

Angelica Cheung may well be the most important and influential woman in the global world of fashion right now.

As editor-in-chief of Vogue China, Cheung is at the helm of the biggest fashion magazine in the biggest fashion and luxury market on earth. She devotes the passion of a fashion-lover and the pragmatism of her business background to the job. Yet her real focus is not clothes, but the women who wear them.

By Harriet Quick Photography by Guzi

An Interview.

FOUR SEASONS MAGAZINE // ISSUE 4 // 2014



WHEN IT COMES TO *Vogue*, the September issue has a cultural resonance all its own. Across every global version of the magazine, it is traditionally the biggest issue of the year, and *The September Issue* was, of course, the name of a must-see 2009 documentary about the making of U.S. *Vogue*. Never one to shy from her values, **Angela Cheung is putting her own September issue to bed.** The September 2013 issue of *Vogue* China, one of the highest-circulation fashion magazines in the world, will be published not long after this interview, with no fewer than eight different covers featuring both Asian and Western supermodels—each one showcasing one of the biggest trends for the Autumn/Winter 2013 season, photographed by our long-time collaborators Inez and Vinoodh,” explains the editor-in-chief. “The result will doubtless boost sales of a publication that already sells briskly. The first issue of *Vogue* China, which hit newsstands eight years ago, sold out within hours, and the magazine now reaches a readership of more than 650,000.

One of Cheung's favourite trends for fall is the return of a more womanly silhouette, with longer skirts juxtaposed with soft, draped necklines, and sinuous slip dresses in sensual, textural fabrics. The alluring looks—spiced headed notably by Phoebe Philo at Céline and Miuccia Prada—is a welcome shift from the ingénué slant of summer and is intrinsically geared to appeal to a woman of substance.

“I love it,” says Cheung, who has many pieces of fabric in her elegant, dad-free wardrobe, alongside Jason Wu dresses, Tory Burch separates and Chanel jackets. “I like the maturity of the new feminine styles. They teach a younger generation to experiment with different skirt lengths, that short is not necessarily better and that you can express femininity in different ways.”

Cheung as an editor is both a visionary and a pragmatist, as concerned with the business of publishing as she is with capturing the spirit of a rapidly changing nation. China is not only in the grip of an economic and social boom; it is also witnessing a revolution in the role of women, as a new entrepreneurial class comes to the fore. Cheung's mission is to inspire this generation, to engage her readers in a new conversation about life and values as modern Chinese women, as well as about the latest trends in hemlines.

For Cheung, style can never be separated from substance, and the celebrities whom she embodies both. “We recently ran a feature on several interesting personalities

who work in fashion, such as Stella McCartney,” she says. “She's somebody who really knows what she wants and sticks to her guns on the issues that matter most to her, and that's a great attitude to learn from. Also, Net-A-Porter Group's founder, Natalie Massenet. Despite the negativity she faced from sceptics at the beginning of her career, she was able to prove them all wrong because she stuck to her instincts. We've also featured the actress Ziyi Zhang, as, again, she is somebody who come back from adversity in her career with a fantastic film—*The Grandmaster*—and she's very much back on top again. We want to communicate that life isn't always about glamour and everything going well. It's how you deal with the problems and the trials that make you into a stronger, more interesting woman.”

Cheung herself is a deeply interesting woman, whether you're a *Vogue* reader or not. Meeting her in Paris during the Autumn/Winter collections, I find her dressed in a white mink coat, carrying no accessories except for a BlackBerry that is constantly beeping with a torrential download of emails. She doesn't show up with an entourage or pose for the swarms of press waiting cameras. “I do dress for attention; I am not craving that. I want to look decent, nice. But being chased after by photographers—that is for the younger fashion editors,” says Cheung, who is easily recognized by her asymmetrical, sharp black bob. There's a refreshing frankness about her: In a world where elaborate effusive-ness is cool and the norms, her speech is straightforward and unaffected, her sentences punctuated regularly with an earthy laugh.

Her perspective is a result of her legal training and her own circuitous route into fashion. Raised in Beijing during Mao's Cultural Revolution, Cheung was a hard worker and a bright scholar who studied law and English at Peking University before cutting her teeth at an English-language newspaper in Hong Kong. She segued into the male-dominated world of banking before returning to journalism. Her entree into glossies came with the role of editor of *Marie Claire* Hong Kong, followed by *Elle* China.

The call to edit the launch of the Chinese edition of *Vogue* came in 2005. “Although I had edited *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, I still had to prove I could lead such a big title,” she says. “But I wasn't intimidated. Traditionally editors came from a fashionista background, and I was in business before journalism, but over the years I have come to know who I am, and I love the job. I don't take myself too seriously,

“I don't take myself too seriously, but I feel my role is to educate and inspire my readers. I want them to realize their potential, to be women I believe in.”

Right: (from left) Veronica Chen, actress Carina Lau, Angelica Cheung, Mona Lee Locke and Emily Locke at The Great Runway. The C.FDA/Vogue Fashion Fund “Americans in China” Fashion Show, Ming Dynasty City Wall, Raffles Park, Beijing, June 2013. **Below:** *Vogue* China celebrates its eighth anniversary with eight covers for September 2013.



but I feel my role is to educate and inspire my readers. I want them to realize their potential, to be women I believe in.”

Launching into a new market, Cheung also faced the challenge of persuading the world's leading photographers and fashion stylists—Marco Testino, Patrick Demarchelier, Mario Sorrenti, and Inez and Vinoodh included—to work for *Vogue* China. At the time, the U.S., U.K. and Paris editions were considered the pinnacles of *Vogue*-ness and the Chinese edit risked being the “poor cousin.” With great tenacity, Cheung forged ahead, creating bonds

with a host of international collaborators as well as encouraging rising Chinese talent. The magazine was an instant success, and supermodels like Liu Wen are now regulars. By insisting on original content (many glamour titles import secondhand features from Western sister publications), Cheung raised the bar, creating an authentic Chinese *Vogue*. She also introduced a column called *Made in China* to celebrate hometown designers like Huishan Zhang, who now shows his collections in London and enjoys a global following.

As China moves from the first flush of

economic success to a more confident and considered approach to style, there has been a noticeable turn away from flashy, logo-bearing status pieces towards a new appreciation of discretion and “stealth wealth.” The first lady herself, Peng Liyuan, who in her June tour to America was universally praised for her polished elegance, has become a pin-up for this more subtle take on style, with copies of her “lady coats” selling out overnight.

“It was good for the Chinese fashion industry, because Peng Liyuan presents a sophisticated image of Chinese women to the world and changes the widespread notion that maybe Chinese people only care about logos,” Cheung says. “And she demonstrates that elegance doesn't come from what label you wear, but whether it suits you.”

While Cheung's primary role is to shape *Vogue*, her remit as a global influencer spreads wide and deep into the heart of the fashion and luxury world. Her advice is sought by CEOs and designers working to establish businesses in China. Invitations to store events and fashion dinners pile up on Cheung's desk, but she insists on going home at a decent hour to spend time with her husband, Mark, a British journalist whom she met while working as a newspaper writer, and her six-year-old daughter, Hayley. Her daughter is her real inspiration, she says, and she wants her to grow up with solid values. “I want her to be brave and loving, to make friends and be of value to the world.”

The family's home, says Cheung, is low-key and comfortable, and it typifies what she believes is the mind-set of modern women. “We all want glamour, family, real life, friendship, professional and social fulfillment. It's not about being perfect, it's about trying, about effort. I'm certainly not perfect, but if I don't at least strive for ideals, how can I pass that message on to my readers?”

The brilliance of Cheung is not only in the way she inhabits her role as a visionary conductor of the zeitgeist, but in the way that she experiences that role as both a privilege and a responsibility. She has created a *Vogue* for 21st-century China and beyond—for style seekers, culture surfers and market mavens everywhere. She is proud but respectful, hard-working but well-balanced, stylish but not slavish. Exactly the kind of woman she admires—and a woman the world is watching. ■

Harris Quick, former fashion features director of *British Vogue* and author of *Cartwaking: A History of the Fashion Model*, is a writer, brand consultant and food enthusiast.