

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 tastemaker 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 wall-to-wall 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 grumbings have since been mullied 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."