



# Designer draws inspiration from Tang Dynasty colours



The trademark East meets West creations of Malaysia's top fashion designer Eric Choong reflect the influences of an ancient Chinese Dynasty, royalties and Western haute couture. Eric speaks to Liana Lai about his works and successes.

**KOTA KINABALU:** Malaysian designer Eric Choong worked hard in the past 20 years to achieve recognition as a haute couture designer from this region. Widely known for his East meets West creations, Choong's clients include Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's wife Datin Seri Endang Mahmood, Malaysian celebrities Sheila Majid and Camelia, VJ Paula Mula Ali and Hong Kong artist, the late Roman Tam.

The friendly designer was tasked to showcase his collection at the Miss Sabah Malaysia final last night at the Sabandar Bay Resort, where the contestants paraded his masterpieces in the evening gown category. Choong favours silk batik in his designs and creates a fusion by combining the fabric with similar ones from other countries such as Italian silk.

"My trade mark is to use hand-painted silk batik which is designed by myself with seagull and other soft fabrics to create a design that says East meets West," he said during an interview here on Friday.

According to Choong, the inspiration for his designs comes from clothes and porcelain colours of the Tang Dynasty which are very vibrant.

"I love the Chinese culture as well as the era of Queens and Princesses, and this is why my designs represent elegance and royalty," he said, adding with a smile, "You feel like a Princess in one of my evening gowns."

Other than the influence of the Chinese dynasty, he also gets his inspiration from attending fashion shows in Europe and Bali. Choong attributed his love for fashion designing to his mother who was a make-up artist and encouraged his interest in art by enrolling him in an art school at the tender age of seven.

When asked about his age, Choong laughingly said: "Let's not talk about that, instead, let's talk about my designs and telling the world about how wonderful Malaysian batik is."

He did oblige in giving information about how he started in the fashion industry after graduating from the Hong Kong Design Institute in 1987 and returning to Malaysia in 1990 to launch his own label, "Eric Choong."

His popularity has been rising ever since he was selected by Tourism Malaysia as one of "Malaysia's Top 10 Designers" for three consecutive years from 1990 to 1992.

In 1995, he received a full-time fashion

program for TV2 and in 1997, represented Malaysia in the Singapore Asian Designer's Fashion show.

The following year, he again represented the country in the Asia Pacific Designer's Fashion show which was held in Hong Kong and his achievements just grew by leaps and bounds after that.

Fashion aficionados in China are no strangers to Choong's designs, as last year, he represented the country in the "Showcase of Malaysia 2004" fashion show in Beijing, which was held in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the China Malaysia diplomatic ties as well as doing shows in Hainan.

And the list of his achievements just goes on. In 2004, Choong was invited as one of the panel of judges for the Miss Malaysia World contest as well as the official designer for Miss Malaysia's evening gown in the Miss World pageant.

This year, he was listed in "People at the Peak - The who's who of Malaysia", which presents a comprehensive selection of personalities from royalties to entrepreneurs, artists and sports personalities who are the driving force of the nation's vibrancy.

When asked about his rise to the "top", Choong said that it was not all smooth sailing and he had to struggle to get recognition.

"The designers now have a easier than those in the 80's, when Malaysian fashions were not well known," he said, adding that there are many designers around nowadays and although they have to compete with both local and foreign peers, the market for their creations has already been established.

As a budding fashion designer in the 80's, Choong said he and his peers would take part in many fashion shows so that they could showcase their designs but the hard work has paid off.

The "Eric Choong" label is now a household name not only in the country but also in several other countries.

"Malaysia's fashion scene is still picking up, so maybe in another five to 10 years, our designers will get the recognition they deserve," he said, adding that at the moment, designers such as himself have established their market in the country, making made-to-measure clothes for their clients who can't find their sizes in haute couture designs.

Choong believes in making his clients feel good in his designs without them breaking their bank accounts, as he has a concept called "tailor their budget".

The clients would tell him how much their budget is for an outfit and he would try to work it out for them based on the information. "If it is something my clients would like to wear a few times, then the design would be simple but versatile. Maybe a two-piece outfit which can be mixed and matched with other articles of clothing," he said, adding that he would also be discussing what type of fabric he would use with his clients.

Choong is also famous for his custom-made bridal gowns and among those whom he has worked his magic for are Hong Kong actress Petrina Fung Po Po and Miss Malaysia World 2000, Tan Si Wei.

Other than designing the bride's



**TOP:** Eric Choong and his models during one of his many fashion shows.

**LEFT:** Choong speaking to a reporter.



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