

He calls himself just ‘that African guy,’ but there’s nothing ordinary about his distinctive fashion style

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When dawn breaks on a Saturday morning, fashion designer Xavier, who goes by only the single name, is often busying himself in his home warehouse, picking out which designs he will take to the market of the day.

The space for each vendor in the market is limited. Xavier has room for a table, two mannequins and a rack, so it’s important to select what he considers the best of his designs.

His designs are distinctive and so is he because he hails from Cameroon.

“Not many people connect Africa with fashion,” said the independent fashion designer now based in Shanghai. “And I want to change that mindset with my brand.”

From tops and dresses to hats and shawls, Xavier’s XaferWear brand, launched in late 2020, might be described as casual chic everyday wear, with sleek African native overtones and just a touch of Chinese flourish.

His designs are a blend of traditional African patterns collected from various countries and tribes in Africa.

He shares customers digital pamphlets that describe the origins of his fashion patterns on his platforms.

For instance, a pattern he called “Bamun” refers to a tribe in western Cameroon ruled by a sultan. That tribe’s best-known sultan was Ibrahim Mbouombouo Njoya (1886-1933.)

“The pattern of the fabric is like a futuristic portrait of a picture of the sultan,” Xavier explained.

Another pattern Xavier loves to use is called “Kitoko,” a word of various meanings in many African countries. In the Congo, it translates as “beautiful.”

“The pieces created with kitoko are



Xavier and a collaborator peruse and discuss fabrics in his home studio.
— Photos / Ti Gong

a reminder that every creation has its individual beauty,” he said.

One of the works he created with the pattern is a version of the traditional qipao Chinese dress, with an asymmetric lower hem and Chinese-style knot button on the collar. The Chinese-style tailoring and African pattern somehow complement each other, making the dress the most popular in Xavier’s collection.

Xavier began his fashion career in 2003 when he was in high school, 17 years before he finally launched his brand. After obtaining a master’s degree in South Africa, he came to China in 2015 on his aunt’s advice.

The aunt convinced him that Shanghai offered many exciting opportunities, so he took a course in Chinese and found an internship and later a marketing job in a design company making uniforms for luxury hotels. One of his colleagues there

later collaborated with Xavier on his XaferWear collections.

Full-time jobs to pay daily expenses have never stopped Xavier from creating new designs. He devotes early mornings and weekends to giving his imagination free rein.

“Whenever I have an idea for a new creation, I first sketch it with a pen,” he said.

XaferWear was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the going tough. It was impossible to import fabrics from Africa, so he had to find suppliers and manufacturers in China. He started an online shop based on WeChat.

Xavier draws inspiration from all aspects of his life. When he walks down the street, visits clients or gets together with friends, he notices not only what people are wearing but also surroundings such as patterns on the floor.

“Sometimes I’m also inspired by my own dreams,” he said. “I used to sketch ideas out as soon as I woke up. Then again, most dreams fade quickly from memory, so I have learned to force myself to wake up when I dream something useful and jot it down immediately on my bedside notepad.”

When he first launched his brand, Xavier was not very interested in formal fashion shows because he said he wanted XaferWear to be firmly rooted “among people” instead of on the catwalk. But after a friend invited him to take part in a fashion show, he understood it was a good way to show the designs and how to style them up. A few months later XaferWear’s own fashion show took place in a bar in Shanghai.

Now when he participates in fashion shows, he invites artists to give performances between runways of models dressed in his garments.

“People gathering around and making connections with each other are important to me,” he said.

His little market booth has helped him develop a wide circle of friends. On one occasion, he asked a Chinese girl who showed up at his booth to become one of his models because he liked her smile.

“Vending in markets is both rewarding and challenging,” he said. “Unexpected things happen when a booth is awash with people, but it feels good when they understand and love your works.”

Xavier sums himself up as “that African guy trying to make garments appealing to people regardless of their background.”

Now that the pandemic restrictions have ended, he has his sights set further afield.

“This year, I hope I can expand my brand recognition beyond Shanghai and beyond China,” he said.