

When did you first become interested in fashion?

I was 14 years old and I was studying fine art, so I had to learn all the proper artistic techniques. I was good at still life, but when it came to figure drawing I found it very difficult, so I started to look at all the fashion magazines. I found out that a lot of fashion designers are actually fashion illustrators – so I used the magazines as a reference to help me practise my drawing skills and then I realised I really enjoyed it. Putting the garments and the fabrics onto the body gave me another point of view. It was the first time that I realised how garments made figures look even better, more interesting. And this built up my interest in fashion.

Did you go straight into studying fashion?

Yes, my first degree was in fashion design in Shiyan, China and then I did a diploma in fashion technology in New Zealand, which was more focused on the industrial side. In Shiyan I had been doing lots of drawings and it was more artistic – I was coming up with lots of ideas and it was a really creative environment.

But in New Zealand there was a lot of knitwear, a lot of manufacturing, we had to work with techniques and tutors and we had to make the clothes – not just design them. I was then lucky enough to work as a knitwear designer for Sabatini in New Zealand for four years, from 1997–2000. I did menswear, womenswear – and I went from design assistant to senior designer in that time. But after seven or eight seasons I began to feel differently about the work. I'd reached a point where I felt I was being more commercial and less creative. That happens to a lot of creative people who enter the fashion industry – you have to take care of the sales, of the results.

I had a lot of pressure from the company. They used to say to me: "Chris, whatever designs you make, we have to make a certain number of sales." If a design only brings in orders for 100 pieces, it is not good, but a sales-orientated approach can stifle creativity. I continued to research, because that was part of my job, and I realised that a lot of designers I was really interested in had studied in London – they had degrees from London College of Fashion (LCF) or Central Saint Martins. And they were not coming from just one angle, or one background, and that excited me. It made me think I needed to do something different, so I applied to Central Saint Martins and LCF. In the end, I chose LCF because it let me do what I wanted to do – Central Saint Martins had only offered me textile design. Looking back, however, that would also have been an exciting option, because a lot of designers I really like now are not from womenswear or menswear, but from textile design.

What did you do after your MA?

I was one of the few people on my course to get a distinction, so I was able to secure the London Development Agency funding I needed to launch the CHRIS LIU womenswear label. I also branched out into accessories under the name Chris&Tibor. Everything I'm doing now reflects my London education. I believe in balance in my work. I don't want to create something that is either extraordinarily ugly, or extraordinarily beautiful – I want to create something well balanced. I am very much a yin yang person, and I don't want to create anything that is too extreme.

What have been the highlights of your career?

I had my first London catwalk show in 2003, very soon after graduating, and I am very lucky to have a celebrity client list that includes Maggie Cheung, Angelica Cheung, Shu Qi, Michelle Yeoh, Kylie Minogue, Sade, Jamelia and Sophia Myles to name a few.

CHRIS LIU

Fashion designer Chris Liu's womenswear has been a hit with a string of celebrities. He tells Antonia Windsor how a master's degree in fashion design technology at the London College of Fashion helped him on the road to success



I also think I am the only person from China who has graduated from LCF with a distinction, because I was invited to do a show of my designs in the presence of the Chinese first lady, Madame Liu, during the state visit by Chinese president Hu Jintao in November 2005. It made me very proud, and I felt like I had become a kind of ambassador for the country. This is a good thing because I want to show young people what you can do over here, and I also want to know what young people are thinking in China, because that is good for my designs. We travel to China quite a lot as a company. Chris&Tibor accessories are now stocked by some very nice boutiques and department stores in China. And I sometimes have letters from people in China who have read about me and my work, and who are interested in coming to study in London, too.

Do you invite people to do work experience with you?

Yes, we have interns constantly working with me, on the women's side and on Chris&Tibor accessories. It is very important that we have new blood in the business, that's the best thing about being in London. You have creative people, the next generation always brings fresh ideas into the business. They learn from us and we learn from them. We are very, very lucky to be in a city that generates lots of creative people.

Will you stay in London?

I love being here and feel very fortunate to be based in London, but perhaps we will expand the company in the future. Perhaps I could open a store in Beijing, but wherever we go in the future, London is where our headquarters is.