

Why is Vivienne Westwood Capturing Young Chinese Today?

Transcript:

Jonathan: Welcome back to the table. This month, we are stepping firmly into the "Made by China" era, where hyper-focused local footwear brands are completely rewriting the rules of global brand confidence. We also explore why China's twenty-somethings are naturally gravitating toward Vivienne Westwood as the ultimate visual antidote to quiet luxury, and we unpack a massive skincare shift you aren't reading about in Western media: why top-tier beauty brands are no longer merely competing with one another, but are fighting for relevance against the total normalisation of clinical dermatology.

Topic 1: The Shift from 'Made in China' to 'Made by China'

Jonathan: Let's dive straight into our first topic. We are tracking a profound macro shift away from the old "Made in China" manufacturing mindset and straight into a sophisticated "Made by China" creative era. Local players are designing uniquely Chinese aesthetics that aren't just winning market share domestically; they are triggering a process of cultural discovery that is catching the attention of international inbound tourists. A perfect case study here is the footwear brand Pane (P-A-N-E). They are an incredibly young enterprise, founded only around 2022, yet they have positioned themselves beautifully within the premium market lifestyle space. Fan, can you give us an operational overview of this brand before we break down why their traction is structurally significant?

Fan: Yes. I wouldn't even classify them as traditional "affordable luxury." They successfully identified a distinct white space sitting squarely between high-end luxury trainers and standard, mass-market athletic sportswear like Adidas. I have to admit, I hadn't closely tracked this brand until it suddenly began spiking across Xiaohongshu and international TikTok feeds with users hunting for their specific silhouettes. When you analyse the company's background, the founder has over a decade of deep expertise in the high-end tailoring business. This manifests directly in the physical product; even stripped of its branding, the construction, materials, and lines look exceptional. While their designs reference the classic German Army Trainer archetype, they actually look more like a refined, sleek bowling shoe silhouette.

What makes their business model fascinating is that they completely bypassed loud, mass-market advertising. Their expansion within mainland China has been highly organic and healthy. They operate only a handful of offline retail outposts, but each boutique is conceptualised like an immersive gallery—one mimics a vintage vinyl record store, another is designed around historic timepieces. They expand their footprint strictly by collaborating with partners who share an identical lifestyle universe.

Lately, this setup has collided with the massive wave of inbound regional tourists utilising China's new visa-free entry policies. Suddenly, Pane has gone viral on international TikTok via creators from markets like Thailand and Russia showing off unboxing videos. Because international consumers quickly realise they cannot purchase these shoes outside of China, it has triggered a fascinating "reverse surrogate shopper" trend. International travellers are intentionally routing trips to their Shanghai boutiques to purchase multiple pairs. Because it exploded internationally, domestic Chinese consumers took notice of the global hype, and now the brand is facing an unprecedented surge in local demand as well.

Jonathan: There is an immense amount of strategy to unpack there. Visually, the product absolutely speaks for itself. In China, this silhouette is universally categorised as a *Dexunxie* 德训鞋, which translates directly to a German Military Trainer—the classic retro indoor athletic outline.

Fan: Exactly. In the luxury space, the gold standard for this silhouette is Maison Margiela. That is the immediate mental anchor when a Chinese consumer hears the term *Dexunxie*. In Western markets, you just call them classic trainers. The mass-market alternative would be something like the Adidas Samba.

Jonathan: Right, that defines the exact structural territory we are looking at. But Pane sits comfortably closer to the Adidas price range—hovering around the \$110 to \$130 USD sweet spot. It is priced higher than a generic daily sneaker, yet it is significantly more accessible than a Maison Margiela. The aesthetic and execution punch well above that weight class. What is strategically vital here is that while Pane is designed and manufactured in China, they do not rely on loud, flag-waving patriotism to sell the product. It is simply a fantastic contemporary brand, full stop. We spend so much time advising global brands on how to localise their heritage for China, or helping Chinese heritage entities translate their story for the West. Yet here is a young brand winning purely on universal design merit and quiet execution.

Fan: Yes. And we are seeing this exact blueprint manifest more frequently across China. Is it an iconic heritage house yet? We don't know—the enterprise is only a few years old. But from a brand architecture and marketing perspective, they have covered every structural base. They aren't shouting about their geographic origin; they are just delivering a universally appealing lifestyle aesthetic. If you dissect their digital strategy, even when highlighting a single footwear drop, they construct an entire narrative universe around that specific item—extending from product naming conventions to editorial campaign styling, store interior design, and curated partnerships. Unlike standard transactional merchants who chase a short-term trend angle to cash in and quickly disappear, Pane is methodically building a long-term community footprint.

Jonathan: That distinction is critical. Marketers globally preach the gospel of community building, but a common error Western brands commit when entering China is viewing the market as one single, monolithic community. You must identify specific sub-communities and speak to them with precise contextual nuance. Pane is executing this perfectly by mapping their brand narrative directly across independent music, design, and localised urban subcultures.

Fan: Precisely. Because at their core, these subcultures share an identical psychographic profile. The consumer who appreciates independent vinyl record culture is often the same individual tracking how to modernise traditional Chinese aesthetics. These are regional tastemakers curating a highly specific lifestyle standard. They are actively seeking an alternative to mass-market commercial branding like the standard Adidas three-stripes logo. Pane strips away visible logos and lets the pure design language and silhouette serve as the identifier. This level of detail extends all the way down to the personal branding of their retail staff. Their in-store advisors are highly active on Xiaohongshu, openly identifying themselves as client advisors or store managers for their Shenzhen or Shanghai locations to publish their personal style profiles daily. The original global blueprint for this tactic was Abercrombie & Fitch back in the day, right?

Jonathan: Absolutely, although in Abercrombie's case, that corporate execution eventually became highly problematic. Let's assume Pane is on a much healthier corporate trajectory. But the underlying mechanics remain true: transforming your front-line retail associates into authentic digital brand ambassadors is a highly effective way to anchor a community. What is equally fascinating is that Pane never drafted a massive global expansion roadmap. They focused on nailing their core audience and starting intentionally small. Pane aligns perfectly with the Seth Godin methodology: find your minimum viable audience, cultivate intense loyalty, and only then pour fuel on the fire.

Fan: Exactly. You have to build the foundation first.

Jonathan: And the fact that this foundation is organically pulling in international travellers to Shanghai is a massive market signal. Witnessing a "reverse Daigou" effect where consumers from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and beyond are prioritising buying multiple pairs during their next trip to Shanghai to resell them on platforms like Vinted or eBay is a complete inversion of historical retail flow.

Fan: Definitely. And it proves that Chinese design language has long-term global appeal if the fundamentals are solid. What fascinates me about Pane is that this international viral lift was completely unplanned. You can tell it's entirely organic because they are currently hiring corporate staff at a frantic pace on Xiaohongshu to manage unexpected operational scaling. They hit a stroke of luck, certainly. But as the Chinese idiom goes, if you aren't prepared, you cannot catch "the wealth falling from the sky" (泼天富贵). If they hadn't spent years perfecting their product, refining their themed retail environments, and building their aesthetic assets, an international tourist's TikTok post would have just been a passing blurb. They converted the viral moment because their brand universe was already fully realised.

Jonathan: It is completely design-led. When the product architecture is exceptional, marketing amplification works seamlessly. Interestingly, Pane recently executed a collaboration with another premium local Chinese brand that we track closely: Herbeast (东边野兽). Fan, can you break down the Herbeast model?

Fan: Herbeast is proudly and explicitly "Made by China." The brand name translates literally to "Beast from the East." They launched initially in premium skincare and have since systematically expanded into body care, home fragrance, and broader holistic lifestyle

categories. They look at the consumer through a total lifestyle lens rather than just selling a single functional consumer commodity. What stands out is that you rarely see their community talking about standard cosmetic efficacy on social media; their core brand identifier is anchored in a highly traditional Chinese ingredient: the Lingzhi mushroom.

Jonathan: Which is universally recognised in global wellness spaces by its Japanese nomenclature, the Reishi mushroom.

Fan: Yes, the Reishi mushroom serves as their foundational essence and driving narrative. Growing up in China, Lingzhi is culturally regarded as a legendary, almost mythical medicine. What Herbeast executed brilliantly is absolute clarity on their brand identity. From top to bottom, they embody the "Beast from the East"—a deliberate counter-narrative to the stereotype of the soft, passive Chinese woman. Their branding communicates an understated, calm, and deeply rooted internal strength.

Jonathan: It leverages the organic texture of the material beautifully. If you look at the raw Lingzhi mushroom, it possesses a gorgeous, wood-like, highly architectural quality. Herbeast delves directly into the raw beauty of their botanical materials. What I find incredibly ironic is that you have numerous Western wellness brands taking imported Reishi mushrooms grown natively in Sichuan, repackaging them into sleek, minimalist Western packaging, and selling them back to Western consumers at a premium. There is a far deeper authenticity when a local Chinese brand leverages thousands of years of regional botanical expertise, roots it in its native origin, and translates it into a contemporary, modern aesthetic that refuses to copy Western conventions. It is uniquely Chinese, ultra-modern, and exceptionally executed.

Fan: Exactly. They use complex local botanicals, and it is stitched directly into their visual design language. Furthermore, they prioritise slow-form editorial content. They publish their own independent print magazine called *The Gap City*, which focuses entirely on the cultural anthropology of mushrooms and local ecology rather than pitching product promotions. They co-produce this alongside a highly specialised publication house from Chengdu. When Herbeast collaborated with Pane, it was a perfectly aligned partnership. They aren't chasing short-term viral fame; they are intersecting two identical cultural universes to bring both communities forward.

Jonathan: That is a massive point. The external perception of Chinese digital marketing is that it is defined entirely by the hyper-accelerated speed of Douyin live streams. While that transactional model certainly dominates mass-market retail, the high-end consumer segments are actively demonstrating an appetite for "slow marketing." A printed, heavy-stock editorial magazine provides a tactile, calm alternative that this generation is craving. We see this exact behaviour with premium leather goods brand Songmont (山下有松). They run a highly successful, slow-form podcast that frequently extends past the 90-minute mark, focusing entirely on deep cultural dialogues around female empowerment, craftsmanship, and modern philosophy. High-net-worth consumers are buying into that depth as an antidote to the lightning-quick live-stream marketing.

Fan: Yes. Songmont approached this with genuine cultural depth. Their podcast is titled 山下声 (Shan Xia Sheng). To understand the strategy, you have to look at their Chinese name, 山下有松, which translates to "there is a pine tree standing at the foot of the mountain."

Because Chinese is an image-based language, that phrase instantly triggers a specific feeling of resilience and calm longevity in the local mindset. Crucially, they didn't use a standard fashion influencer as the host; they hired Zhou Yijun, one of China's most respected investigative journalists and former war correspondents. Hiring a host with immense intellectual authority completely elevates the asset as she interviews deeply grounded cultural icons, writers, and artists across industries.

Jonathan: That choice of host speaks volumes. Selecting an investigative journalist with immense credibility is a deliberate, strategic brand filter. This leads directly to my main strategic takeaway: it is an absolute mistake when Western corporate executives look at the Chinese market and use the phrase "*Guo Chao*" as a lazy shorthand for a trend they cannot influence. Using that phrase today as a generic excuse for poor strategic localisation drives me crazy. This isn't a trend of passive nationalism; it is a reality of elite local competition. These brands are winning because they design superior products, master localised community ecosystems, and deliver sophisticated contemporary aesthetics at a highly competitive premium price point. Global brands must stop hiding behind catchphrases, step onto the same playing field, and match that exact level of execution. Fan, your closing thoughts on this chapter?

Fan: Two final operational thoughts. First, I completely echo your frustration. Hearing the word "*Guo Chao*" used lazily in brand presentations completely misses the point; this generation genuinely appreciates, critiques, and lives within contemporary Chinese culture. Second, as much as we praise Pane's exceptional brand architecture, they face an immediate product challenge. While their aesthetics and storytelling are world-class, consumers are increasingly noting on review threads that their silhouettes are quite stiff and lack long-term physical comfort. They have an engineering issue to solve. Given their name, maybe they will just claim it's intentional, but structural product refinement must be their next step.

Jonathan: Indeed, a diffusion line focused purely on ergonomic comfort might be the strategic answer.

Topic 2: The Rise of Vivienne Westwood in China

Jonathan: Moving on to our second chapter, which brings us directly into the emotional psychology of China's Gen Z and young Millennial luxury demographics. There has been an immense amount of buzz across fashion media regarding the sudden boom of Vivienne Westwood in mainland China. Structurally, that narrative is incorrect. We are indeed tracking an exceptional surge in volume, but this isn't a return of a legacy audience. It is an entirely new generation of twenty-somethings discovering the punk heritage brand for the first time as a personal expression asset. Fan, how is Vivienne Westwood successfully capturing the imagination of young Chinese luxury buyers right now?

Fan: There are several core strategic drivers. First is the global Y2K aesthetic wave. For modern twenty-somethings, it isn't nostalgic at all; it is a brand-new, futuristic aesthetic discovery. Because fashion operates in cyclical waves, Vivienne Westwood was positioned perfectly to capture this. On top of that macro trend, the house executed a highly strategic

collaboration in late 2025 with the legendary Japanese anime series *Nana*, which represents the absolute pinnacle of independent, non-conformist female self-expression. The intersection of the global Y2K trend and the *Nana* subculture fan base created a perfect storm, leading this generation to discover the house's archive.

Jonathan: That is a fascinating counter-trend. The dominant marketing narrative out of China recently has been entirely focused on understated refinement—no visible logos, neutral tones, and hyper-discreet luxury. Vivienne Westwood represents the complete antithesis of that look. On a product execution level, what is the specific visual asset driving this conversion? Is it the accessibility of their sub-category jewellery, specifically the classic pearl choker adorned with the metallic orb?

Fan: It succeeds precisely because it acts as an affordable counterweight to haute luxury. It is structurally accessible compared to brands like The Row or Chanel. Does China have a massive quiet luxury consumer base? Yes. But the self-expression segment is expanding concurrently. Historically, Chinese professionals maintained a highly conservative, humble dress code in the workspace to avoid drawing individual attention. But today, the rapid digitalisation of the economy and the expansion of creator-class professions mean the traditional corporate dress code is breaking down. Young professionals have immense lifestyle autonomy, giving them total freedom to adopt bold, personal style statements.

Jonathan: Do you see this dynamic creating a sharp operational divide between Tier-1 megacities and lower-tier hubs? If a consumer resides in a Tier-2 industrial hub like Taiyuan, working for a massive national state-owned enterprise, can they realistically walk into a corporate boardroom wearing a full Vivienne Westwood runway look?

Fan: The execution scales based on the environment, absolutely. If you are employed by a state-owned enterprise, you cannot wear an aggressive, asymmetric punk skirt to a corporate presentation. Instead, you wear the classic Vivienne Westwood orb earrings. It serves as a subtle, private nod to your personal identity beneath the uniform. The bold, head-to-toe statement looks are naturally concentrated within creative capitals like Shanghai, while lower-tier hubs adopt the brand via high-margin, entry-level accessories.

Jonathan: That is a brilliantly subtle form of lifestyle nuance. Wearing the orb earrings becomes a discreet sign of personal rebellion. What about the punk narrative? Are consumers connecting with her anti-establishment history?

Fan: The core subculture understands it, but the mass-market volume expansion is driven by a completely different local interpretation of the brand's iconic orb logo. Many young buyers have no contextual knowledge of British punk history; they look at the logo and assume it is simply the planet Saturn. They have constructed an entirely localised narrative around it, viewing the "Saturn orb" as an outer-space fortune talisman that brings personal good luck. It is a total reinterpretation of an anti-establishment symbol into a positive consumer anchor, and from a sales perspective, it works flawlessly.

Jonathan: That is phenomenal. It perfectly illustrates the concept of *Bù míng jué lì*—not fully understanding the underlying mechanics or historical origins of something, but finding the aesthetic execution incredibly powerful and cool. The core takeaway for international brand

directors is that you must respect and protect your authentic core advocates, because they generate the cultural coolness that the mass market desires to emulate. This phenomenon also lays the groundwork for brands that embrace bold colours, distinct logos, and high-energy statements.

Fan: Exactly. We partner with contemporary British luxury footwear house Kurt Geiger, whose visual brand DNA is defined as "London in the sun"—vibrant, joyful, and deeply expressive. It targets a completely different psychographic profile compared to a traditional, quiet European heritage house, yet both models possess highly profitable, non-overlapping target audiences within mainland China. We are tracking a clear expansion of this expressive segment, which explains the strong traction of brands like Diesel under the creative direction of Glenn Martens, whose futuristic, high-contrast Y2K denim treatments speak directly to consumers who want their clothing to match their internal emotional state.

Jonathan: This reflects the broader evolution of consumer psychology in modern China. Over the past twenty-five years, the local consumer has moved from basic economic consumption to extreme individualism and self-expression. Whether a buyer expresses themselves via the ultra-premium, quiet luxury aesthetic or through subcultural punk attire, the golden rule for international marketing remains completely unchanged: maintain total clarity on your authentic brand identity. Brunello Cucinelli should never start randomly attaching safety pins to their knitwear to chase a youth trend. Understand your exact consumer cluster, deliver your core identity with absolute conviction, and scale from that foundation. Fan, your closing thoughts?

Fan: Maintain absolute brand integrity. It makes me highly critical of executions like Givenchy's recent breakfast pop-up cafe initiative in China, which felt like a shallow attempt to mimic a lifestyle activation trend simply because Prada executed a similar format successfully. It felt completely disconnected from Givenchy's actual brand DNA. Do not allow a short-term digital trend to dilute your overarching global brand narrative; if a marketing activation doesn't authentically align with your core universe, don't force it.

Topic 3: The New Norms of Beauty Treatments in China

Jonathan: Our concluding chapter focuses on the rapid, structural evolution taking place within the premium beauty and wellness ecosystems. The macro insight here is stark: global beauty conglomerates are waking up to the reality that premium skincare brands are no longer merely competing against traditional cosmetic peers. They are fighting for absolute market share against the total normalisation of clinical dermatology and medical aesthetic procedures. In Tier-1 Chinese hubs, visiting a medical aesthetic clinic is fully integrated into regular consumer grooming routines. Fan, help us unpack the technical mechanics here, because the consumer conversations taking place on the ground are incredibly sophisticated.

Fan: The accessibility and normalisation of clinical beauty treatments across Tier-1 and Tier-1.5 hubs is unparalleled. Consumers treat a clinical visit as a routine weekly or monthly maintenance appointment for mechanical deep-cleanses, specialised LED light therapies to resolve skin redness, or laser treatments to get rid of hyper-localised UV spotting.

Furthermore, if a consumer lives in an exceptionally arid climate like Beijing, their baseline treatment is *Shuiguangzhen*.

Jonathan: Which translates technically to micro-injectable, non-crosslinked hyaluronic acid skin boosters.

Fan: Yes. It delivers the exact active ingredients found in your luxury topical serums, but mechanically guarantees they bypass the epidermal barrier to reach the deep layers of the dermis where cellular repair occurs.

Jonathan: To a Western audience, undergoing a regular clinical micro-injection routine sounds like an advanced, highly invasive procedure. Are we stating that this is now standard maintenance for the core beauty consumer in China today?

Fan: Yes, and it is completely standard for both female and male demographics. Topical skincare is ultimately a long-term gamble; every season, global brands launch new molecules backed by expensive marketing campaigns, but human skin can realistically only absorb a fraction of a topical cream. The Chinese consumer has invented a specific term for this discrepancy: the "intellectual tax" (智商税). When faced with a choice between investing €400 in a premium topical cream that *might* show subtle results in six months, versus investing €200 in a monthly clinical injection that delivers visible hydration and density within 48 hours, the consumer performs simple, practical math. It is an entirely outcome-driven decision.

Jonathan: It is hyper-pragmatic. Regardless of disposable income level, the modern Chinese beauty buyer is obsessively focused on verified efficiency. For decades, global skincare relied on marketing "magic in a jar." While premium topical products absolutely serve an essential role in daily barrier protection, you have laid out a logical consumer evolution: direct, layer-specific delivery of active ingredients yields immediate results. There is also a fascinating cultural contrast regarding social stigma; consumers openly audit their clinical journeys, healing times, and structural adjustments on Xiaohongshu.

Fan: It is an entirely transparent conversation across China, South Korea, and Japan. You cannot realistically mask the results anyway, because your skin quality changes visibly. However, the overriding aesthetic benchmark in Asia remains absolute natural beauty. Consumers explicitly reject the over-filled, frozen look common in some Western celebrity circles. In China, that unnaturally swollen look is termed "Mànhuà" (馒化 - Steamed Bun Face), and it is viewed as a major failure of aesthetic execution. The goal is to look completely untouched, dense, and naturally radiant.

Jonathan: That brings us directly to the technical frontier of this topic: what comes next. This is where the industry is shifting from traditional fillers to advanced tissue biostimulators, specifically PLLA and PDLLA. Traditional PLLA treatments—locally termed *Tóngyánzhēn* ("Child-Looking Needle")—rebuild deep structural volume, but they carry operational friction, requiring intense, painful post-procedure facial massage to ensure the coarse particles don't clump into hard subcutaneous nodules. The real disruption is PDLLA, commercially known as Juvelook, and locally marketed as *Sùyánzhēn* ("No-Makeup Skin Quality Needle"). Fan, help us delve under the surface of that.

Fan: This is where the marketing terminology requires strict, objective scepticism. When a medical treatment invoice lists consumer-friendly marketing phrases like "Child-Looking Needle" or "Young Girl Needle," a sophisticated consumer must look directly at the underlying science. The breakthrough with PDLLA (*Sùyánzhēn*) is that it acts as a true skin-density biostimulator rather than a mechanical filler. It combines non-crosslinked hyaluronic acid for immediate hydration with ultra-fine, patented spherical microparticles. Because these molecules are perfectly round and porous, they scatter flawlessly within the shallow dermis without any risk of clumping. This completely eliminates the mandatory post-procedure massage requirement, drops nodule risks to zero, and instructs the body's own cells to synthesise fresh collagen naturally over time. It delivers density with absolutely zero risk of the "steamed bun" puffiness.

The absolute frontier beyond this is Exosome 2.0 Therapy, which moves completely away from synthetic materials. Exosomes are nano-scale extracellular vesicles derived from pristine cell cultures that operate as advanced biological messengers to directly deliver concentrated growth factors, proteins, and RNA into depleted tissue, instructing fatigued skin cells to structurally repair skin health at a cellular level.

Jonathan: This creates a critical strategic dilemma for international skincare brands. If consumers are systematically allocating their budgets toward monthly clinical injectables to achieve a completely natural look, how do topical skincare brands preserve their commercial positioning? Is there a risk of overusing jargon and turning off those sceptical consumers?

Fan: The brands that remain completely insulated from this threat are clinical, derma-graded barrier-repair giants like La Roche-Posay, CeraVe, and SkinCeuticals. After a clinical injection or a high-intensity laser treatment, the skin barrier is temporarily compromised and highly vulnerable. Dermatologists strictly prohibit the use of complex anti-ageing creams during this healing window, mandating simple, pure medical barrier-repair hydration instead. The brands facing an immediate commercial crisis are those whose primary marketing hook relies on selling topical anti-ageing or science-based selling points. A consumer will look at your premium wrinkle cream, look at the instant efficacy of clinical neurotoxins or Juvelook, and realise your topical USP is completely redundant because it attempts to duplicate exactly what the beauty treatment is doing.

Jonathan: That defines the exact battleground. Premium skincare houses must pivot their product positioning to actively integrate with the clinical workflow. Your topical formulations must be engineered to either prepare the skin barrier *before* a procedure, enhance the longevity of a biostimulator *during* its cycle, or safely accelerate cellular repair *after* a clinic treatment. If your product line doesn't clearly serve a precise, post-clinical consuming scenario, you risk being entirely cut out of the luxury consumer's budget. Fan, thank you for guiding us through the science. We will see you at the table next month.