

Guo Pei is a world-renowned fashion designer known for her intricate embroidery and designs. In 2016, Guo Pei became the first Asian guest member of the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture. (Clothing as Art, 2019) Guo has been only the second Asian to be invited to the prestigious French fashion group. (Guo Pei's monumental fashion-A fusion of couture and culture, 2019) Guo Pei is a visionary who has redefined contemporary Asian fashion. She has empowered herself and her nation through her art with couture. "I think the culture of China, it's just like the blood that runs through my veins, it's my life. The history has greatly enriched my design and is an essential foundation of my work," said Guo Pei. "She believes that her ability to learn from different cultures and designing on a global scale is the key to her success." (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020) Her designs incorporate rich cultural symbolism, such as the use of gold, a color traditionally reserved for emperors, which elevates her garments to more than just fashion; they are works of art and cultural statements. "I could fall into the abyss, or I could rise up into the clouds. I felt I had relinquished control of my designs. I was just creating in this madness," stated Guo Pei (Brettkelly, 2018). Pei told The Straits Time, that "she had no direction in mind when she switched to couture in 2003." (Chai, 2022) Her dedication to craftsmanship, attention to detail, and innovative use of traditional techniques have earned her a place not only in the world of haute couture but also as a cultural ambassador for China. Through her work, Guo Pei has reasserted the value of Chinese artistry, challenged Western dominance in luxury fashion, and inspired a new generation of Chinese designers to embrace their heritage while looking toward the future.

Haute couture, which translates to "high sewing" or "high dressmaking," has its roots in mid-19th century Paris, a city that soon became the global epicenter of luxury fashion. Originating with the creation of custom, high-quality garments, haute couture was initially reserved for aristocrats and the wealthy elite. These unique, handcrafted pieces were painstakingly designed and tailored to the precise measurements of each client, using the finest materials and techniques. The fashion houses that create haute couture today must meet strict criteria set by The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode, including the maintenance of an atelier in Paris and the presentation of a minimum number of original designs each season. Haute couture remains synonymous with exclusivity, craftsmanship, and innovation, continuing to shape the world of high fashion through elaborate shows held in Paris twice a year. (Paris Haute Couture Week 2024: What Does It Really Take For Fashion Pieces To Be Haute Couture?, 2024)

The Cultural Revolution, officially known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a socio-political movement in China led by Mao Zedong and the Communist Party from 1966 to 1976. Its primary goal was to preserve and enforce communist ideology by removing perceived

capitalist and traditional influences from Chinese society. The movement involved mass mobilization, particularly of youth groups known as the Red Guards, who were tasked with challenging authority figures and institutions associated with the "old" culture. Schools and universities were disrupted, and cultural relics, books, and historical landmarks were often destroyed in an effort to reshape society. The Cultural Revolution also involved widespread political campaigns and public trials, leading to social upheaval, displacement, and significant loss of life. The movement concluded with Mao's death in 1976, leaving a lasting impact on China's cultural, social, and political landscape. (Between the great famine and the divinity of Mao: this is what China's Cultural Revolution was like, 2021)

"When I was little, I didn't know what fashion was. The word didn't exist." Guo Pei told Bazaar about how she grew up during the "cultural revolution." (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020) Guo Pei was born in 1967 (About Guo Pei, 2024); being raised in Beijing, her mother and grandmother would take her for evening strolls. (About Guo Pei, 2024) Guo said, "I lived with my grandmother when I was little due to my mother's eyesight." At two, Guo was taught by her mother how to put a thread in the eye of a needle. (Brettkelly, 2018) In preschool, her mother noticed how advanced her drawing skills were. (Brettkelly, 2018) Due to her frequently being with her grandmother, she began to admire traditional Chinese fashion, including what she is currently known for, which is her embroidery.

Guo's mother claimed that Guo, as a child, spent all her holidays learning embroidery and mentioned how she believed it to be useless during the Cultural Revolution. Guo's mother explained during the Yellow is Forbidden documentary that many images of Guo's grandmother were destroyed because of the Cultural Revolution. (Brettkelly, 2018) "My grandmother had to burn all her beautiful clothes and hide her precious jewelry in boxes," The designer divulged (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020). She continued to explain how her grandmother would tell her tales at night about what people wore in the palace and how embroidery was worn by royals and nobles. "She spoke about how beautiful her clothes were when she was young and how intricate the detailing in the embroidery was." (Brettkelly, 2018) "Royal embroidery was lost over a century ago when the Chinese royal family was dismissed and right now we are bringing it back." Guo said (Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal, 2015) Guo divulged in the documentary that she had 300 embroiderers on staff and that 20 years ago in China you couldn't find anyone who did embroidery. When asked where she found her staff she admits they were taught, bringing recognition to her reintroducing the intrinsic skill back to her community and to their Chinese heritage.

Guo Pei takes a lot of inspiration from the Qing dynasty and references it in the document several times for both her ready-to-wear and couture lines. Guo stated, "This had a huge influence on me. Although I've never seen those clothes in my memory, they were the most beautiful things that existed" (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020). China has a rich history of intricate textile art, particularly in embroidery, silk weaving, and gold thread

work. These skills, once at the heart of imperial China, were in danger of being lost due to modernization and industrialization, which placed less value on labor-intensive, hand-crafted techniques. Guo's use of gold and elaborate embroidery echoes the imperial robes of Chinese emperors, emphasizing China's rich royal heritage. In a time when global fashion has often been dominated by Western trends, Guo Pei's emphasis on distinctly Chinese aesthetics has provided a sense of cultural pride. Her work showcases China's historical wealth and artistic legacy, countering the narrative of Western dominance in luxury fashion. Guo graduated from Beijing's Second Light Industry School in 1986 with a degree in fashion design. (Chai, 2022) "When I started studying design in 1982, no one knew their clothes were supposed to be designed," Guo stated. (Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal, 2015) In 1997, Guo Pei left commercial fashion design after ten years. During the early 2000s, Guo slowly increased her brand's awareness until she solidified herself in the couture competition with the debut of "Magnificent Gold" as her first piece of couture in 2006. (Chai, 2022) "Couture is art, an expression that doesn't focus on representing or reflecting reality... It's not designed to be solid. Rather, it should be treated as art, where an artist expresses one's feelings, creations, and understanding of the world." explained Guo Pei (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020)

Guo Pei started Rose studio and created two separate entities of the business, one of couture, and the other, ready-to-wear. Jack Tsao, Guo Pei's husband, told interviewers "She makes clothes to sell, to make clothes she does not want to sell." She told Bazaar (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020) "Part of my work is self-centered, it expresses everything I want without reservation." She continued to express her work by stating " My studio is a place where we create beauty." (Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen, 2020) Guo revealed to Global Time China, "I initially designed ready-to-wear garments for large-scale production, and did not do private custom clothes until one customer asked me to help her design an outfit. I was a bit reluctant at first because I thought the clothes I designed were for many people and now I was going to use my talent for only one person, which was a waste. However, when I saw my customer's temperament had improved after she wore my clothing, I was so pleased and realized I was doing a very meaningful thing - improving my customer's image. This was a different kind of joy than what I got designing mass-produced garments. Gradually, I began to take private orders. At the time, I didn't think about it as haute couture, I was just following my heart and enjoying making my customers look beautiful and gorgeous. After designing a number of outfits and gaining a lot of experience, I realized that I was in the field of haute couture." (Xi, 2019)

Guo Pei credits her supportive team for her success in haute couture. "My employees are artisans. And artisans have their own pride. You need to build an emotional bond with them." Guo Pei stated she also gave credit to her husband for her continued success and introducing her to more fabrics and stated "He is my wings, I would be able to fly without my wings." Rose studio produces nearly three thousand fashion items each year. (Brettkelly, 2018) The brand takes around a 1000 custom orders annually with one fifth of them being bridal wear. (Wanglili,

2019) Rose studio has more than 500 vip members and spent around \$50,000 dollars in one shopping trip to qualify. Guo stated "Our premier members invest from \$150,000 USD to \$750,000 USD. Our most prestigious clients, I respect more than celebrities and sit in the front row at fashion shows." Guo Pie's foundation has been built on designing for China's wealthiest families and for the wives of public figures. "I had wealthier clientele in the communist party, but in recent years, with political change, people have disappeared. They have now been replaced with normal clients." Guo Pie stated. (Brettkelly, 2018) Since her fashion brand has been a symbol for status and nobility amongst the wealthiest of Asia, she continues to find ways to express her creativity.

Pei has created a demi-couture line of wedding dresses targeted towards the middle class consumer. Guo created 200 handmade bridal gowns for the collection. (Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal, 2015) In the interview, she stated "Now an increasing number of younger Chinese people are choosing to be wedded in Chinese bridal outfits," She continued on how she came to this revolutionary idea "In Western fashion, you have bridal styles like Victorian or fishtail. At the time, Qipao was the only style that people associate with Chinese weddings. But I don't think Qipao is grand enough for weddings. So I began to have this idea that I should create modern China's own wedding outfit." Guo stresses the importance of remembering her heritage and its influence on her work. "I have been designing for four decades. I know too well how China has changed. It wasn't until the twenty fourth century that we began to have a sense of self awareness, and it took another decade before we began to have a clear understanding of our own identity." (Guo Pei on Redefining China's Own Bridalwear, 2022) Guo during the debut of her ready-to-wear collection stated "When we go to the West, Europe or America, we have to wear clothes that are sophisticated. We don't have their bone structure or complexion. We don't recommend you wearing that because it doesn't suit, you would be laughed at overseas." (Brettkelly, 2018) Women's Wear Daily stated " She makes garments with techniques old and new from around the world and is pushing for a shift in Chinese society from wearing Western styles to reimagined Chinese traditional ensembles for the main ceremony." (Guo Pei on Redefining China's Own Bridalwear, 2022) A client from Yellow is Forbidden stated "Her designs are different from those of others, she devotes her heart. She will make you different designs for specific occasions, she doesn't just follow the trends." A close established source reassured the designer stating "Your influence is enormous. You make Chinese women look powerful." (Brettkelly, 2018) "I love my country and my heritage; no matter where I was, I never thought about changing my nationality." Guo Pei proudly stated."Because of a special period, two generations did not know what a bride should wear...The younger generation has completely blended in with Western fashion. We shouldn't forget we are Chinese." Guo explained. (Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal, 2015)

Guo Pie's emergence onto the couture stage began with the debut of the Da Jin dress. The dress costs about one million and is known for its refined embroidery work. The dress took 500,000

hours within 2 years. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2022) With 100 embroiderers hired for the task, it took 5 months to do the embroidery. (Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal, 2015) "When I was eight, I asked Granny for a yellow dress and she got very mad at me. She told me, "Yellow is forbidden," said Guo Pei. (Brettkelly, 2018) "As a creator and artist, there is no greater honor or privilege than to share my creativity with a wider audience... I hope that it will bring greater awareness and understanding of my life's passion, and convey Chinese culture, traditions and show the new face of contemporary China," says Guo. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco: Guo Pei - Couture Fantasy to Transform the Legion of Honor, 2022) The rich use of gold fabric and intricate embroidery recalls the luxury and opulence of the Qing Dynasty and other eras of Chinese royalty, where gold symbolizes wealth, status, and power. Gold is a color reserved for emperors in traditional Chinese culture, often used in the robes of emperors and empresses as a symbol of divine rule. The "Da Jin" dress directly references this imperial symbolism, evoking the splendor and grandeur of historical Chinese courts. The "Da Jin" dress is an homage to the intricate craftsmanship of Chinese artisans from centuries past, who dedicated their lives to perfecting embroidery and textile-making. The embroidery and motifs represent the unity of heaven and earth, as well as balance and harmony—concepts central to Chinese philosophy. The "Da Jin" dress, along with other works by Guo Pei, gained global attention when she became the first Chinese designer invited to join the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris. The "Da Jin" dress by Guo Pei is more than a fashion statement; it's an intricate tapestry of Chinese history, cultural symbols, and unparalleled craftsmanship. Through this dress, Guo Pei encapsulates her philosophy of creating garments that transcend time, blending ancient cultural motifs with the innovation and daring of modern haute couture. The dress is a powerful symbol of China's rich heritage, while also asserting itself as a global work of art within the ever-evolving world of fashion.

Guo Pei has taken a Euro flare since her time devoted to Haute Couture. One notable example is the spring/summer collection, which was inspired by both Asian and European history. The collection featured voluminous skirts, dramatic headpieces, and intricate lacework. Guo was left speechless to the beauty of the art within the church used for her upcoming event. (Brettkelly, 2018) Even though she has a soft light feminine demeanor she still has a business woman exterior when faced with the invitation, she was concerned about couture not fitting her style. Guo accepted the challenge of the historically honored group with 158 years. By showcasing the richness of Chinese textile arts and design traditions, she has opened up new possibilities for what haute couture can represent. Her designs are a celebration of diversity, and they highlight the fact that luxury fashion is not confined to one geographic region or cultural tradition. She was asked how her work represents China's haute couture. She replied, "It doesn't, I'm just a designer. Not a Nation." Guo understood how to balance the line between honor and renovation while still maintaining her pride. Acknowledging Haute Couture due to its french origin "owns this official stamp of recognition" (Brettkelly, 2018) After her couture exhibition, she told her husband, "I should still continue down the runway, even if I don't make it. I will seem timid and

lacking confidence." Even though the designer stands fearless and prepared, she expressed her previous concern stating "If I give the impression that I am famous because of celebrities, then no one will take me seriously" Guo also stated "Haute Couture is very exact." She spoke how being an invited guest has felt like winning an honor due to it being a very protected group, she expressed, "It has such a status. It can never be replaced." (Brettkelly, 2018) With the noise of trying to maintain the balance between respecting the nature of Couture and her heritage Guo admitted "I have long forgotten the boundary between what's ours and what's theirs. I don't care what are the main styles of Chinese embroidery. I use whatever can help me reach my goal. Maybe 50 years from now, people will call it the Guo Pei style of embroidery." (Guo Pei on Redefining China's Own Bridalwear, 2022)

Over the past 20 years, Guo Pei has redefined haute couture by blending traditional Chinese craftsmanship with modern innovation. From her breakthrough 2006 Samsara collection, which introduced the world to her opulent, hand-embroidered gowns, to her 2015 global recognition when Rihanna wore her "Da Jin" dress at the Met Gala, and other collections, such as the 2012 "Legend of the Dragon" and Fall/Winter 2019/2020 futuristic "Alternate Universe," highlight her mastery of embroidery, bold silhouettes, and innovative materials. By honoring China's imperial past while embracing contemporary themes, Guo Pei's fashion shows have become cultural spectacles, celebrating both artistic heritage and cutting-edge design. The documentary, "The Yellow is Forbidden," highlights the designer's emphasis on family and her desire for a balanced personal life. It also showcases her appreciation for the arts, particularly past fashion designers, which reveals her natural historian nature. It is commendable to witness a woman's unwavering dedication to empowering women in her nation while simultaneously driving innovation in couture. However, Guo's presence in Haute Couture raises a pertinent question for the contemporary fashion industry: as nations advance and engage in global fashion competition, will Haute Couture maintain its central position if it fails to become more inclusive? As the world moves away from a Eurocentric perspective and nations embrace their cultural roots to gain a competitive edge, it remains to be seen how this shift will impact the fashion landscape.

Guo Pei is a visionary fashion designer who has profoundly reshaped contemporary Asian fashion by merging traditional Chinese artistry with modern haute couture. Her work is deeply inspired by China's cultural heritage, especially the Qing Dynasty, and she has played a key role in reintroducing traditional techniques that were nearly lost due to modernization and historical events like the Cultural Revolution. Her career highlights how she not only preserves but also innovates upon China's rich legacy of embroidery, silk weaving, and gold-thread work, with one of her most prestigious works the "Da Jin" dress, being one of her most iconic creation. Guo's journey into haute couture began as she transitioned from mass production to custom-made designs, initially reluctant but later finding joy in creating pieces that transform the fashion world. She has become an ambassador for Chinese culture in the modern luxury fashion world. With reintroducing Chinese bridal wear, she has not only revived traditional Chinese fashion but

also modernized it to appeal to a younger generation. Guo Pei's designs are not just about aesthetics; they symbolize the resurgence of Chinese cultural pride and craftsmanship, asserting China's place in the global luxury fashion market. While deeply honoring her heritage, she remains unbound by cultural confines, stating that her work transcends national identity. Her career embodies a delicate balance between respecting tradition and embracing innovation, ultimately carving out a unique space in the world of haute couture.

References:

About Guo Pei. Bio.Guo Pei. (2024.).

Retrieved from:

<https://www.guopei.com/bio>

Between the great famine and the divinity of Mao: this is what China's Cultural Revolution was like. (2021,October 11). CE Noticias Financieras English.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a63TW-M1J1-DY1R-B1VD-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Brettkelly, P. (2018, January 1). Yellow is forbidden (2018). Tubi.

Retrieved from:

https://tubitv.com/movies/707826/yellow-is-forbidden?start=true&tracking=google-feed&utm_source=google-feed

Chai, A. (2019, June 21). Culture meets couture; Couturier Guo Pei showcases her Chinese roots through her gowns, some of which are on display at an exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum. The Straits Times (Singapore).

Retrieved from

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5WCS-NBG1-DYX4-02JY-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Chow, S. (2023, April 5). *Inner Worlds | Guo Pei*. Art Basel.

Retrieved from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_iFPRWbWno

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. (2022, June 3). Deep Dive: Guo Pei's Da Jin Dress. YouTube.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBTI8FNIIIE>

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco: Guo Pei - Couture Fantasy to Transform the Legion of Honor. *Targeted News Service*. (2022, February 8). Targeted News Service.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a64RF-F291-DYG2-R0S0-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>

Guo Pei's monumental fashion-A fusion of couture and culture. (2019, July 22). *Philippines Daily Inquirer*.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=>

[urn%3acontentItem%3a5WMS-H801-JCH9-G4RR-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618](https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5WMS-H801-JCH9-G4RR-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618).

Guo Pei: Inside the world of China's couture queen. (2020, January 22). Harper's Bazaar UK. YouTube.

Retrieved from:

<https://youtu.be/iIy3ugkZloI?si=2TH2dBv5DRQe7IWT>

Guo Pei on Redefining China's Own Bridalwear. (April 6, 2022). WWD.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a655D-SM91-JB0P-B0GF-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Huang, M., & The Wall Street Journal. (2015, November 25). *Meet Guo Pei, China's First Haute Couture Designer*. YouTube.

Retrieved from:

https://youtu.be/_pJTNQsvbcI?si=YKVFZReTTj242Yu0

Paris Haute Couture Week 2024: What Does It Really Take For Fashion Pieces To Be Haute Couture?. (2024, June 26). *Times Now Digital*. Times Now.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a6CBJ-YCF1-JCMC-W0MY-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Wanglili. (2019, June 13). Spotlight: Chinese couturiere Guo Pei's works to be on show in Singapore. Xinhua General News Service.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5WBC-JT81-DY91-H03J-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Xi, Chen. (2019, August 1). Clothing as art. *Global Times* (China).

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a5WPM-B6T1-F11P-X16M-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.

Zhu, L. (2022, April 21). Fashion weaves ties. *China Daily (Hong Kong Edition)*.

Retrieved from:

<https://advance-lexis-com.citytech.ezproxy.cuny.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn%3acontentItem%3a658K-C171-F11P-X2X8-00000-00&context=1519360&identityprofileid=N5VPDM51618>.