

Queer



The winner takes it all Last year's champion Honey West, middle, passes the crown to Victoria, right.

Game of thrones

A new queen might have been crowned, but as **John Ovans** discovers, Shanghai's drag scene still lacks the leader to conquer new territories

Okay, this is where we're gonna get shady.' Honey West, the winner of the 2013 Annual Drag Queen Competition in Shanghai, has seized our dictaphone and is about to turn the air a blistering shade of blue. 'He makes a beautiful girl, but take that shit to Thailand and become a ladyboy, because that is not drag. If you look at my pictures from last year when I won the competition, I was the ugliest bitch on stage. I was ugly as fuck. Last year when we had 12 or 13 performers, it was dry as fuckin' paint. They were all gorgeous as fuck, head-to-toe tens. Ten, ten, ten, ten. And here comes me, this 200-pound, six-foot-three, American fat guy dressed as whatever the fuck, and people just ate it up. Everyone's like, "You're gorgeous!" and I'm like, "Clearly you're fuckin' blind".'



Locked, loaded and ready to fire out soundbites like they've got rounds to spare, drag queens make for dream interviewees. We first encountered the burly, brash and crash fabulous Ms West at the latest competition, where she was wearing a Tina Turner-style mini dress, a cheap wig from the Yu Gardens market, and 'heels from Taobao that are ripped at the front because my feet are so goddamn big.' Today, though, hood yanked up, biker jacket on, she's Greg Kasten, a teacher from Florida, with just the cocky charisma and the foul mouth to give away his alter-ego, whom he describes as an 'educated white woman who wants to be black. She has no problem getting down and dirty like a bitch, she'll take off her

earrings, she'll beat you if she gets drunk enough.' Despite the fighting talk, she missed out on clinching the title in 2014.

Held every November, the competition is the biggest drag event of the year, held in a packed-to-the-rafters 390 Bar. While a number of people in full drag compete – first in a catwalk round, then with an individual performance, which generally comprises lip-synching along to something – many others tip up with their genders bent to various degrees, from men in lipstick to women with drawn-on moustaches. Repping for the Chinese, the winner for 2014 was the sleek and perfectly put together Victoria, who took the title with a plan of attack that included three different outfits and a self-described 'gorgeous and slutty' performance of Madonna's 'Gimme All Your Luvn'.

While she refers to Honey West as her 'sister', Victoria has quite different ideas about what qualities

make a reigning queen. 'If you are pretty, you are the winner,' she says sweetly, adding, 'If you are ugly, oops, I'm sorry!' Victoria is Suzhou-born Leslie Chan, whose resting face is a coquettish smile, permanently poised to deliver Miss World-style inspirational maxims. I ask the similarly immaculate-looking Chan how he feels drag – more commonplace in liberal Western countries – fits into a less accepting Shanghaiese society. 'In China, a lot of guys want to [do] drag, but they are very shy,' he claims. 'I just want

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to express that, to translate that, and say, “You're Asian, you're pretty, and you can do whatever you want. If you think you are the best, you will be.” Your confidence is frickin' important

– I am the Chinese boy but I can be the international queen. You have the high heels inside of you!

There are currently no regular shows wholly dedicated to drag in Shanghai. The success of the competition – now in its seventh year – however would suggest that there's certainly an audience for it, and by extension, the possibility of monetising it.

So why doesn't it exist? 'We have businesses that back the LGBT community, so why wouldn't they want to back a drag show?' posits Kasten. 'I don't think there should



be any excuses about why it isn't happening, we need to make it happen. Someone just needs to be in charge and do it.'

It's a sentiment echoed by drag king Brandi Stewart, aka Ennis FW (a play on the acronym NSFW), also the competition's zesty compère. 'Like any other artistic endeavour it just comes down to whoever has the time and the energy to put it all together, and the charisma to sell it,' she says. There are, though, a few other tricky variables to account

for, one being the language barrier. 'While Shanghai Pride is a bilingual event, in order for there to be a regular bilingual drag performance, it would take strong leadership from somebody with that ability,' Stewart says. 'And at this point, it's really just a vacancy. It's there for anyone who wants it.'

While this Messianic figure has yet to surface, the gay community has much to thank from Charlene Liu, whose tireless work with Shanghai Pride helped win the

organisation the title of Shanghai Hero at last month's *Time Out* Best of Shanghai Awards. According to Liu, there are still some obstacles that need to be overcome. 'Venues are still conservative in terms of organising drag shows,' she says. 'When bigger venues are ready to include drag shows as part of their usual go-go dancer line-up, it will help to make the scene bigger.' Despite this, she believes Shanghai as a city is heading in the right direction. 'Many of us are getting

bolder and braver when it comes to how we want to project ourselves, or how we want to have fun,' she says.

As attested to by the competition, fun is what drag queens are good at. In fact we had so much fun that we woke up the next morning and realised we had accidentally deleted all our interviews, so had to re-do them. Occupational hazards aside, we'd be glad of more opportunities to revel in Shanghai's drag scene on a regular basis – maybe we've got high heels inside us after all.

Spotlight Peter Le 2015 calendar

Lock up your daughters and leave your sons at the front door – Peter Le's got a calendar out. Scream!

If you're not acquainted with the work of Peter Le, then let us familiarise you. If after reading this article, however, you feel compelled to familiarise yourself even further, we suggest you do so in the privacy of your own home because a quick Google will lead you to websites that are about as NSFW as it gets.

To save you the explicit, hi-res imagery, we'll sketch it out for you roughly: while California-born and of Vietnamese origin, Le is the most famous gay porn star in China and purveyor of production company Peter Fever. While Le has never actually confirmed whether he's gay, straight or just whatever, he's been credited with putting the spotlight on Asian men in an industry that

frequently rejects them or regards them as feminine. He's also a writer, personal trainer, bodybuilder and clothing designer – and now, hanging up on your wall for the next 12 months.

Under the creative direction of Hans Ibrahim, with photography by Jeff Chen, Le has kept his trousers on for the new calendar, but we still get to see him in various states of undress, with abs, pecs and biceps all greased up and popping against brightly coloured backdrops. You'll also catch him sucking on lollipops, biting chunks out of watermelons and engaging in other cheekily suggestive (but PG-rated) activities.

All proceeds from the calendars – which will be available until the end of January

and priced at 50RMB – will go to Shanghai Pride. **John Ovans**

To order your copy, email shanghaipride@gmail.com.

