

THE **EDGE**

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LIFE STYLE LEISURE

Options

The Edge & theSun present

the KL Six – the country's leading designers – at the
Malaysia-International Fashion Week 2006

SIX in the CITY

CHERYL AMBROSE and JACQUELINE TOYAD speak to the country's top six designers who will helm the Malaysia-International Fashion Week (M-IFW) which kicks off on Nov 23 at the KL Convention Centre. *The Edge* and *theSun* play host to the highlight of this annual international event featuring the KL Six.

Until Jimmy Choo came along with those incredibly sexy shoes of his, Malaysia had no hopes of being linked with anything remotely connected to the international fashion scene. Sure, we have Zang Toi who showcases his collections bi-annually at the New York Fashion Week and there's local model Ling Tan who's created quite a stir in the US. But after two decades of building a local fashion industry, it's pitiful that so few names have made an impact on what has become a billion dollar industry internationally.

Three years ago, in a bid to put Malaysia on the world fashion map, Mercedes-Benz, which continues to be extremely supportive at the Australian and Singapore Fashion Weeks, decided to lend its name to the search for the next best local designer.

And there was our excuse to hold a

Malaysia Fashion Week. Some of the names of the bodies have changed, sponsors have come and gone but three years on, the spirit behind the event continues to burn strong: to help local designers make a name for themselves on the international scene.

This year, the Malaysia-International Fashion Week (M-IFW) will kick off on Nov 23 with a gala night that evening where *The Edge* and *theSun* will present the KL Six, who are effectively the leading local designers in the country. This year, the six honourees feature two business minded veterans (Edmund Ser and Sonny San), two artsy types (Melinda Looi and Eric Choong) and two designers who continue to tap into our heritage (Tom Abang Saufi and Michael Ong).

The Night of the Orient, which is the theme for the by-invitation-only gala event, promises

to be the event of the year with the aforementioned Datuk Jimmy Choo making an exclusive appearance. That night, each of the KL Six will send their models down the catwalk to showcase their latest collections, and while at it, hopefully convince the world that they are to be taken seriously.

Lewré Lew, founder and chief designer of local shoe house Lewré (who will incidentally be sponsoring the footwear for *The Night of the Orient's* main show), and close associate of Choo, is solely responsible for the presence of 50 international buyers at the gala night and throughout the four-day long affair.

President and chairman of the organising body, the Malaysian International Fashion Alliance or MIFA, Nancy Yeoh points out that while local fashion designers are not lacking in talent, they are however not getting the right support to help them grow their brands.

"A lot of designers don't have enough funding to build strong infrastructures. Some have had big orders to fill but are unable to deliver because they lack the funds," Nancy continues. "Banks have no clue as to how the fashion industry works."

Hopefully, this event will help foster closer relations between the artistes and the bankers. This year also sees the participation of three government bodies: the Matrade (Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation), Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage. Their enthusiastic support clearly marks their new understanding of a considerably young and growing local industry.

Apart from the gala night, the M-IFW will feature numerous showcases by various local designers to an audience comprising those all-important international fashion journalists. And of course, fashion buyers who have the power to place our designers' creations in their stores.

Select foreign designers will also showcase their works for that international flavour through *A Stylish Affair* on the night of Nov 24, featuring the runway styles of brands, including Chloé and YSL.

There will also be an Islamic fashion extravaganza and what better way to do that than through the Islamic Fashion Festival on Nov 25, to be hosted by Datuk Raja Rezza Shah.

This four-day affair will conclude with the M-IFW Gala Ball on Nov 26, featuring Kraftangan followed by the Malaysian International Fashion Awards ceremony sponsored by Mercedes-Benz recognising the Designer of the Year and Best Collection Showcase.

The KL Six collectively give us a picture of the current movement within the local fashion scene — a melting pot of sartorial artists yet to be unleashed onto the worldwide fashion arena. The presence of Choo and the appointed M-IFW fashion ambassador, Bernard Chandran, will remind us of the achievable distance when the M-IFW launching pad succeeds.

It's a misconception that local designers don't have the creative insight to compete on the international scene but as Tom Abang Saufi points out, it's not about competing but about creating a niche.

That we can do. All that needs to be done now is to make use of the M-IFW as a platform to build their reputations. ■

Eric Choong

Seated in the midst of the boisterous crowd that is the KL Six, Eric Choong appears quite lost. Numerous conversations fly across the large table in the conference room where make-up, hairstyling and breakfast are going on simultaneously. Eric also looks like the youngest of the group, the more insecure one listening intently in the hopes of learning something new about the business.

He seems to like this perception, even though nothing could be further from the truth. Eric the man is now 42 years old and Eric Choong the label, 16.

Eric is content to play the role of observer, watching and listening, rather than offering his views — a fact that followers of the designer would have noticed given his absence from the scene for the last two years.

"I am a lone ranger," he says, quickly qualifying that with the fact that he has a team that works closely with him. "But I have been quiet for the last two years because I needed the time to gather my thoughts and work on the future. I want to be a famous fashion designer. I don't want to compete with others."

And so, after years of working to establish his label, Eric finally took some much-needed time out to focus on all the things that had originally inspired his creativity — painting and drawing — which he had left alone to concentrate on designing.

"I've been studying Chinese painting; I went to a retreat in India; I learnt tai chi. I really enjoy my peaceful life," Eric says, smiling delicately. "It's not easy to survive in the fashion industry. When I stopped doing interviews for those two years, there were rumours that Eric Choong was dead. I was a labelled an old designer."

After all the soul searching, Eric has discovered his true motivation and the vision to propel the Eric Choong label forward.

"The Eric Choong label is already 16 years old. I feel it's time to revamp my brand. Everything will now be changed to Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur. I need to upgrade to [move forward] in this industry," he explains.

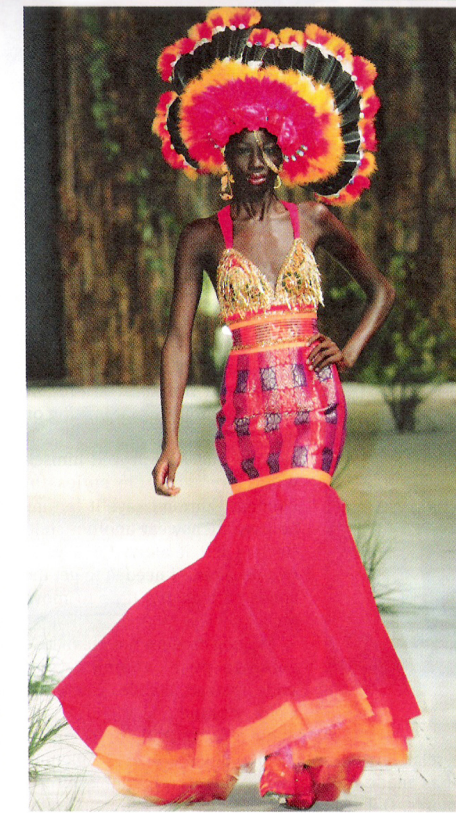
Eric's interest has always been inclined towards high fashion, with its elaborately embellished and flowing gowns. His is not the sort of clothes women would gravitate towards for everyday wear. But given the changing moods of fashion, Eric has realised that the time to alter his perspective is ripe.

"I've been doing this for 22 years," he says, adding that he had spent the

first six years of his career in Hong Kong. His creative inclination began when he attended his first art lesson at age seven. At the time, his mother ran a make-up and hairstyling school, and therefore kept up with the fashion of the times.

Eric loved to see her in her latest outfits, and found pleasure in flipping through her fashion magazines.

"She influenced me," he says. But more than that, she gave him passion. At a time when fashion designing was believed to be a glamorous profession, Eric's mother sent him off to Hong Kong to study fashion. When he came back in 1990 with a diploma in fashion designing and some serious training in haute couture, Eric decided that the only way to make it in this country was to start his own label.



"That was my dream," he says, beaming a pleasant little-boy smile. He made that dream come true with the help of his family and went on to open his first boutique in Park Royal Hotel, focusing on made-to-measure bridal wear.

And now it's time for a change. Realising that he cannot hope to carry on his label on his own, Eric has finally

flowers! But these are existing lines.

At the Malaysia-International Fashion Week (M-IFW), he plans to launch his ready-to-wear collection.

"Actually, it's more cocktail ready-to-wear," he says. Of course, it would be. Who can imagine Eric Choong producing everyday wear minus the frills?

"I plan to produce limited-edition

given in and teamed up with a business partner, with the intention of broadening the business.

"Eric Choong is a brand. I hope one day to open stores in London, New York, Hong Kong and Shanghai," he says. To achieve his goal of franchising, Eric has decided to combine all his labels into one — Eric Choong Kuala Lumpur — with five diffusion lines under this one name.

Given his talent, the main line will be called Eric Choong Brides, supported by Eric Choong Flowers. Every bride needs her

pieces. I will also use my haute couture workmanship in the ready-to-wear collections," he says, referring to the fine handy work that goes into made-to-order pieces.

But that is by no means the end of Eric's world domination plans. Next in line are Eric Choong Homme and something else, which he has not quite decided on.

"It's good for me," he says of setting up a full-on company to handle his business. "If in the future I decide to do something else, I can. The business will still run. I might want to paint more, or do charity work. That's the reason I want to build my name. I want to use my name to do charity work."

Well, Eric is already on his way to becoming a name to be reckoned with in Asia at least. At this year's 19th Malaysian Film Festival, Eric picked up the award for best fashion designer, the first time a Malaysian of Chinese descent has won this accolade.

Being named one of the KL Six will definitely help. He grins and says he is impressed that there is finally a platform for Malaysian fashion designers to grow locally and expand internationally.

"It's a win-win situation." ■

