

FEATURES

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Engineering fashion

Goji Lin studied to be a mechanical engineer, but is now one of Taiwan's most famous fashion designers, known for his over-the-top — but still sexy — creations

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER



Switching from mechanical engineering to high fashion seems like an unlikely career path, but that swerving road has led Goji Lin (林國基) to fame. The designer is renowned for his over-the-top creations — he has sent models down the runway in sleek glass corsets and encased in giant lantern-shaped bamboo frames. Lin credits his engineering acumen for his style trademarks: elaborate construction, innovative manipulation of fabric and vivid colors.

Lin studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City and the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in England, but he says he draws inspiration from different facets of Taiwan's culture. His recent designs have highlighted Taiwan's ecology, Chinese calligraphy and the computer industry.

Alexander McQueen and Coco Chanel count among Lin's fashion heroes. The two may seem like complete opposites, but both are seen as sartorial revolutionaries who changed attitudes toward fashion. Lin says he hopes to do the same with traditional Chinese clothing. The neckline of an evening gown, for instance, takes its cues from the *qipao's* stand-up collar, but dips below the breastbone; rows of tiny pin tucks add structure and texture to the matte satin. A hand-painted peony blossom in the style of classic Chinese watercolors is hidden by an overlay of tissue-thin black chiffon until the wearer moves.

Before switching careers, Lin also considered interior design and fine art, his first passion, but decided on fashion because "it was easier to start up a clothing business." He still maintains his interest in painting; last month, Lin's first one-man art exhibition was held at Alot of People (一票人票畫空間). Called "Unbutton," it examined Lin's fascination with this most humble of clothing embellishments.

The designer also derives inspiration for his sexy gowns from one of the world's most famous women — Barbie. Lin proudly owns Taiwan's largest collection of the fashion doll.



A former mechanical engineer, Goji Lin now applies his past experience to constructing his signature sensual evening wear.

PHOTO: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES

Lin has gained a certain amount of notoriety for his outrageous designs and unusual hobby and, with his gregarious nature, is a frequent guest on talk shows and has become something of a media personality. Just before his interview with the *Taipei Times*, Lin shot a public service announcement for a charity that serves the impoverished. Surrounded by evening gowns in his Anhe Road (安和路) storefront, Lin talked about his passion for Taiwan's native flowers, the mechanics of clothing design and, of course, his little plastic muse.

Taipei Times: You'll be showing at Hong Kong Fashion Week [which takes place this week]. Where did the inspiration for your most recent collection come from?

Goji Lin: I'm still working with flowers that are native to Taiwan. They are fascinating — the way their stems are shaped, their petals, their colors, the different moods that they evoke. I hope I can use this motif to express what is unique about Taiwan and its culture. There are a lot of gorgeous flowers here, but even Taiwanese people don't know their names. My theme is "conversing with flowers." It's about getting to know them better. Hopefully we'll develop a greater appreciation of them and not let them become rare or go extinct. That's another reason I'm placing the spotlight on these plants with my designs.

TT: You had a fashion show last year in Vancouver [at the Telus TaiwanFest] that also focused on Taiwan's native flowers. What drew you to them in the first place?

GL: At first it was because Taiwan's Council for Cultural Affairs invited us to create some designs based on the flowers, as part of a campaign to draw attention to them. At that time I was familiar with a few, like Taiwan cherry blossoms, butterfly orchids and azaleas. I'd seen them while hiking in the mountains but never really taken a closer look.

Before I became a designer, however, I studied to be a mechanical engineer. I really like paying attention to the construction of things. I took apart a lot of blossoms to get familiar with them. That way, you can take a closer look at each and really understand the beauty of each part. I'm inspired not only by the colors of each flower, but also by their petals, stamens, stems and the way everything connects to one another.

That's how I work when I'm looking for inspiration

or studying traditional clothing. For example, I like to take vintage clothing apart and then put its back together again to study its construction. But when I put things back together, I don't just remake them. I'll try to think of how to invent something new using the same pieces. It's all about deconstruction, experimenting and coming up with even more interesting silhouettes.

TT: Is that because you have a mechanical engineering background? How did you go from mechanical engineering to fashion design? The two seem very disparate.

GL: Mechanical engineering was never something I was passionate about, but as a student in Taiwan's educational system, I didn't have a lot of options. Your choice of universities and subjects depends on your scores in a few exams. But even when I was studying engineering, I never let go of my interest in art or beautiful things.

I started sketching when I was in fifth grade. Because my grades were pretty bad, drawing was a source of encouragement for me, because my talent was recognized and I won some awards. That really solidified my interest in art.

In university, I kept drawing and I even made it into a part-time job. I'd do sketches and sell them to people. And I kept developing my own ideas about aesthetics.

TT: Though it wasn't your first choice, do you think your mechanical engineering training continues to influence your fashion design?

GJ: Definitely. I'm interested in the mechanics of clothing design. I think what makes my things unique is the construction. You can see evidence of my background in that, because my clothing is more three-dimensional. I love working with fabric to give it new texture and shapes and I think that's because of my previous job.

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There are all sorts of untried possibilities out there, and ways to express what is unique about [Taiwanese] culture.

— Goji Lin, fashion designer

Goji Lin's engineering background is evident in his elaborate designs. Smaller details, like multiple rows of pin tucks, unusual pleating and unique silhouettes, reflect his interest in the mechanics of clothing design.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF GOJI LIN