They're 400 million-strong and the new focus for some of the trendiest alternative style and art publications from the West. It's easy to see why: China's youth, a digital native cohort of Gen Zs and millennials, are carving out their own space for creativity and culture that's re-imagining Chinese heritage in a contemporary context and setting new precedents for brands.

This new wave of consumers recognizes China's rising economic status and thus possesses an acute sense of national pride; no longer are they reliant on Western fashion brands and influence to define how they express themselves as individuals. Yet the world is small, and despite crackdowns on international cultural imports like hip-hop and K-pop, there are echoes in China of what defines Gen Z tastes abroad in the streetwear, beauty, art, luxury and online landscapes. This is channeled through a powerful new creative lens, one that's beginning to exert its own influence on the global stage.
UOOYAA's 'Chinatown' Spring/Summer 2019 collection
“The future generation of Chinese consumers are hyper fashion aware and what's more, they’re bringing a new perspective and voice to the creative industries,” Jefferson Hack, CEO and co-founder of Dazed Media, tells JWT Intelligence. “I heard that in the past getting a job in the creative industries was not taken as seriously as it is now. This perception change shows new opportunities for storytelling and shaping future narratives for youth.”

Among those already making major impressions in this space is photographer Leslie Zhang, a Shanghai-based millennial who has worked with the likes of Dazed, Nylon China, and Wallpaper China, among many others. Zhang dabbled in painting before settling on photography as his primary medium for expression, and is lauded for the way his fashion shoots uniquely capture culture and beauty through the lens of nostalgia for 1990s China. “I’ve realized the things I have the deepest emotional connection to and find the most beautiful are the sentiments from my memories of growing up in China,” he told It's Nice That. “I now try to recreate these ambiances and moods in the images I create.”
In the art world, there's Beijing-born painter and illustrator Du Qiurui, who playfully depicts the contradictions that came with China's whirlwind economic development in his work. His colorful approach makes strong cultural commentary with both modern and traditional Chinese elements, pairing imagery like tomb sweepers with the curious protective sun wear, the “facekini,” that caught the attention of Western media outlets in 2017. Du partly attributes his artistic influence to his time at The Parsons School of Design.

“Be yourself and love what you do—that's how I learned when I studied in the West,” Du tells the Innovation Group. “Never change yourself to fit in the social norms, and use your art as a voice to tell your stories and express your opinions.”

**Digital expression**

Growing up immersed in a fast-paced, mobile-first landscape has given China's middle class youth nearly unending access to inspiration and information that has shaped them into more discerning and opinionated consumers. Many have studied or traveled abroad and are bringing these worldly experiences to thousands of followers on social media platforms, or creating their own experiences IRL. These take on familiar forms; immersive installations, for instance, are spreading like wildfire and inciting more mainstream interest in art.
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The rise of online social platforms like Douyin (TikTok) and video and gaming app Bilibili have given young consumers across China new creative outlets for individualistic self expression—much of it via memes and viral short video. In fashion, China's streetwear culture has found a home on domestic editorial e-commerce platforms like Nanjing-based Yoho!, while its lifestyle is nourished via apps like Yoho!'s Mars, which highlights hip and underground stores, cafes, and studios in 20 cities across the country.
And thanks to the enormous buying power of Gen Z and millennials in China, there are entire online ecosystems supporting e-commerce and the monetization of creative talent. Alibaba's online shopping mecca Taobao is bursting with quirky youth-focused and genderless fashion and beauty brands, some spearheaded by groups of young online influencers, others by retailers with an eye on young trendsetters. One such brand is **UOOYAA**, who debuted its Spring/Summer '19 collection at London Fashion Week and launched its first concept store in Shanghai this month, boasting the motto “Stay weird, stay different.” In its experiential boutique, which nods to a “Chinatown” theme, UOOYAA stocks **BBOOYY**, a unisex line that meshes retro imagery with contemporary silhouettes.

**Beau-tea Culture**

Local brands with cult followings from young Chinese consumers are fueling the rebirth of heritage brands thanks to their creative takes on nostalgia marketing. Popular beverage chain **HeyTea** often channels retro China in its campaigns, and has embarked on multiple partnerships with **Pechoin**, a Shanghai beauty company that first launched in the 1930s. HeyTea updates Pechoin's traditional aesthetic with playful, animated illustrations for its marketing campaigns, paired with engaging storytelling, and updated product offerings.
HeyTea's vintage-inspired campaign for their White Rabbit collaboration
In April, HeyTea collaborated with another time-honored Shanghai company, White Rabbit, on a limited-edition milk candy flavored ice cream and boba tea. And this month, White Rabbit itself worked with Chinese fragrance brand Scent Library on a bath and beauty collection, along with a White Rabbit sweets-shaped handbag to entice China's young hypebeasts.

HeyTea has also effortlessly forayed into Chinese foodie culture on social media with WeChat campaigns that fluidly blend the contemporary with the old-school. In recent months, their campaign images have featured young models dressed in a colorful mix of vintage and streetwear eating hot pot and zongzi, the glutinous rice dumplings eaten during China's Dragon Boat Festival.
HeyTea's WeChat campaign
Hedone, a rising online C-Beauty brand, uses their social media influence to connect with young customers through humor and tongue-in-cheek packaging. Their in-house marketing team also creates video content that touches on affairs important to China's Gen Z and millennial generations that wouldn't generally get a mainstream platform, including diversity, gender fluidity, self expression, and even LGBTQ issues. Their August 2018 video to market the Existence collection, “The Grand Hedone Hotel,” encourages fans to consider “What is the raw and essential you?” The comments under the video are filled with emotional answers, flanked by words of encouragement from Hedone: don't be ashamed of who you are because you're not the only one with a complicated soul.

**Media empowerment**

Publishers at the forefront of youth culture in the West seem to be recognizing China's potential and giving it new platforms. This month, *The Face* magazine celebrated its relaunch after publishing its last edition in 2004, this time tapping Chinese-Australian influencer and photographer Margaret Zhang as its Asia creative director. Dazed Media recently announced it will launch Dazed China later this summer in partnership with Yoho! and backed by C Ventures, the investment firm run by entrepreneur and K11 art mall founder Adrian Cheng. While Dazed China has yet to reveal what content they have in store, it's likely that one highlight will be China's burgeoning young independent fashion designers, who are making waves in Gen-Z circles for their fresh take on Chinese-ness.
“Mars [Liang, Yoho!'s founder] and the Yoho! team fully understand our motto ‘empower youth through creativity’ and we believe that Dazed China in their hands can make a significant contribution for this generation as it carves out this new identity,” Hack told JWT Intelligence.

“What’s exciting is China’s youth are moving so fast. What Mars [Liang] created at Yoho! is leaps ahead of any publisher in the West, so we are being introduced to a 21st Century publishing model that is for me me is the future of youth me is the future of youth media.”

**China's new creatives**

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