

FASHION

The Hub started last year as a trade show for international brands. This year, however, it's Asian designers who drew the most buzz, writes Charley Lanyon

For two days last week Lai Chi Kok was the unlikely location for the hip and happening in fashion. Designers, buyers, and retailers descended on the warehouse district in Kowloon for the third edition of The Hub, one of Hong Kong's most-watched fashion fairs and trade shows.

Started last year by Richard Hobbs and Peter Caplowe, The Hub was meant to be a non-traditional trade show for niche, mostly Western, fashion brands hoping to gain a presence in Asia. At the same time, they saw that multi-label stores were taking off in China and hoped The Hub would provide a forum for Asian retailers to meet international brands without having to travel to Europe or the US.

This year, however, things were different. Aside from relocating from the stultifying AsiaWorld-Expo halls to a trendier industry space in Lai Chi Kok, the biggest change was in the range of designers. The usual better-known European and American labels were there, but there was also a group of young designers from Asia.

"When we started, the vision was to bring international fashion brands to Asia," says Hobbs. "The difference that we've seen [this year] is a lot of interest from both local and regional designers who needed a place to showcase themselves."

On Wednesday, the first two floors where most of the American and European brands were located were fairly quiet. The real action was happening upstairs on the 10th floor at The Greenhouse, an area set aside for up-and-coming local designers along with bigger Asian names like Chinese designer Vega Zaishi Wang and Hong Kong designer Six Lee.

Dana Maulana, founder of Indonesian brand Danjyo Hiyoji, saw The Hub on



Clockwise from left: shoppers check out the scene at The Hub; menswear designer Six Lee; Amy Cheung of Handkerchief, showing off her political shirts; knitwear designer Nannan Kong. Photos: Wallace Ko



On the right rack

YouTube at home in Jakarta. This is his first year taking part and he's already making a splash. In the early afternoon, many buyers, mostly from the mainland, had expressed interest in his line.

While mainland buyers stalked the racks, European fashion fans eagerly pawed

through collections of new local designs and crowded around Wang and Lee as they gave interviews for local television cameras.

The attention paid to local designers was a potent symbol of the changing trends among Asian consumers. Time and time again in conferences and talks, organised in conjunction with the China Fashion Forum, attendees were reminded that the days of blind mass consumption and label-obsession were over. On the mainland in particular, today's consumers want clothes that emphasise their individuality. They flock to small brands and local designs.

These changes have encouraged local designers to jump into the mainland market, and led to a proliferation of small independent labels in China.

Hobbs remembers not too long ago, regional designers had to travel to Europe to court Asian retailers. Today, The Hub is in the bizarre position of

The difference this year is a lot of interest from both local and regional designers

RICHARD HOBBS, CO-FOUNDER, THE HUB

introducing Asian brands to their own markets.

Take Nannan Kong. The Chinese designer has based her Lou de Nannan brand of funky, brightly coloured knitwear in Beijing, and though her clothes are carried in stores in many Chinese cities, she says she's still more comfortable with the European market.

"Before, we

[designers] lived in Paris and we started in Paris," Kong says.

"I think I know the European market but I don't really know the Asian market."

Hong Kong designers such as Amy Cheung, the creative director of the Hong Kong brand Handkerchief, are also eager to establish a presence on the mainland but remain unsure of the Chinese consumer.

"I hope to be able to meet more Asian retailers and buyers because we have not been exposed to Asian markets," Cheung says. "I always present in New York so we know people

there but I actually don't know so many people locally."

Cheung is in a particularly tricky position. Her clothes are political, and often critical of China. Her trips to show in New York have been sponsored by the Hong Kong Trade and Economic Council, and she says one of the requirements of her sponsorship was that she "would not show these political things".

At The Hub, there were no such restrictions, and she decorated her booth proudly with a row of black T-shirts each sporting a large white letter.

Together they spelled, "Democracy is now here".

She happily explained to passers-by that the idea for the shirts was inspired by a Hong Kong politician who was turned away at the

Shenzhen border for wearing a pro-democracy shirt. With her shirts, a group of people could pass through customs unnoticed and later spell out the political message.

Cheung makes no secret of her desire to subvert authority. When it was suggested recently that she should not mention Hong Kong's massive July 1 protests in China, she created a top with a fringe of plastic tabs. On each tab, written in braille, were headlines relating to July 1 from newspapers around the world.

She laughs off the suggestion that her political messages could be off-putting to mainland buyers.

"Asian retailers have been very interested," she says. "I actually feel that China is very open."

That, or maybe something has been lost in translation.

"I don't think they get this yet," she says, pointing to a shirt. "They don't know English." charley.lanyon@scmp.com



Japanese designer Chitose Abe (left) is known for her hybrid approach.



Richard Hobbs (left) and Peter Caplowe, co-founders of The Hub.

A heavy dose of mix and match

Jing Zhang
jing.zhang@scmp.com

It has been a slow burn for designer Chitose Abe, who started her label Sacai back in 1999, after spending eight years as a pattern cutter and designer at Comme des Garçons.

At the start, she sold pieces out of her apartment in Tokyo. She then moved West, looking for investors who would take a chance on a young designer. Fifteen years on, the Japanese designer is earning compliments from the likes of Anna Wintour and Karl Lagerfeld.

Lane Crawford's ears have pricked up, too. On September 4, Sacai will launch a capsule collection available at luxury department stores in China.

The collection, dramatically called Sacai "THE" composition,

will appear in a pop-up space in Lane Crawford IFC, and will showcase 17 new pieces, along with Sacai's autumn-winter 2014 collection.

As ever, the line is true to Abe's signature style of playing with contrasting textures.

While panels of a leather biker jacket sewn onto the hem of a peacoat might seem gratuitous, it's a combination that will always make an impact.

For the capsule collection, Abe sticks to the



label's core colour scheme, dishing out 11 navy blue pieces for women, and six for men.

This time she's played it safe. Usually known for her uncanny combinations, the biggest juxtaposition you'll get is in the chiffon pleats on a pair of culottes, or in the heavy gold chain necklaces on a series of square-cut tees and jumpers.

Sacai's usual suspects return for autumn-winter, and there are plenty of moments where Abe offers up the hybrid garments for which she is known.

Asymmetric outerwear is a theme of the

season, seen in the patchwork combination of a tweed trench, leather vest, and oversized fur collar.

Elsewhere, Mongolian sheepskin hangs off biker jackets, while down-filled pockets accessorise long, traditional coats, creating an eccentric parka fusion.

Despite supplying to more than 90 international retailers, Abe still owns 100 per cent of Sacai, which means no constraints in her creative direction.

This, she says, is why she has been able to progress with such stealth, after so many years in the industry.

She is inspired by her surroundings, following whatever aesthetic inclination drives her at the time.

Lane Crawford will also carry the label's three other collections, Sacai, Sacai luck and Sacai men's.