under Elbaz, its reputation and sales have flourished. He makes clothes with a classic cut, to be worn year after year, not just for one season. “Alber’s dresses make women feel beautiful and easy. The first show he did was for winter. The fabric is quite thick. But all the dresses could swing. It’s because of the cut. Normally, thick fabric is very stiff. But he makes you dance with your dress.”

A steamed fish appears, evidently too early. Wang sends it away. Elbaz’s dresses are not overly revealing, she says, miming flesh spilling out of a low-cut dress. “They don’t show everything.” I had read that Elbaz didn’t like his clothes to be thought of as sexy, certainly not in the full-on way associated with Gucci’s Tom Ford, the man who deposed him at Yves Saint Laurent. “I don’t think so,” she says. “Sexy is good. It’s a compliment. But you have to have class. Not ...” She leaves the sentence unfinished but treats me to another mime of a bosom bulging out of a dress.

The fish reappears. This time it has been cut in two, the part with the head for her, the tail for me. “Everybody loves Alber’s dresses,” she is saying. “Before I [used to] say Alber’s dress is for anyone from 18 to 81.” But she recently met an 85-year-old Chinese artist wearing a Lanvin dress. “So pretty.” Wang’s granddaughter, who is just 11 and evidently being groomed for greatness, also wears Lanvin. “The dresses are very elegant and simple, so the range of our customer is very big.”

I ask if she enjoys the fashion shows, the parties and the glamour. “Alber and my director go the parties. Not me,” she says, spitting out some fish bones into her hand. “I don’t like those kind of people or those kind of parties. I am not a jet-set person.” She has lots of famous friends but she meets them in private, she says, reeling off names of actors, actresses and kung fu stars. She’s off on a tangent, telling a story about when Jackie Chan annoyed the Taiwanese by suggesting that Chinese people needed to be controlled and that democracy in Taiwan was chaotic. “Jackie, he’s very honest and straight. I called him and said, ‘You are great. You have a very big market. If people here are stupid, don’t come.’”

We talk about the recent thaw in relations between Taiwan and mainland China. Although she is an anti-communist and counts among her friends several Tiananmen Square dissidents, she says the government in Beijing has changed. “Now, I agree with what they are doing. They are disciplined. Before

you have the law, don't give too much freedom," she says, wagging her finger. "You have to teach people to respect the law, even if the law is bad."

The waitress brings in some lusciously green and crisp snow peas with scallops. There's barely room on the table. She continues on the China-Taiwan theme, saying it has been more than 60 years since the two separated. But unification is not so easy, she says, referring to the strong sense of Taiwanese independence. "We Chinese all have patience. Next generation, let's see what that brings. I think in China one day, if they have freedom of the press and liberty of election, we can negotiate to become one big China.

"We have no reason to hate each other. The Japanese killed many, many Chinese and Asian people. Why don't the people hate the Japanese?" she asks, referring to the relatively warm relations between the Taiwanese and their former Japanese colonists. "War kills, but not the way the Japanese kill. They use ..." here she mimes the stabbing action of a bayonet. "They kill women and babies with their cruel methods. People say forgive, but I say, 'I cannot.'"

To this day, she says, she refuses to meet Japanese people, notwithstanding the fact that she is currently negotiating to buy back the Japanese licence to Lanvin, previously sold to trading house Itochu. "It doesn't matter what title they have. If people say, 'Madame Wang, this is such and such,' I never give my hand. I never say hello to Japanese." She turns her head disdainfully. "Bye bye. I don't care what they think."

The waitress offers to wrap up the left-overs. "For my driver," says Wang. Two egg tarts and two portions of taro pudding are served. The egg tart, with divinely crumbly pastry, is the best I've tasted. I had read somewhere that she compares the dual role of newspaper magnate and fashion-house baroness to having a husband and a lover. Which is which? "Who told you I said that?" she flashes back. "Since my husband died I don't have any lover. So how can I compare my husband to a lover?"

The important thing is to throw yourself into both. "If you run a business, you have to love this business with all your heart. Before, when I ran a newspaper, I sleep for maybe two, three hours a day. I am so excited." Now she has cut back and handed over day-to-day management to her nephew. With Lanvin, too, her strategy has been to step back and give Elbaz the freedom to create.

The waitress brings pear and papaya. I nervously broach the subject of who should pay for this feast. Wang's assistant had warned previously that, under no circumstances, would Madame Wang allow the FT to pay. I try anyway. "I am meant to invite you," I say timidly. "The FT really does insist on paying." The riposte is swift and brutal. "Here in China, no. Never, never, never," she shrieks. "This is my domain. Even if you are Chinese, you cannot pay."

I figure it is useless. Besides, she is already wrapping up, telling me that on no account am I to refer to her as a Taiwanese businesswoman. "I don't consider myself Tai-wan-ese," she says, drawing out the word. "I am Chinese. And I don't consider myself a businesswoman either," she adds without explanation. Then she softens. "It's true, I am a woman. That I cannot say anything about."

David Pilling is the FT's Asia editor

.....
Taipei World Trade Center Club

34F, No 333, Sec 1, Keelung Rd, Taipei City, Taiwan

Cold cuts of chicken, pork and duck with kimchi

Chinese-style grilled beef

Steamed fish

Scallops with snow peas

Egg tart

Taro pudding

Pear and papaya

Jasmine tea

Total Not disclosed

.....

How Alber Elbaz breathed new life into Lanvin

With his cheerful demeanour, an oversized bow tie that looks as if it might squirt water and Charlie Chaplin-like suits, Alber Elbaz hardly resembles a typical fashion designer, **writes Jane McFarland**.



Alber Elbaz

Yet his slightly cartoonish appearance belies the fact that since he became the artistic director of Lanvin in 2001 he's taken a dusty fashion house without a modern identity and turned it into a desirable, critically acclaimed label. His efforts haven't gone unnoticed by the French, who have awarded the Casablanca-born, Tel Aviv-trained designer the Légion d'Honneur in recognition of his rejuvenation of France's oldest fashion house.

Lanvin was founded in 1889 when Jeanne Lanvin set up a milliner's boutique in Paris. In 1909 she began designing women's clothes and joined the Syndicat de la Couture. Wedding dresses, interior design and sports clothes followed, and in 1924 Lanvin perfumes was created.

Among the designers who worked at Lanvin between 1946, when Jeanne died, and 1996, when the house was bought by the French cosmetics company L'Oréal, were Antonio Canovas del Castillo, Claude Montana and Maryll Lanvin.

In August 2001 Lanvin was bought by an investor group led by Shaw-Lan Wang, who went on to recruit Alber Elbaz as the house's new artistic director. It was Elbaz's autumn/winter 2002 collection for Lanvin that made the house newly fashionable, and since then it has become synonymous with a particular brand of very feminine but never fussy design.

Vanessa Friedman, the FT's fashion editor, wrote last September that Elbaz "has effectively created his own aesthetic ... [combining] extreme decoration

with great ease". Today Lanvin is known for its dresses, and luxurious fabrics, soft volume and fluid draping. Embellishment, whether with large crystals, ribbons or brass plates, is a key element of the look, as is the house's distinctive costume jewellery.

In 2010, when Lanvin collaborated with Swedish high street chain H&M, the collection sold out worldwide within six days, boosting the chain's sales by 8 per cent in its debut month. Lanvin has also produced several denim collections with hip, mid-priced label Acne.

The brand returned to profitability in 2007, and 2011 saw a record year with sales reaching €203m, not counting an estimated €4.5m in revenues from licences. Underlying the brand's buoyancy is Elbaz's reliance on instinct and passion: "What Elbaz has proved so convincingly," wrote Vanessa Friedman, "is that by not being driven primarily by commercial concerns but by emotional ones, you can be enormously successful."

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2012. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

[Share](#) [Clip](#) [Reprints](#) [Print](#) [Email](#)

Post your own comment

User6645851 [Update your profile](#)

By submitting this comment I confirm that I have read and agreed to the [FT terms and conditions](#). Please also see our [commenting guidelines](#).

[Submit Comment](#)

Comments



Sorted by newest first | [Sort by oldest first](#)

[nipponophile](#) | February 18 2:27am | [Permalink](#) [Report](#)

Madame Wang seems like a very interesting person and boy, were her gut instincts with Elbaz spot-on.

However, I found it very disappointing to read her views on the Japanese. As an Australian whose countrymen and women also suffered terribly at the hands of the Japanese, I can understand the basis for her feelings, but in the end, unforgiveness solves nothing and traps those who cannot forgive in corrosive bitterness.

Her feelings are particularly curious when juxtaposed with those towards the current mainland government, who in its "discipline" is no less cruel to any of its OWN CITIZENS that dare oppose it than the Japanese ever were.