MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Sophia Chong

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Sophia Chong. Deputy Executive Director, Hong Kong Trade Development Council.
Portrait Sophia Chong - Photo Credit ® HKTDC
Questions conceived and hosted by Florian Müller

MODEM:
Your professional path began in a business environment. Today you shape Centrestage, a platform that makes creativity visible. In what way do you put the unique fashion industry within the broader spectrum of industries you are promoting?

SOPHIA CHONG:
Fashion became a captivating aspect of my professional life at HKTDC, especially with the debut of Centrestage in 2016. While we organise some 40 international exhibitions and conferences throughout the year, this one stands out for its unique ability to showcase how fashion connects commerce, creativity and culture in powerful ways. Preparing the 10th edition, with over 250 brands from more than 20 countries and regions, reinforced the significance of this industry for Hong Kong and beyond. Working closely with both global labels and local designers has shown me that fashion is not only a creative expression, but also a strategic driver for international collaboration and economic growth. Last year, Robert Wun showed at the Hong Kong Palace Museum, and this year Guo Pei is presenting in M+. Both examples demonstrate how outstanding artists have confidence in what the platform offers for their work.

MODEM:

You act as a bridge between institutions, industry, and independent voices. How does your work shift when very different participants such as designers, media, and buyers come together with their own expectations?

SOPHIA CHONG:
Each group arrives with its own priorities. Designers look for visibility and also want to sell their creations, media seek compelling narratives, and buyers focus on products that will succeed commercially. I intend to create a space where these needs can align naturally. This means curating content that offers inspiration while encouraging business opportunities, from runway shows to seminar discussions. At our location, different formats featuring local Hong Kong designers and international pavilions allow all participants to meet on equal ground. By fostering mutual understanding, we create moments where creative vision, industry expertise, and market potential can meet in a way that benefits all involved. The fair presents fashion not just as a product but as a reflection of current ideas, from sustainability and innovation to cultural identity. That thematic depth helps spark attention and make the experience more relevant for different audiences.

MODEM:
You support creative processes not only from a distance but also by enabling targeted encounters at Centrestage. In your experience how do meaningful connections between participants usually take shape during the fair?

SOPHIA CHONG:
Connections often begin with a shared point of interest. At our fashion trade show, this could be a conversation sparked during a runway presentation, a discussion after a seminar, or a handshake in the networking activities. The variety of zones, from craftsmanship to circular fashion, offers natural spaces for dialogue between fashion professionals. We arrange business matching opportunities that foster not only immediate interactions but often lead to long-term collaborations that continue well beyond the fair. The mix of international and Hong Kong participants creates a rich context for partnerships that combine different skills, perspectives, and cultural influences. This environment fosters sustainable innovations and lasting relationships, supported by initiatives like for example the Redress Design Award which highlights responsible fashion practices and presents their award show at our venue.

MODEM:
When an edition is successful you can feel it on multiple levels, from conversations at the booth to follow-up projects months later. How do you personally recognize that a fair was more than just a calendar appointment?

SOPHIA CHONG:
I see it in the way momentum continues after the event ends. When exhibitors tell me that meetings led to confirmed orders, media coverage, or new partnerships, it shows real impact. I also notice when local designers gain new markets, as with Mountain Yam expanding internationally or Angus Tsui presenting in London and Milan. I’m also pleased to see many young talents emerging from our annual Hong Kong Young Fashion Designers’ Contest. These achievements reflect that the fair has been a catalyst, not just a date in the diary. A successful edition leaves participants inspired, with tangible results that strengthen both their creative and business development. The integration of sustainable themes and the showcasing of emerging talents confirm our role as a forward-thinking platform.

MODEM:
You move daily between structure and openness. Are there any principles or rituals that help you stay grounded even when formats and content change?

SOPHIA CHONG:
The guiding principle is always to connect a clear strategy and creativity with opportunity. No matter how formats change, this remains constant. For each initiative, we prioritise frequent and open communication with stakeholders to remain engaged with their work and experiences. Such meaningful connection serves as a reminder that behind every stand and runway show are people who have invested their talent and energy. It helps me focus on the purpose of the fair and keeps decisions anchored in its mission. A defined focus and a strong sense of purpose allow me to adapt while staying connected to the event's core values. We've also been focusing more on future-oriented ideas and valuable exchanges, making sure these aspects stay central as the event continues to evolve.

MODEM:
Participation in fashion fairs is often a strategic decision for brands and buyers. In your view what makes Centrestage an essential platform in such a competitive market?

SOPHIA CHONG:
We offer both international exposure and strong local connections. This year, with participants from many different countries, including the United Kingdom as our first Partner Country, and Thailand establishing its largest presence ever, it provides access to diverse markets. At the same time, it supports Hong Kong designers through showcases like solo runway presentations and FASHIONALLY runway which spotlight our local talents and their collections. The fair combines exhibition sectors, curated pavilions, and high-profile shows to attract a broad audience of buyers, media, and fashion lovers. This balance of global reach and local depth makes it a platform where strategic relationships are built and creative ideas can translate into concrete business opportunities. The fair's focus on thoughtful production and enduring value also helps brands differentiate themselves in a crowded market.

MODEM:
The topic of mental health has gained visibility over the past two years through two panel talks previously held during your event. What does it mean to you that this issue is now part of the dialogue within the fashion context?

SOPHIA CHONG:
We feature a diverse array of panel discussions that address current industry trends and needs in the fashion industry, with mental health as a form of social sustainability. Fashion is dynamic but also demanding, and the pressures can impact overall wellness. By creating space for open discussions—such as the two talks hosted during our event in collaboration with the Mental Health in Fashion campaign. This initiative raises awareness internationally through education and cultural programming, helping make the topic both visible and actionable. Incorporating this subject in our event's programme sent a message that people are at the centre of the industry. It encourages understanding, reduces stigma, and helps participants recognise that resilience and balance are as important as innovation. Ultimately, this dialogue contributes to a healthier and more sustainable creative community. It aligns with the fair's broader mission to nurture talent holistically, integrating mental health as part of professional growth.

MODEM:

In the fashion world there is often high pressure to stay visible and creative at the same time. Which structures or practices do you find especially helpful in supporting long-term mental balance?

SOPHIA CHONG:
Creating supportive networks is key. We make sure that designers can connect not only with buyers but also with peers and mentors. This exchange helps them navigate challenges more effectively. Our events consistently feature educational elements, such as master sharing sessions that provide inspiration and learning opportunities from successful figures. In the previous edition we were excited to have Hong Kong-born haute couture designer Robert Wun to share his inspiring journey from student to prominent figure in the fashion world; this year we invited another renowned couturier Guo Pei to share her remarkable story from Mainland China to the international stage. We also foster open dialogues between internationally acclaimed designers like Han Chong and emerging talents, reminding young designers that building a career in fashion is a marathon, not a sprint. The ongoing conversations about mental health further empower individuals to seek balance.

MODEM:
You work with people who constantly reinvent themselves in an industry that rarely slows down. What gives you orientation when many things happen at once?

SOPHIA CHONG:
The clear mission of positioning Hong Kong as an international fashion hub provides my direction. Whether coordinating large-scale showcases or supporting emerging talents, every decision is guided by that goal. I also draw focus from the diversity of participants, from established labels to young designers. Seeing their creativity reinforces why we bring so many perspectives together. This orientation allows me to manage multiple priorities while keeping the bigger picture in view. It ensures that the fast pace of the industry is channeled into meaningful and lasting outcomes. Commitment to eco-awareness, new approaches, and preserving heritage remains central to our direction.

MODEM:
Imagine someone leaves the fair with a feeling that stays with them beyond trends or business contacts. What would be the greatest compliment someone could give you about the platform you helped build?

SOPHIA CHONG:
The greatest compliment is knowing that participants leave feeling inspired and empowered, witnessing their businesses thrive after engaging with us. We are dedicated to nurturing young talent, sparking creativity, and building meaningful business connections that foster durable partnerships. Our goal is to create a platform that connects the global fashion community. When attendees share stories of collaboration and original concepts encouraged by their experiences here, it reaffirms our mission to cultivate a vibrant community that nurtures growth and creativity. Ultimately, it’s fulfilling to see our platform reinforce Hong Kong as Asia's fashion capital.