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Local hero: a new take on Made in China for the country's exploding design market

DESIGN / 31 DEC 2015 / BY ROSA BERTOLI

During the past 15 years, Shu Wei has lived many professional lives. Starting her own agency as a graphic designer aged 19, she took a break to obtain an MBA from Stanford School of Business, then worked for the Chinese social media platform Renren as director of corporate development. Later, she became CEO of mobile app company Jingwei, then founded social network Civo, which she ran for three years. Her most recent endeavour is offering a revolutionary view of design and manufacturing to her generation in China, with a new brand that is challenging the idea of Chinese-made products as cheap copies.



New high-end Chinese furniture brand ZaoZuo with its pioneering founder, Shu Wei. Pictured clockwise from left: coat hanger, price on request, by Sarah Bottger; sofa, CNY3,699 (£380), by Luca Nichetto; 'Tab Series' table, CNY1,799 (£185), by Jonas Wagell; upholstered chair, CNY599 (£62), by ZaoZuo; side table, CNY488 (£50), by Keiji Asizava; 'Arch' chair, CNY499 (£52), by Luca Nichetto, all for ZaoZuo

1 OF 1

INFORMATION

For more information, visit [ZaoZuo's website](#)

Photography: Tony Law

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In 2014, Wei decided to gather her design, finance and manufacturing expertise and started working on ZaoZuo (which in Mandarin, she explains, suggests the meaning 'very picky'), a furniture brand catering to the rapidly growing Chinese middle-class, offering furniture and lifestyle products that are manufactured in the country. 'I realised that product choices in China are bipolar,' she says. 'On one hand, there is low-quality, cheap stuff; on the other, very expensive. And for the new middle class, there is no place to buy things for the home.'

The brand officially launched in September during Beijing Design Week. At the same time, Italian designer Luca Nichetto was announced as creative director, heading ZaoZuo's roster of international designers, including Jonas Wagell, Form Us With Love, Richard Hutten and Max Gerthel, among others (a few items are also designed in-house). Wei is very clear on what she wants to establish aesthetically. 'I prefer more industrialised, mature design works,' she notes. 'Now that we have built this network, people are starting to reach out to us, conversations are beginning to become more and more interesting,' she continues.

Contrary to popular belief, quality of design production is not an issue in China, says Nichetto. However, there is a lack of expertise in research and development. He and Wei work on these aspects of the business with a task force in Europe, and then instruct the Chinese team in a dedicated workshop in Beijing. 'The design industry in China is very young and unstable,' says Wei. 'So I think we can do something to help: import ideas, skills and designers to educate the market, the environment and industry.'

Her team of 70 manages 30 factories in China, each specialising in different materials and techniques, and together contributing to ZaoZuo's vast portfolio that includes upholstered seating, lighting, metal pieces and wooden furniture. It's an eclectic mix, which she is coordinating with Nichetto's guidance. 'Luca and I agree that this is the right time for China to introduce a brand age, not a this country, that we can really build quality goods.'

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