

FASHION & BEAUTY

Model-turned-designer Philip Huang in the Thai countryside.
Photos: Handouts



Pigment of the imagination

A husband-and-wife team have established a brand of indigo-dyed fabrics in Thailand in collaboration with artisans, with offbeat designs inspired by postmodern art and film

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A key element of a trendy Thai-made clothing brand aimed at affluent customers abroad originates in clay pots of foamy sludge that look like witches' brews.

The vats are in villages in the agricultural heartland of Thailand in the country's rural northeast, hundreds of kilometres away from where the clothes are designed in Bangkok by a husband-and-wife team under their own fashion label, called Philip Huang after the husband.

The key element is indigo, a natural pigment derived by fermenting leaves of the *Indigofera tinctoria* shrub, known as *khram* in Sakon Nakhon province. Many villagers, especially older women, still employ old methods to make homespun, indigo-dyed clothes worn for work in rice paddies.

"When I think of indigo, I think of water buffaloes and farmers dressed in blue with their palm leaf hats," says label co-founder Chomwan Weeraworawit. A Thai woman from Bangkok, she grew up in London, studied law and specialised in intellectual property in the textile industry before embracing her true passion: fashion design.

An indigo dye vat in Sakon Nakhon.



Her husband, Philip, is a New Yorker born to Taiwanese parents who made a name for himself in the industry as a trailblazing Asian-American male model, working with Gucci, Tommy Hilfiger and other leading fashion houses.

It was after the couple's road trip to Sakon Nakhon in 2015 that their nascent idea of starting a fashion label came together. While exploring the bucolic countryside, they came across a group of elderly woman weavers.

The visitors were fascinated by the villagers' skill in teasing brilliant blues out of light-green pinnate leaves. The women soaked sheaves of fresh leaves in water and fed sugary tamarind paste into a sickly looking

concoction teeming with micro-organisms until there emerged gooey blue indigo.

"It's like a microbiome and everything has to be kept in an equilibrium for the right colours to come out," says Huang, a tall, trim man who has a degree in engineering.

"Our trip inspired us to lean more towards natural dyes and work with local artisans," he says.

The couple set about creating offbeat modern designs that reflected traditional rural aesthetics. They fleshed out their ideas on "mood boards" – collages of impressions and images they culled from postmodern art and their favourite films.

One of their designs drew on the samurai-style *haori* coat Luke Skywalker wears on his home planet, Tatooine, in *Star Wars* films. Another was based on a Hawaiian shirt worn by Don Johnson's character in *Miami Vice*, a hit 1980s television series.

The latter bears prints of a wallpaper with a stylised tropical sunset from a scene in the 1983 film *Scarface*, overlain in parts with Photoshopped snapshots of the couple's recent holiday in the Philippines. "I think our children are in there somewhere," Chomwan says. The couple have three young children.

Before they did all this, though,

they wanted to replicate the traditional way of making indigo dye in their backyard in an upscale enclave in central Bangkok. It was not a roaring success.

"I couldn't keep it alive," Chomwan recalls. "I tried and tried, but it took a couple of years just to keep fermenting paste from turning into this icky blue water that didn't do anything."

Perhaps the spirit of indigo was not on her side. "We believe that indigo has its paranormal spirit," says Sa-ard Trongti, a 67-year-old "indigo grandma" in a village in Sakon Nakhon who is collaborating with the couple.

Villagers attribute chemical reactions such as oxidation to the doings of a spirit – one of many supernatural beings they believe inhabit the countryside. To make the spirit of indigo happy, some locals even sing to the fermenting paste. Menstruating women, meanwhile, avoid going near vats so as not to "sully" the contents.

"If the spirit likes us, the right colours will appear. If it doesn't like us, the dye won't turn out well," Sa-ard says. "To get good results, we need to have the right mix of leaves, lime water, tamarind and ash."

The pH content of water affects the resultant hues. So does air temperature. During cooler winter months, duller shades emerge, while summer heat brings out more attractive blues, Huang says.

One dip of a cloth in fresh dye results in a lighter shade of blue,



Indigo dye workers in Sakon Nakhon.

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SA-ARD TRONGTI, "INDIGO GRANDMA"

while four dips yield a dark navy blue. A designer shirt stitched up from two halves by the husband-and-wife duo uses both blues.

The enterprising couple didn't stop at indigo. They collected a palette of other colours from natural dyes used in rural Thailand: peachy hues derived from red mud, smoky greys from wood bark, and rose pinks from the resinous secretion of small insects. "All the natural dyes are out there. We just had to go and find them," Huang says.

He and his wife started apply-

ing the dyes to T-shirts first. "They were the perfect blank canvas for experimenting with designs and colours," Huang says.

Three years on, they're up to their seventh collection, with a range of specially made pieces for online sale: shirts, trousers, shorts, jackets, trench coats, jumpsuits, balaclavas, fabric face masks and cotton socks. A pair of tie-dyed socks alone sells for US\$25 on their website. Most of their customers are techies and hipsters in New York, Los Angeles and Miami.

One collection, called Vision, features a trippy mixture of psychedelic patterns. "This is as crazy as it gets – for now," Chomwan says, showing off a tie-dyed shirt with a kaleidoscope of natural colourings.

Until recently no fashion lover in Bangkok would have been caught dead wearing handwoven, indigo-dyed garments. Even villagers who made such clothes avoided going to town in them. "We wore them only at home or in the fields," Sa-ard says. "We didn't want city folk to laugh at us and take us for country bumpkins."

Times have changed. One of the Philip Huang label's brand ambassadors is a prominent young Thai artist, another is an internationally celebrated Thai Chinese filmmaker.

"Chomwan and Philip give us jobs and buy our handwoven textiles," Sa-ard says. "They're taking old designs to a new level."