

Cool clothes a hot topic

As temperatures rise and interest in heatwear increases, South-east Asian designers are proving that they are adept at balancing heat and style



Hot Bodies, a show by local branding firm Anak, asks: "What if, instead of avoiding the sun, people embraced it with a smarter, but no less stylish, style of dress?" PHOTO: ANAK



Carmen Sin

At the height of the holiday season in 2025, a blink-and-you-miss-it clothing exhibition opened with an audacious proposal. It asked: What if, instead of avoiding the sun, people embraced it with a smarter, but no less stylish, form of dress?

For three weeks in December, the show Hot Bodies by local branding firm Anak filled a hall at lifestyle cluster New Bahru with 10

design works commissioned from creatives around the world. Some 6,000 visitors surveyed the likes of a suit made for 38 deg C weather by Japanese brand Front Office; a sarong wrap by Malaysian label Fern, with whirling batik patterns that change colour as ultraviolet levels rise; and a "wind-catcher" jacket by Vietnam's The

Idiot, an inversion of the conventional wisdom of the windbreaker. Each was produced in consultation with heat researchers, such as Associate Professor Jason Lee, director of the Heat Resilience & Performance Centre at NUS' Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

That these articles were undeniably hip challenged the notion of hot weather as an adversary of style. In its slouchy fit and crinkled indigo hue, the 38 deg C suit kept all the rakish appeal of the Western garment, still formal enough for the workplace. Yet, its double-sided twill material placed a silk welt against the skin for cooling, while its calculated roominess ensured breathability.

Says show curator Lee Hanyi: "Dressing for the cold climate is already gao dim (Cantonese for 'settled'). But for hot weather, we found a big gap."

"If you think about it, no one has really kind of pushed it. Not in a cool sense, I mean. It's either the auntie stuff (gauzy UV-protective sleeves and sunhats) or Uniqlō Airism."

It is early days, but the conversation around heatwear has begun to stretch from the technical into the fashionable, with a vision of no or few concessions to either side.

With this comes opportunity. The exhibition, supported by SG Eco Fund and DesignSingapore Council, was in part driven by the Government's bigger ambition of positioning the Republic

as a world leader in heat resilience, says Ms Lee. The founder of Anak, who has toyed with developing a heatwear line, had a parallel instinct that "we could own the consumer side as well".

These are discomfitingly fiery times, and scientists in the United States warned in February that a hothouse Earth, warmer than the 2 to 3 deg C temperature rise the world is on track to reach, was getting closer. The year 2024 is the hottest on record and 2025 is the third warmest.

In Singapore, the temperature hit 37 deg C in Ang Mo Kio in 2023 – matching the high watermark first set in 1983.

Clothing is poised to become a battle line. Attire is one of the three determinants of how hot a person feels, says heat centre director Prof Lee.

The other two are the environment and their physiology, both well taken care of, he adds. "Weather services have always been there – very good, very organised – and we're always investing in physiology."

It is in the under-served apparel space, where the heat crisis has opened a fresh bounty of business opportunity. Singapore, and the region more broadly, has the credentials to come out on top, says Anak's Ms Lee. "We're experts. We've been using sarongs, wearing linen. The world could learn from us."

Interest in the subject was encouragingly higher than expected, adds Ms Lee. Limited quantities of the windcatcher stocked at the show's emporium sold out and people of all ages caught on to the contrarian campaign for sun acceptance more easily than anticipated.

Curiosity from visiting Britons, Australians and Scandinavians – including the head of design for Ikea – hinted at the potential for global payoff, notes Ms Lee. She foresees exponential growth in interest as the planet continues to warm.

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MS LEE HANYI, founder of Anak

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MS ISABEL SICAT, co-founder of Toqa

REGIONAL SMARTS

The "heatwear, but make it nice" space is not short of contenders.

Tropical expertise abounds in the region and South-east Asian designers are just as, if not more, practised at juggling heat and style, trendy brands included.

Buzzy Malaysian label Anaabu prioritises natural and semi-natural fabric blends for their cooling properties.

In its rotation are linen, cotton blends and occasionally cool-to-the-touch rayon. Loose cuts are favoured, like its signature batwing cut – realised as boxy button-down shirts and casual tops with subtle batwing sleeves for ventilation.

Fellow Malaysian brand Hira, ware produces breezy nano-air pocket seersucker cotton shirts that it bills as "heatproof".

Though heat is a primary design concern by virtue of the brand's tropical home, it is the all-seasons, fade-free appeal of its clothing that the brand prefers to market, says Anaabu spokesperson Ale Isa.

Across the region, these default heat-girding efforts are rarely advertised. It just comes with the territory. Filipino label Toqa's playfully brash clothing uses a "sport resort" formula that combines the movement of performance wear with the laidback ease of resort. It does not shy away from body-skimming fits, combating clamminess with stretch and sport meshes that often incorporate utility accents – like a belt-bag buckle on a floral skirt. Its fabrics allow for airflow and movement, says co-founder Isabel Sicat.

Like its Easiest Tee, a new product that can be worn as a poncho or an oversized T-shirt, its pieces are designed to be multi-way, which Ms Sicat says is essential in warm climates. "You want versatility and return on investment, not single-use garments."

Its Sport Resort approach is informed by life in South-east Asia,

where clothes should be functional and unprecious enough to be worked in, as well as support chilling, she adds. "For me, that balance between function and ease is what tropicality really is."

Sportswear deadstock – or obsolete inventory – sourced from around the region is a go-to for the brand.

This tropics-forward approach might come more naturally to Filipino designers, suggests Ms Sicat.

She says: "The Philippines is a developing country with limited infrastructure, and that often forces designers to be resourceful, adaptive and inventive. In many ways, Filipino designers are already accustomed to designing for heat, instability and improvisation."

"That lived reality naturally produces work that's responsive rather than idealised."

The sentiment drives at the uniqueness of each country's philosophy, even within the same equatorial belt. If the Philippines can draw on the deadstock shipped to its shores, Singapore's edge is in its urbanity.

Co-founder and creative director of local fashion insider darling, In Good Company, Mr Sven Tan says: "In Singapore, the experience of the tropics is not only about the outdoor heat. Mr Tan deployed lightweight fabrics and ventilated constructions to respond to the outdoor climate, while allowing for layering indoors with the collection's soft jackets."

A pair of dyed, fluid trousers featured a thin sarong-like wrap overlay, secured with a knot at the side. In true Singapore style, it looked fit for the office or the beach.

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Anaabu's Batwing Top. The Malaysian label prioritises natural and semi-natural fabric blends for their cooling properties. PHOTO: ANAABU

Spotlight on the tropics



Toqa's The Lotus Tank. The Filipino label's playfully brash clothing uses a "sport resort" formula that combines the movement of performance wear with the laidback ease of resort. PHOTO: TOGA

FROM C1

TROPICS RISING

Talk of regional know-how coincides with a growing tropical movement in fashion.

Lasalle College of the Arts fashion lecturer Daniela Monasterios-Tan sees industry players invoking the tropics more regularly lately.

The Philippines, in particular, seemed to cotton on early, she adds, raising as examples the work of Cebu-founded creative studio and clothing label Tropical Futures and Toqa. The latter's satirical video work for the 2022 contemporary art event Hawai'i Triennial used the term "Extreme Aloha" to collapse stereotypes of Hawaii and the Philippines as monolithic beachy idylls.

Says Ms Monasterios-Tan: "Comparing being a fashion student 20 years ago with now, within the briefs, there's definitely a very big push to centre our region and lived experience instead of just basing things off the Western fashion system."

The school has run Tropical Imaginaries for the last three years, a speculative project that tasks students in its fashion design and fashion media degree programmes to use the tropics as a starting point in their work. A Vietnamese student in the inaugural batch borrowed the idea of air vents used by compatriot architect Vo Trong Nghia to develop his clothing line, and students have imagined a world soaked in constant tropical rainfall.

This push was prefigured in 2016 by the school's White Shirt project that asked students to remake the wardrobe classic for this part of the world. Their work was installed outdoors and introduced to the elements of heat, rain and humidity. "It was one of the first projects by Lasalle's School of Fashion that explicitly centred our weather and geography," Ms Monasterios-Tan says.

The idea is to resist the historical notion of the West as axis mundi and design things that are more suited for what people call the "global South", she adds.

Fashion might have been a little late to the party, though. Ms Monasterios-Tan reckons it is one of the last creative mediums to enter the tropical conversation, beat by decades by Tropical Modernism in architecture – where ventilation is key – and the late 1960s Brazilian Tropicalia art movement.

The delay might have to do with an inherent tolerance for some discomfort in dressing, which has never been about pure utility.

She says: "As soon as humans were able to, one of our earliest



Lasalle's White Shirt project installation from 2016. Students were asked to remake the wardrobe classic for this part of the world. PHOTO: LASALLE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

We know it is hot. We don't have to wear our suit and tie, but culturally, and in certain professions, (that is a) no. So, we also want to come out of that.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JASON LEE, director of the Heat Resilience & Performance Centre at NUS' Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine

desires was expression. That's why people stuck feathers on or put mud in different patterns on themselves."

The urge to telegraph modernity could be one reason Western dressing – associated with the latest fashions – took a little longer to unseat.

Some of the excitement around the tropical campaign might have to do with its new name, suggests Ms Monasterios-Tan. "Maybe this always existed, it just had different vocabulary. Now, we're always talking about decolonising, but maybe this is something that people have always done."

There is ample historical evidence of stylish heatwear. Baju kurung worn here in the 20th century had gussets, which kept more space between skin and fabric. Batik cheongsam from the 1960s used natural fabrics common to the print. Cotton sari had and still have a light layer for the head.

"If you look at the traditional garments around the tropical belt, many of them are very suited for

the climate," she adds.

Resortwear is another close substitute – those billowy kaftans and raffia bags that are the standard vacation kits pushed by global brands. Bali brands, or designers living close to the sea, do overlap with resort, says Ms Monasterios-Tan.

The crucial difference between so-called tropical fashion and resortwear is the gaze. Are you for locals or visitors? Says Ms Monasterios-Tan: "Resort is a consumer industry. It's not necessarily a design industry. It's answering to the market."

Indigenous designers, on the other hand, design for people who live in the region. "They ask: 'How do you dress fashionably for this region? What is everyday life like for someone living here?'"

SHIFTING SOUTH

These questions slot easily into the zeitgeist.

Tropical Futures founder Chris Fussner sees the needle shifting south, with more non-white designers like Vietnam's Fanci Club building an international following.

Mr Fussner, who has a background in speculative design, says Tropical Futures began at a time of cataclysmic weather events in the Philippines, marked by 22 tropical cyclones in 2017 – an unusual high, met with a head-scratching global indifference.

"Actual futuristic stuff was happening, good and bad, in the tropics. Why is there not more discussion?" he had thought.

Of the present day, the Filipino-American designer says: "Obviously, we're in different times. We have (luxury fashion houses) Prada and Loewe referencing Indian sandals and sarongs.

"For the record, I'm really 'pro' these things. People will hate on it, and there is appropriation that I don't agree with in how some of

this is executed, but at least it brings these cultures into the conversation."

It is also an age of shopping local, at least among Gen Z, he adds. He declines to reveal his age, but notes that the turn towards buying from home ground is a departure from the "anglophilic" premium on Western goods still held on to by Gen X. Bringing the conversation back to heat, he says traditional garments with cooling qualities like the handwoven Hablon textile and Barong Tagalog (an embroidered long-sleeved formal shirt for men) are resurgent in the Philippines.

His Tropical Futures clothing line has put out six contemporised iterations of the sarong, the latest taglined "built for heat."

As the goal of thermal comfort in apparel goes mass, Prof Lee is wary of overzealous claims.

There is no industry standard for sweat-wicking attire, he says, referring to fabrics that purport to spread sweat over a larger surface area for quicker evaporation. This means any brand can claim wicking ability.

Claims abound, but true fabric innovation has been scarce, he notes. His ideal cloth would be a non-absorbent one that dries up the surrounding air, or reduces its humidity, facilitating the evaporation of every drop of sweat secreted.

Still, science cannot force changes in how people dress, not when clothes awaken what Prof Lee calls the "nonsensical" sides of people.

He says: "We know it is hot. We don't have to wear our suit and tie, but culturally, and in certain professions, (that is a) no. So, we also want to come out of that."

It is amusing, he adds. "We say we must be evidence-based, but we professors are the ones wearing suit and tie."

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