

Sustainable fashion: the finest wool in the world and why Erdos is the king of cashmere

The world's biggest cashmere producer Erdos has released five lines of clothing, directed by experienced European creative directors

CEO Jane Wang talks about supermodel Liu Wen, sustainability and the pursuit of perfection

Topic | **Fashion**

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Jane Wang's current favourite Erdos product is a delicate scarf of boundary-pushing thinness and lightness, created through a combination of cutting-edge technology, carefully refined traditional techniques and, of course, the very best cashmere fibre, taken from contented [goats that graze on the Inner Mongolian plains](#).

The scarf, prices for which start at HK\$7,000 (US\$900), is a personal passion – Wang is a Cambridge University engineering graduate who fully understands the technical issues involved – and on a broader level it is an illustration of the driving ambition, and meticulous planning, behind the Erdos cashmere brand.

“I believe firmly we will be the best cashmere brand in the world,” says Wang, who heads Erdos Resources, which has interests in mining and natural resources. It is also the world's largest producer of cashmere, supplying raw materials to other luxury brands.”

“Already we position ourselves as the best in China, we have different brands, each with its own character, and different customers. Our key advantage is having the best cashmere quality, always reliable and guaranteed. We are one of the oldest fashion brands in China and now we have added new designs and creative directors and stylists and photographers; people are crazy about it.”



Jane Wang, CEO of Erdos Group.

The attempt to move upscale has not been undertaken lightly, or inexpensively. The main sub-brands have European creative directors with distinguished resumes that feature names such as Prada, Chanel, Fendi and Pringle. They spend 10 days a month at Erdos' headquarters in Beijing, helping to create collections that can compete with Loro Piana, Brunello Cucinelli and other high-end cashmere garment purveyors.

Another initiative was to invite [supermodel Liu Wen](#), who has been the face of the brand for a decade, to design a full collection. The line proved to be a runaway commercial success, clocking up HK\$36 million in sales during the initial launch period. It helped that the hugely popular Liu was willing to get personally involved, making store appearances to pass on personal tips to customers.



Liu Wen wears Erdos cashmere in an advert for the brand.

“When we started, we picked her because she has an international look, also a natural look, not too feminine, but with character and independence,” says Wang. “She is very careful, she doesn't want to just use her name to sell if she is not really involved. She really worked, came to the studio, gave feedback, was very serious.”

Erdos has five different lines, from the affordable, entry-level Blue Erdos to the flagship brand 1436. Many people ask what the numbers signify.

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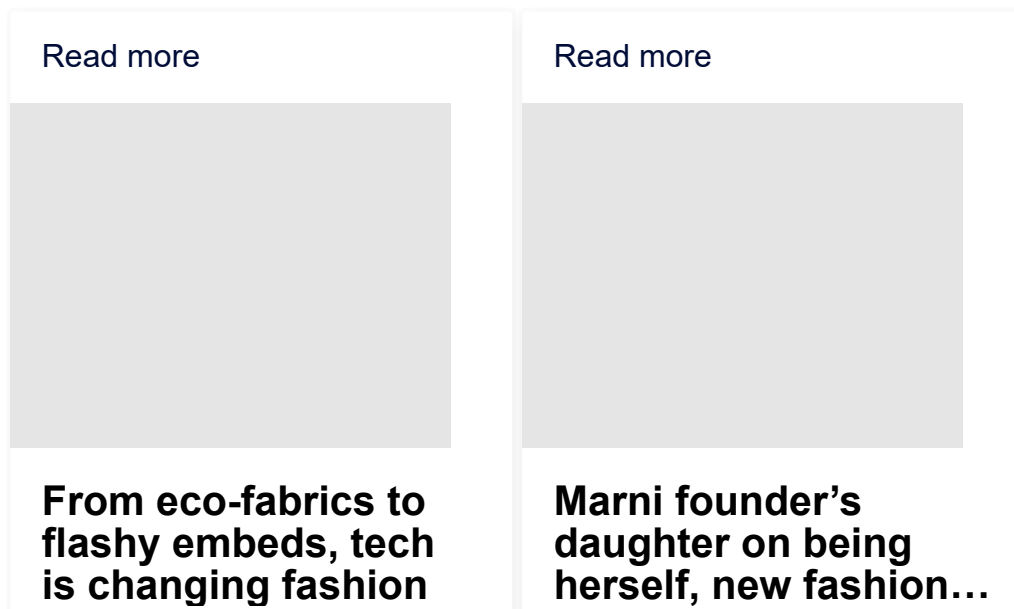
“When I am in Europe or Japan and they talk about cashmere it is a different perspective, it is thought of as special and luxurious but in China because of lack of good brands, or fashion brands, people think of it as an unfashionable thing, warm and good quality but not luxury or fashionable,” she says. “That made me very frustrated, I thought, as the world’s biggest cashmere producer we have to promote the right image for cashmere.



Antonio Fontana is creative director of 1436.

“So I introduced 1436, which is named after the diamond quality cashmere fibre. It is difficult to remember and not so easy for marketing, but I wanted to give it that number because that is the number for the best cashmere fibre, an average fineness of less than 14.5 microns and length of over 36 millimetres. If it can fit into both dimensions it is the world’s best cashmere fibre. Only a certain breed of goats have this.”

Erdos has been following a path of sustainability for decades, [long before it became a fashion buzzword](#); commercial reality dictates that the company ensure that the horned animals have quality pastures to graze on.



“It is natural for us to do, as we own the whole supply chain,” she says. “If the grassland is wrong, we are the victims. If the goats are good, we benefit from it, so it is in our interests to keep the grasslands well and to preserve the breed of the goats and to treat them well.”



Menswear looks from cashmere label Erdos

Staff at all the brands are encouraged to come up with initiatives to save waste and reduce packaging. The Erdos factories are also adopting environmentally friendly practices.

Wang studied in the British educational system, initially at senior school in London and then at Cambridge University.

She says: “When I was in China I was good at remembering my numbers, and my characters, but in the UK it is such a different environment ... people ask you questions and you have to ask questions as well and there is not always an answer, that is normal. It changed my way of thinking. In Cambridge I learned to think logically and to have methodology to achieve something.



Model Liu Wen.

“With fashion it is the same, you give freedom to the creative people but you have to manage your stores and have expansion plans. You have to have a good plan, you don’t just throw money everywhere.”

She talks fondly of the designers, revealing that Gilles Dufour has developed a liking for Peking opera and antique markets, Dirk Jaster endears himself to factory staff by asking informed technical questions and showing appreciation for their skills while Antonio Fontana clearly loves the job, as he undertakes possibly the world’s longest commute, from his home in Brazil to Beijing every month.

“For myself, I feel the happiest when I speak to the creative directors,” she says. “We have the techniques and machines, the best materials and they give me the feedback. I find communication with them so interesting and stimulating. I also enjoy going to the technical centre and learning about the treatments they are doing with the material.”



Dirk Jaster, designer of Erdos menswear.

The Erdos overseas expansion plan is a long-term goal. For now, the focus is on China, where there are 1,349 stores and, of course, the never-ending quest to make lighter, and thinner cashmere.