

# BAG TO DIFFER

A former lawyer living large in Hanoi, mad bag designer Christina Yu takes Deanna Ng on a tour of her work and life.

Don't let the big-haired photos on her website fool you. Christina Yu is not another I-sleep-with-curlers-on tai tai (married lady of leisure) masquerading as a designer.

Today she's conducting a private tour of her workshop on the top floor of the art gallery opposite the Metropole Hotel in Hanoi, where her world-famous Ipa-Nima bags are created. It's a spot most women wouldn't mind being in. Christina stops sporadically to chat with her seamstresses in English and a smattering of Vietnamese.

"I show them sketches and colour charts, discuss ideas with them and write down explanations," she says. "I work with them here to show them how to do it."

Her hands-on approach to her business has turned Ipa-Nima into a fashion icon that's been featured in magazines from *InStyle* to *Asiaweek*, and sought after by luminaries such as Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, the HRH Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden, Jamie Lee Curtis, Sarah Michelle-Gellar, Cate Blanchett, Kelly Osbourne, Martha Stewart, Michelle Yeoh, Maggie Cheung and Faye Wong, just to name a few fans.

## FROM LAW TO BAGS

Before Christina set up shop in Hanoi, this former litigator used to moonlight as a fashion writer and spent her vacations and savings travelling to international fashion shows in Milan, Paris and New York.

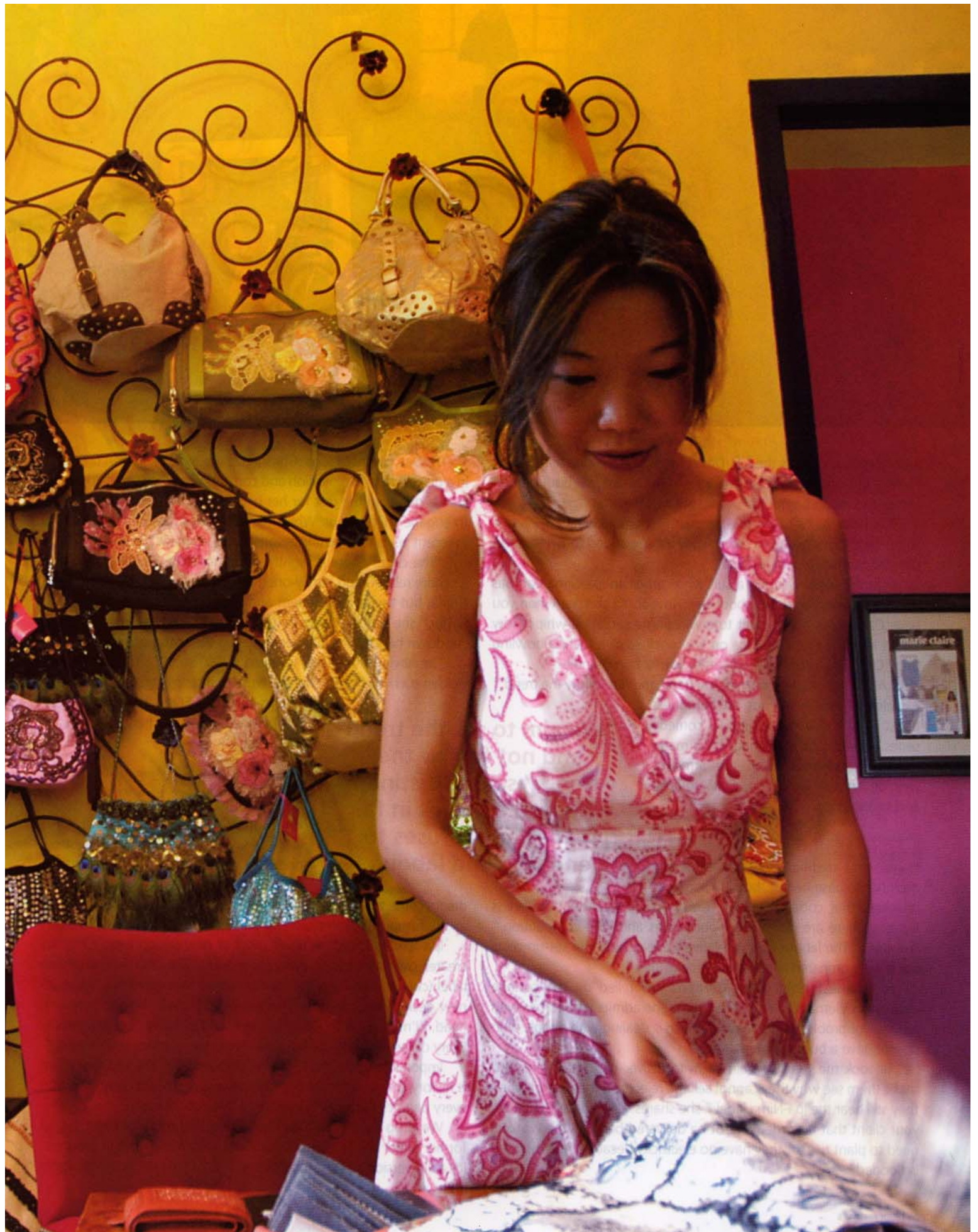
In 1997, her husband Mark Lockwood, an Australian lawyer, had to move to Hanoi to set up a branch for an international law firm, and Christina found herself in a situation where she could no longer practise law in a different country.

Armed with a Hong Konger's innate business sense, a wildly creative streak and a passion for fashion, she took the plunge to set up Ipa-Nima, which is an acronym for "Idees Parfaites viennent de Notre Imagination Magnifique" (meaning "Perfect ideas come from our magnificent imagination"). She was to take her bag fetish one step further – she would make them!

## GLAM SLAM

Christina has put the Paris of the East on the world fashion map: her bags are sold in Neiman Marcus, Henri Bendell, Fred Segal







and Nordstrom across the US, David Jones in Australia, and Harvey Nichols in Hong Kong, to name a few. She also owns boutiques in Hanoi and Japan (in the hip district Shibuya).

To Christina, "a bag is to a woman's ensemble what jewellery is to the face, or flowers to a room. They are the added touch that can turn 'conservative' into 'original'."

A professional wearing a suit who carries an Ipa-Nima bag has an air of mystery and fun about her. How could she not when you have Catwoman on a velvet tote wielding a sequined whip? How about Marlene Dietrich's face on two pockets of a fuchsia bowling bag? Or a silk lantern-shaped carrier with a horn handle?

"At Ipa-Nima, we aim to set the trend and not follow the trend," explains Christina. It's not an immodest boast – on the trend-setting TV comedy series *Friends*, Christina's bags have made repeated appearances on the arms of Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox-Arquette and Lisa Kudrow.

#### BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Hanoi's not traditionally a place for any designer to base herself, but Christina has rewritten that code. "Hanoi is a good place to conduct business because there are plenty of opportunities and little competition," she says. "The labour cost is relatively cheap, and the set-up costs are lower compared to most other countries."

For the last eight years, Christina has relied on the cottage industry in Vietnam to create her bags. She admits that comes with a bunch of problems, not least of which is dealing with people who do not have a business mentality.

"It took me years to train them to deliver things on time, and make them see why they cannot sell the rejects on the market when they still bear the Ipa-Nima label," she shares. "And how do you tell your client that his order cannot be delivered because the workers need to plant rice, or they have no electricity because their province is flooded?"

**"We aim to set the trend and not follow the trend," says Christina, who also believes in fair wages and refuses to engage child labour.**

Despite complications, Christina sticks to working out of Hanoi. In a place where exploitation and corruption are not unheard of, she stands out from the rest for her belief in fair wages and her refusal to engage child labour. While many factories have moved to China in recent years, this businesswoman has no plans to follow suit.

"The culture here is slightly different to the mainland Chinese: it's more relaxed and family-oriented. Cost-wise, it's not as cheap as China, but the embellishment and embroidery I get here are much better," she states, adding that she plans to start her own factory to cut down her current independence on the cottage industry.

The savings that she invested (USD120,000) to set-up have yielded such profits that her husband quit his full-time job two years ago to become CEO of Ipa-Nima Pte Ltd. She modestly values her company at USD1.5m.

#### THE REAL AND THE SURREAL

Stepping into the Ipa-Nima store at 59G Hai Ba Trung is a surreal experience. All of a sudden, you are cut off from the street noise and transported into a whimsical, art deco arena that is every girl's shopping

dream come true. From posh velvet chairs to brass chandelier, nearly all the furniture in the store was personally designed by Christina.

Ipa-Nima addicts are never short of new design fixes. Christina creates over 40 designs every six months. She also runs a private label (customising bags for special clients) that turns out about 25 new designs each season. That's over 130 fresh designs from one head. "I'm inspired by people I meet, and pictures or photographs. Every collection starts with a story. From there a theme is created."

Impossible to define, Christina's magic lies in the fact that there is history, art, geography, pop culture and aesthetics combined into every bag. It's East-meets-West-meets-hardcore kitsch.

We drop by at Tina Sparkle, her second establishment set up for her junior line for younger women, which is a work in progress. It's a lite version of Ipa-Nima, but no less fun. As we progress down



Christina expresses her creativity in the colours of her home – whichever corner you look, you will see her signature mark.

Whether it's taking a dip in her unique pool or having friends over for tea, Christina is one woman who knows how to strike that balance in her life between work and play.



the same street, we stop at a shop that has caught her attention. Christina walks right through the front door, and, catching sight of some (badly-produced) copies of her designs, tells the owner off.

"This is a copy of my last Autumn/Winter collection! That's a copy of Ipa-Nima too! These people are shameless!" she exclaims.

Of course, we're thrown out of the shop.

Fakes are a problem in this part of the world (some even copy Ipa-Nima's signature lining with its logo imprint). To combat it, Ipa-Nima has engaged a lawyer to work on this. However it's hard to nip the problem: the minute a store is busted, it simply closes down and sets up elsewhere. The good news is that the fakes are so badly made they're not a real threat, and pricing for the originals start at USD35, which isn't bank-breaking.

### A PLACE CALLED HOME

Christina admits that her choice to stay in Hanoi has to do with the people and the environment. "It's noisy but it has a lot of charming French architecture, and the locals are very nice," she says.

Little surprise that Christina lives in a five-storey, 4,000 sq ft terrace house that is best described as an Ipa-Nima bag you can live in. It's got a lovely curved facade that gives an art deco feel, setting the stage for the totally mad indoors.

"I like places with lots of open windows, plus my swimming pool is the best!" brags Christina about her dip pool located in the backyard. "Many of my friends have been 'christened' in my pool – you can open the windows and just jump in!"

It's not a home just anyone can live in: rich colours pervade and the space is filled with Mark and Christina's eclectic collection of art and furniture.

An old Chinese noodle cart doubles up as the bar next to the foosball table. All over the house, Andy Warhol prints hang next to 1920s Shanghainese beauty posters and Dali-esque painting. Turkish-style furniture is mixed with modern pieces. The living room

is painted a passionate red and a cow skin carpet is strewn in the middle of the room, completed by a lush velvet sofa. Bookshelves are crammed with wedding and family photos.

The décor cools upstairs in the bedroom, which is painted pale yellow. On the wall hangs an oil painting of a Vietnamese woman. Romanticism prevails with a pretty four-poster bed and pink frills.

### ELEMENTS OF HER INSPIRATION

Incredible as the rest of the house is, nothing prepares one for Christina's walk-in wardrobe. It's more like a house for her clothes, bags and shoes! Interestingly, this room truly reflects Christina's personality, and reveals the mind and passions behind the designs.

You will not find a single logo bag in her wardrobe, but only very carefully selected items of sartorial art such as vintage pieces that are unique and quirky. It's when you observe her personal tastes that you realise the source of inspiration for many of her creations.

Christina has a huge collection of mesh purses which she has acquired from flea markets around the world. The most

remarkable of these are a set of antique Victorian purses, very rare.

This fascinating woman is the most curious mix of exquisite taste and functional practicality. She may love the latest fashion, but she would keep her clothes for 15 years, knowing styles come right back in fashion. "But I recommend throwing away anything you can't fit into anymore, because you're only kidding yourself if you think you could get into that skirt again!"

And that is the secret of Ipa-Nima's (and Christina's) universal appeal – it looks wild and beautiful on the outside but it is totally useful and intelligent on the inside. **Tiger Tales**

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