

'FASHION MAKES PEOPLE NERVOUS'

American *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour became a household name when *The Devil Wears Prada* hit the best-seller lists and the box office. Style's high priestess tells **Gary Jones** on a visit to China why fashion matters, and why she won't be changing her look any time soon

lfin in stature and instantly recognisable beneath her trademark pageboy bob haircut and Willy Wonka-esque sunglasses, Anna Wintour strides towards the Central Academy of Fine Arts' auditorium on a suitably frosty morning in the Chinese capital. Her reputation precedes her like a crackling and hostile storm front.

The British-born editor-in-chief of American *Vogue* is the most powerful and polarising figure in her industry. She has been slated as demanding, imperious and intimidating; labelled as ruthlessly ambitious and occasionally, malicious.

Wintour does not suffer fools at all, let alone gladly, according to one former assistant. And "she doesn't do small talk".

Inside the auditorium, a chock-full house of Chinese design students has rallied to participate in a rare question-and-answer forum with high-fashion incarnate. They fidget skittishly while the press pack huddles in anticipation of an "Icy Wintour", rather than a "Nuclear Wintour" (her distaste for that unflattering sobriquet is on the record).

Ninety minutes later and the dispersing congregation is nonplussed. Was Meryl Streep's Cruella De Vil-like fashion editor-cum-horror in *The Devil Wears Prada* really modelled on Wintour? While flanked on the Beijing stage by *Vogue's* poised director of special events, Sylvana Soto-Ward; its businesslike fashion news director, Mark Holgate; and *Vogue China's* effervescent editor-in-chief, Angelica Cheung, a composed Wintour has had the crowd eating out of her expensively manicured hand. She has been gracious, charming and engaged.

"They were all so polite and well-behaved," Wintour says later while settling in for our post-event tête-à-tête. "That's quite unusual." The supposedly iron-fisted tastemaker disarmingly enquires from where her interviewer originates and how long he has lived in China. Couture's uncontested über-führer, it emerges, is not at all averse to chummy chitchat.

It is her first visit to China, and she seems impressed. "I wouldn't underestimate anything about this country right now," says Wintour. Her

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impenetrable shades remain, as they will all morning (Wintour's sunglasses are fitted with corrective lenses. She has referred to them as her "armour", and where would she put them, anyway? She doesn't care for handbags). "I believe there is a fashion week in Beijing. Whether China will ever have a fashion week on the same scale as what we have in Paris or Milan or in New York, I couldn't say, but growth here has already been so extraordinary. It's fantastic."

She says that visiting the Beijing offices of *Vogue China* reminded her of when she started out in London. "I was working for *Harpers & Queen* at the time. We had a tiny staff, and basically you had to do everything: take pictures, write captions, cover the market, do the layouts, follow up ... To me, that was the best training. When I came to the US and American *Vogue*, I discovered we had a shoe editor, and a lady in her 90s who was the fabrics editor. There was an underwear editor ... there were so many layers, and I think that's not always helpful to understanding the industry."

it is soon apparent that, with over two decades at the helm of American *Vogue* under her belt, the 61-year-old Wintour is a polished operator. She answers questions in broad, diplomatic strokes, and she parries when she deems it necessary. Wintour has, after all, frequently been a lightning rod for tirades against her field, notably on issues such as fur ("Fur is still a part of fashion, so *Vogue* will continue to report on it"), skinny

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models ("We need to reverse the tyranny of sample clothes that just barely fit a 13-year-old on the edge of puberty") and elitism (Wintour has been accused of, or credited with, wiping out the early 1990s grunge look).

She is of course so much more than a magazine editor now. Thanks to the films *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The September Issue*, she is the only *Vogue* editor to become a household name. What does she think of the films? "I enjoyed the movies," she says. "I thought that they were highly entertaining, and they were extremely kind to me because, of course, actually I beat all my assistants, I



Anna Wintour was hosted on her Beijing trip by Angelica Cheung, her counterpart in China.

lock them up in cupboards, and none of them gets paid."

Wintour hints at an aloof indifference to unsolicited public or media opinion when asked how *Vogue* sustains its influence and clout (the US edition sells more than 1.2 million copies a month).

And whether Wintour had anything to do with it or not, the fashion world is abuzz over the Condé Nast *Vogue* empire, as Corine Roitfeld, the editor of *Vogue Paris*, abruptly resigned last month after 10 years in the job.

"It's a particularly interesting time right now," Wintour muses. "Everybody seems to think they are a fashion editor, or a photographer, and everyone has an opinion and access to fashion in a way that they never had before. That makes our job particularly challenging and even more useful because there is an awful lot of noise out there; everyone thinks they are an expert."

She goes on to say that Tom Ford "so hates" the internet's influence on fashion that he invited only 100 guests to his September show in New York. "I think Tom has a very valid point. Sometimes women feel that clothes are overexposed by the amount of coverage they get online."

Wintour has also mentored designers, such as John Galliano. "When I first met John, he did not have enough money to take a taxi. I would lend him money for fares; he would sleep in my hotel room. I used to fly him over from London to New York because I felt it so important for him to meet the right people. I helped him find investors. We

really went to everybody and everywhere to support John because we realised he was a unique talent, and it's *Vogue's* responsibility to nurture and support talent as much as we possibly can.

She is aware of how crucial her role is in encouraging new talent. "The most important thing is to be honest. Designers have friends, the press and whoever rushing backstage to tell them they are wonderful. That may be very nice to hear, but it's not always constructive for someone trying to develop a business. *Vogue* always tries to be helpful, and to tell the truth. It's equally non-constructive to completely knock somebody."

"We gently try to explain our point of view, and what we think they might try and change, or what a collection might be lacking. Then they usually go ahead and do whatever they want to do anyway, but at least we told them what we think."

While her visit to Beijing will prove to be part pleasure (taking in sightseeing on the Great Wall, in the Forbidden City and at the galleries of the 798 Art District) and part fact-finding mission, Wintour sees her role at *Vogue* as semi-ambassadorial for the US fashion industry, and she acknowledges that American brands have been relatively tardy in entering the China market compared to their

European counterparts. "Dolce&Gabbana ... I know they were just here in Shanghai. They told me it was their first trip. They loved it. The American design community cannot afford to ignore the strength of this market, and my understanding is that there are a lot of retail properties being looked at right now by key American designers. It's going to be a huge market for them. There's a limit to the amount of growth possible in the US, so we all have to look at the emerging countries for expansion."

Previously, Wintour has opined that politics and fashion make uncomfortable bedfellows. In a 2006 interview, she said: "Washington is frightened of fashion. I think the British government is the same. People in political office tend to get extremely nervous about fashion because they feel it's frivolous. And they don't want to look too elitist or too silly."

recalling this statement in Beijing, Wintour grins. "Well, actually, I think, thanks to the First Lady in the US, that has all changed," she says. "Michelle Obama really has been a standard-bearer for fashion. She obviously enjoys it, and she wears it so well. She has been so incredibly supportive of young American talent, of designers like Jason Woo, Derek Lam, Narciso Rodríguez, Michael Kors."

Wintour is adamant there is more to fashion than clothes. "Fashion does not exist in a vacuum," she says. "Fashion reflects culture; it reflects our times. A great fashion photograph can tell you just as much about what is going on in our world as any headline or TV report, so go out, go to the galleries, go to the theatre, read books, travel ... all of that will come back to reward you later."

And of the fashion she has witnessed on Beijing's nippy winter streets? "I notice a lot of really interesting hair, I have to say. The colours and cuts are fantastic." Wintour suddenly becomes the most animated she has been all morning, and for a brief moment reveals an endearing glimpse of the shy teenager who rebelled against her school dress code by taking up the hemlines of her skirts. "It seems to me that, among young people, there has been an explosion in self-expression here. It's great."

It is clear that her passion for fashion is as strong as ever. "I feel I'm the luckiest person in the world. I have the best staff in the world. I've been doing the job for 100 years and I still can't wait to get to the office every morning. The wonderful thing about fashion is that it changes all the time. If you are working for a magazine like *Vogue*, you have the opportunity to work with the most incredible talent."

The Wintour file

BORN November 3, 1949, London



1989

SCHOOLING North London Collegiate School

FAMILY Father Charles Wintour (a former editor of the *Evening Standard*, London, and the original "Nuclear Wintour"), and mother Trego Baker, an American. Four siblings. One brother died in a car crash when he was a child. Wintour married the child psychiatrist David Shaffer in 1984 and they had two children, Charles and Katherine. They divorced in 1999.

FIRST JOB At the trendsetting Biba boutique in London when she was 15. Her father pulled strings to get her the job. As she says in the documentary *The September Issue*: "I think my father really decided for me that I should work in fashion".

FIRST JOB IN FASHION JOURNALISM As an editorial assistant at *Harpers & Queen*, where she told colleagues that one day she wanted to edit *Vogue*.

FIRED FROM *Harper's Bazaar* in New York in 1975, where she was a junior fashion editor. Apparently, her shoots were too innovative.



1990

EARNED HER NICKNAME, "NUCLEAR WINTOUR" At British *Vogue*. After taking over in 1985, she shed staff and became a far more hands-on editor than the previous incumbent had been.

BECAME EDITOR OF AMERICAN VOGUE In 1988. Her editorship has been controversial, especially over her pro-fur stance. Also known for trying to control cover girls; she reportedly told Oprah Winfrey to lose weight before her cover shoot. She also refused to follow an ultimatum from Armani to feature more of his clothes on her editorial pages. Armani caved in.



1990

HOBBY Plays tennis every morning before work.

WINTOUR ON FASHION "There is something about fashion that can make people really nervous."

WHAT'S WITH THE HAIRCUT AND THE SHADES? She has sported her a bob since she was 14, and always goes back to it after trying something else. Her glasses are prescribed.

AND THAT FILM? Well, most observers agree the character of Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* was partly based on her, but no one has admitted she is quite that bad. However, she was the victim of a real-life murder plot by Peter Braunstein, a reporter who had once worked for her.



2007

MOST TELLING QUOTE ABOUT HER "At some stage in her career, Anna Wintour stopped being Anna Wintour and became 'Anna Wintour', at which point, like wings of a stately home, she closed off large sections of her personality to the public", wrote Emma Brockes in *The Guardian* in May 2006.



2010

ANOTHER TELLING QUOTE ABOUT HER "Anna happens to be a friend of mine", said the journalist Barbara Amiel, "a fact which is of absolutely no help in coping with the cold panic that grips me whenever we meet."

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Wintour in Beijing

As Asian models take the world's catwalks by storm, the industry's most recognisable tastemaker talks to **Gary Jones** about China's rising profile.



Elfin in stature and instantly recognisable beneath her iconic pageboy bob and Willy Wonka sunglasses, Anna Wintour strides into the Central Academy of Fine Arts on a frosty morning in Beijing. Her formidable reputation precedes her like a crackling and hostile storm front.

The British-born editor-in-chief of American *Vogue* is arguably the most powerful and polarising figure in the fashion industry. She has been called demanding, imperious and intimidating, and described as ruthlessly ambitious and occasionally malicious. Wintour does not suffer fools at all, let alone gladly, according to one former assistant. And "she doesn't do small talk".

Inside the academy's auditorium, a packed house of students has rallied to participate in a rare question-and-answer forum with high-fashion incarnate. They fidget while the press pack huddles in anticipation for "Nuclear Wintour" (an unflattering sobriquet she hates).

An hour later and the dispersing congregation is cheerfully nonplussed. Was Meryl Streep's Cruella de Vil-like fashion editor in *The Devil Wears Prada* really modelled on the demure and gracious Wintour (who attended the movie's New York premiere wearing the film's eponymous fashion label)? On stage the charming and composed living legend had the crowd eating from her no doubt expensively manicured hand.

"They were all so polite and well-behaved," Wintour says while settling in for a post-event tête-à-tête. The supposed ultimate taskmaster and iron-fisted tastemaker

disarmingly inquires where her interviewer hails from – couture's uncontested uber-fuhrer, it emerges, is not at all averse to chit-chat.

Her impenetrable shades remain, as they will all morning – they are fitted with corrective lenses and she has referred to them as her "armour". Where would she put them anyway? Wintour does not care for handbags.

It is Wintour's first visit to China and she is impressed. "I wouldn't underestimate anything about this country right now," she says. "Whether China will ever have a fashion week on the same scale as Paris or Milan or New York, I couldn't say, but growth here has already been so extraordinary. It's fascinating. There is such an explosion going on. It's fantastic. There is such appetite for fashion."

Wintour, 61, answers questions in broad, diplomatic strokes and parries when she deems it necessary. She has, after all, frequently been a lightning rod for tirades against her field. On fur, she has said, "Fur is still a part of fashion, so *Vogue* will continue to report on it"; on elitism Wintour has been accused of or credited with wiping out the early-1990s grunge look; on the waif-model trend, she has come around to the view that, "We need to reverse the tyranny of sample clothes that just barely fit a 13-year-old on the edge of puberty."

Asked for her perspective on up-and-coming Chinese designers, she admits she does not know enough about them to comment. The topic of Asian models, however, is perfectly timed for her and *Vogue*.

"It's incredible how that has changed in the past year or two," she says. "You see so many more Asian models on runways these days."

Wintour enthusiastically flips through this month's issue of *Vogue* to a lavish spread shot by acclaimed fashion photographer Steven Meisel, who was behind Madonna's notorious 1992 book *Sex*. Under the headline "Asia Major", the shoot features eight models: China's Du Juan, Liu Wen, Bonnie Chen and Lily Zhi, Koreans Hyoni Kang, So Young Kang and Lee Hyun and Japan's Tao Okamoto.

The text describes how Asians have increasingly catwalked into the limelight in recent years.

"Grace Coddington, my creative director, and I were discussing it when we came back from the collections last season," says Wintour. "We were particularly impressed by Oscar de la Renta's collection [in which Liu Wen appeared] and we wanted to do something special. Grace said, 'You know what, I think we should shoot a whole story with Asian girls.' Five years ago this would not have been possible."

The resulting shoot, however, has been criticised. On news website Huffington Post, contributor Disgrasian (self-described as, "Two Asian-American chicks who grew up in the heartland") took umbrage at *Vogue's* assertion that Asian models are "redefining traditional concepts of beauty". Disgrasian wrote, "There are plenty of places in the world where, traditionally speaking, Asian women



have long been considered beautiful. Like in, um, Asia, for example.” Such grumblings have since been mulled over on blogs, such as those of Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, *The Financial Times* and *New York Magazine*.

Vogue China’s Beijing-born editor-in-chief, Angelica Cheung, bristles at such comments and springs to her mentor’s defence.

“At *Vogue* China, we have been making huge efforts to promote Chinese models overseas and it is great to see such real support from my American colleagues,” she says. “They actually do something about it instead of just talking. I find the criticisms irrelevant because it is so easy to criticise others who make an effort. I would say to any detractors, ‘Show us what you have done to support Asian models.’”

During the students’ forum, Wintour hinted at her indifference to unsolicited public or media opinion when asked how *Vogue* sustains its influence and clout. (The United States edition sells more than 1.2 million copies a month).

“It’s a particularly interesting time right now,” she said. “Everybody seems to think they are a fashion editor, or a photographer, and everyone has an opinion and access to fashion in a way they never had before. That makes our job particularly challenging and even more useful because there is an awful lot of noise out there. Everyone thinks they are an expert.”

She went on, saying Tom Ford “so hates” the internet’s influence on fashion that he invited only 100 guests to his September show in New York. Reporters from daily newspapers were excluded.

“None of us were allowed to photograph the collection, although we managed to sneak around that with Grace’s wonderful drawings,” Wintour recalled. “But [Ford] gave *Vogue* an exclusive for that particular collection because he is trying to bring back into the industry some sense of fashion being special again and I think he has a very valid point. Sometimes women feel that clothes are over-exposed by the amount of [coverage] they get online.”

While her visit to Beijing will prove to be part pleasure – with sightseeing trips to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the galleries of the 798 Art District – and part fact-finding mission, Wintour sees her role at *Vogue* as semi-ambassadorial for the US fashion industry. And she acknowledges that American brands have been relatively slow in entering the mainland market compared with their European counterparts.

“Dolce & Gabbana ... I know they were just [in Shanghai],” she says. “They told me it was their first trip. They loved it. They just adored it. They came straight to New York afterwards and they were full of stories.”

“The American design community cannot afford to ignore the strength of this market and my understanding is that there are a lot of [retail] properties being looked at right now by key American designers and I certainly plan to go back to the US and encourage them to come here. It’s going to be a huge market for them. There’s a limit to the amount of growth possible in the US, so we all have to look at emerging countries for expansion.”

Wintour has expressed the opinion that politics and fashion do not make comfortable bedfellows. In a 2006 interview in Britain’s *The Guardian* newspaper, she said, “Washington is frightened of fashion. I think the British government is the same ... People in political office tend to get extremely nervous about fashion because they feel it’s frivolous. And they don’t want to look too elitist or too silly or whatever it may be.”

Recalling this statement in Beijing, Wintour grins. “Well, actually, I think, thanks to the first lady of the US, that has all changed,” she says. “[Michelle Obama] really has been a standard bearer for fashion. She obviously enjoys it and she wears it so well. She has been so incredibly supportive of young American talent, of designers like Jason Wu, Derek Lam, Narciso Rodriguez, Michael Kors, and by being so careful about the designers she wears when she goes abroad, so I think that’s really helped shift opinion. And I’m very impressed by [the British prime minister’s wife] Mrs Cameron, and I think that she has already announced that she’s going to take a leadership role in supporting British fashion. So, I think, with Mrs Cameron and Mrs Obama in place, we have a lot to be grateful for.”

And of the fashion she has witnessed on Beijing’s chilly winter streets?

“I notice a lot of really interesting hair, I have to say. The colours and cuts are fantastic.”

Wintour suddenly becomes the most animated she has been all morning and, for a brief moment, reveals an endearing glimpse of the shy teenager who, in the swinging London of the 60s, rebelled against her school dress code by taking up the hemlines of her skirts.

“It seems to me that, among young people, there has been an explosion in self-expression here,” she says. “It’s great. And I see a lot of hats. The Chinese seem big on hats.”