

# Designer Nostalgia in Hong Kong

## D. J. Huppertz

As a means of framing and filtering the past, nostalgia asserts a sense of stability in a context of imminent change. The nostalgic reconstruction of history at once seems to extinguish history's temporal distance, while providing for a pleasant experience through the repression of its negative aspects. In the late twentieth century, nostalgia became a common experience as history and tradition began to play a crucial role in consumer culture. The uncertainty faced by Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s, with the anxiety of the 1997 handover looming, made it an exemplary production site for a wide range of nostalgic cultural products. Through the analysis of two prominent exponents of Hong Kong nostalgic design—graphic designer Alan Chan and fashion house Shanghai Tang—this article examines nostalgia's appeal to both local and global audiences. Alan Chan's graphic design work in the 1980s, and his subsequent move into product design in the 1990s, were marked by the appropriation of nineteenth-century China Trade paintings and Shanghai commercial imagery from the 1920s and 1930s. The fashion house Shanghai Tang provides a further example of Hong Kong's nostalgia fever, but with a more eclectic approach to Chinese history taking in not only modern Shanghai, but Qing dynasty and Maoist nostalgia as well. On the one hand, both companies are products of a specific local context that reflects Hong Kong identity. On the other, both appeal to a particular global imaginary in order to sell nostalgic Chinese fantasies to a global market.

A combination of the Greek words *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful condition), the term "nostalgia" was coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the late seventeenth century to describe extreme homesickness among Swiss mercenaries fighting in distant lands.<sup>1</sup> It described a medical condition, the symptoms of which included despondency, melancholia, mood swings, weeping, anorexia, and suicide attempts. Nostalgia remained a medical or psychological disease until the twentieth century, during which the term lost its medical usage and its core referent, "homesickness," but retained some sense of "home-like" sentiments as it was assimilated into Western popular culture after World War II. In popular culture, nostalgia's appeals to continuity of identity proved popular in the face of the various forms of discontinuity inherent in modernization's program of rapid change. For Fred Davis:

The nagging sense of the absence of a future undercuts what is perhaps the chief unspoken aim of nostalgia's

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1 F. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979). The original article is Johannes Hofer, "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia," published in 1688 in Latin (English translation by Carolyn K. Anspach, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 2 (1934): 376–391). In a design context, see also Jonathan M. Woodham, *Twentieth Century Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Chapter 9 of this text, "Nostalgia, Heritage and Design" examines late-twentieth-century nostalgic design in Britain and the U.S.

exercise, that is, to assuage apprehension of the future by retrieving the worth of the past.<sup>2</sup>

This “apprehension of the future” was precisely the situation of late-colonial Hong Kong, with only the certainty being change after June 30, 1997. The uncertain future related not only politics, but covered all aspects of social life with Hong Kong’s imminent change from a British colonial city to a Chinese city. It is in this context that Hong Kong’s nostalgia fever of the 1980s and 1990s arose—cultural products from film and literature to advertising and design tapped into the colony’s anxiety about future change.

### **Hong Kong’s Nostalgia Fever**

Hong Kong’s “nostalgia fever” of the late 1980s and 1990s has been widely characterized as a symptom of handover anxiety, incorporating a broad range of cultural products that might construct a cultural identity based on a particular history before it (potentially) disappeared. In an article about nostalgic films, cultural critic Rey Chow noted that the colony’s nostalgia fever included not only films but also the renovation of architectural landmarks, the popularity of old postcards, posters, and publications, as well as the fashion for collecting antiques.<sup>3</sup> However, the specific place and time that clearly stood out as a reference in this wave of nostalgia was modern Shanghai—the glamorous decadence of the “Paris of the East” in the 1920s and ‘30s was a key touchstone that embodied Hong Kong’s contemporary aspirations and fears.

Art historian David Clarke, in his book *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization*, argues that Shanghai nostalgia was:

... handover-related in that it showed a fascination with a city whose past might prefigure Hong Kong’s future: Shanghai was also a modern Chinese capitalist city that had been taken over by the Communist regime.<sup>4</sup>

While he skirts around the issue of Shanghai’s semi-colonial status, Clarke suggests the popularity of Shanghai nostalgia lay in its prefiguring of Hong Kong’s future. In the contemporary case of Hong Kong, such nostalgia perhaps represented a yearning for the “golden age” of Shanghai modernism. The connections between the capitalism and global trade in the Shanghai of the 1920s and ‘30s and Hong Kong of the 1980s and ‘90s are hardly coincidental. Significantly, commercial Shanghai modernism was unpopular with the Chinese Communist regime, so it is unsurprising that the revival came primarily from Hong Kong rather than the mainland.

In the local film industry, Shanghai stood out as a cultural touchstone. Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1988) and *Centre Stage* (1991) are among the best-known of the Hong Kong nostalgia genre. Chow argues that temporal dislocation is the key to Hong Kong nostalgia films such as these because:

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2 Ibid., 71.

3 Ibid., 133.

4 D. Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 187.

... they are not, despite their often explicit subject matter, nostalgic for the past as it was; rather they are, simply by their sensitivity to the movements of temporality, nostalgic in tendency. Their effect is tenacious precisely because we cannot know the object of such effect for sure. Only the sense of loss it projects is definite.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Ackbar Abbas reads Hong Kong's nostalgia fever in terms of preservation, "memory without pain," in which history becomes a kind of surface decoration.<sup>6</sup> For Abbas, the historical past disappears in a series of pop images, as the specifics of history disappear in the generalized nostalgic spirit of the pre-handover period. This generalized nostalgia without a clear object of loss is at odds with Fred Davis's account of nostalgia in which "there is *some common* experiential base to which the word points and which it *qua* word evokes."<sup>7</sup> For Davis, nostalgia's material is not merely a general past, but "the past which is the object of nostalgia must in some fashion be a personally experienced past."<sup>8</sup>

Adding a further dimension to Hong Kong nostalgia, Dai Jinhua notes the parallel fashion for nostalgia in 1990s mainland China:

Nostalgic atmosphere, in embellishing the vacuum of memory and in creating personal identities within the span of historical imagination, simultaneously accomplishes a representation of consumerism, as well as a consumerism of representation.<sup>9</sup>

Given the decline of revolutionary communism in the 1980s and 1990s, the question of collective representation in China was up for grabs. But in the mainland case, nostalgia, Dai argues, was an expression of the individual or the consumer, rather than the collective. And, unlike in Hong Kong, modern Shanghai was not the touchstone. Meanwhile, in a global sense, theorists of postmodernism such as Fredric Jameson, and of globalization, such as Roland Robertson, have suggested that nostalgia is common to postmodern culture in general.<sup>10</sup> Images of the past that reappear in popular representations were part of a global tendency in late-twentieth-century design. American graphic designers such as Paula Scher and Louise Fili, or British designers such as Neville Brody and Peter Saville, for example, revived an eclectic mix of prewar modern styles in the 1980s as a challenge to the purity of international-style modernism exemplified by Swiss School graphic design.<sup>11</sup>

However, the particular situation of Hong Kong during the 1980s and 1990s was unique, and the example of Alan Chan's and Shanghai Tang's rise to prominence there exposes the complexities of nostalgic design in the late twentieth century. Their cultural products not only were designed for local consumption in their exploitation of particular local histories, but also provided exotic Asian imagery

- 5 R. Chow, "A Souvenir of Love" in R. Chow, *Ethics after Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity, Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 147.
- 6 A. Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 83. Abbas also has written specifically about the relation between prewar Shanghai and contemporary Hong Kong in "Cosmopolitan Descriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong," *Public Culture* 12:3 (2000): 769–786.
- 7 F. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, 7.
- 8 Ibid., 8. Davis distinguishes nostalgia from "antiquarian feeling," a term he uses to describe a time that has not been personally experienced.
- 9 D. Jinhua, "Imagined Nostalgia" in *Postmodernism & China*, A. Dirlik and X. Zhang, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 211.
- 10 See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); and R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).
- 11 See also E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London, Reaktion Books, 2006), especially chapter 4; and R. Poynor, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), especially chapter 3.

for a predominantly Western tourist and export market. Thus, they provide an insight into the nostalgic formation of the Hong Kong identity, and its appeal to a particular global imaginary. Significantly, both Alan Chan and Shanghai Tang continued expanding their businesses after the 1997 handover, suggesting that, while the local context of Hong Kong's nostalgia fever may have been a starting point, their continued global appeal means that a careful consideration of Hong Kong in an international context also is crucial.

### Alan Chan: Shanghai Retro

Alan Chan was born in Hong Kong in 1950 and, after completing a ten-month graphic design evening course, worked in advertising during the 1970s before setting up his own company, Dimensions Advertising, in 1980. He founded Alan Chan Design Company in 1986, with its core business as corporate identity, brochures, annual reports, advertising, packaging design, posters, and interior design. Among its hundreds of international awards and accolades, the Alan Chan Design Company made *Graphis Magazine's* "Top Ten Design Firms of the World" list in 1997. More recently, Chan's position as a leading Hong Kong designer was confirmed with a major retrospective at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum in 2003, "The Art of Living," featuring a selection of his designs and artwork.

Chan is best known for his nostalgic designs; an early example of which is his visual identity for the Canton Disco (1984), which included signage, menus, coasters, and stationery (Figure 1). The menus feature a repeated motif of a swimmer against a flat background of bright green, pink, or yellow (a different color for each type of menu). The swimmer, with his slicked-back hair and 1930s bathing costume, was appropriated from an old cigarette card, illustrated in a Western style. With its decorative line work and irregular lettering, the logo is clearly influenced by contemporary

Figure 1  
Alan Chan, Canton Disco menus, 1984.  
Permission of Alan Chan.



Euro-American, postmodern typography, particularly the Milanese studio Memphis. This decorative and colorful approach to typography is similar to art deco, itself in keeping with the style of the 1930s swimmer illustration. The disco's name, Canton, utilizes the English name for Guangzhou, the trading port in neighboring Guangdong province, and all of the text is in English rather than Chinese characters. Described by Hilary Binks as "Hong Kong's most upmarket and fashionable discotheque of the 1980s,"<sup>12</sup> Chan's designs were clearly meant to appeal to the expatriate community, or to a cosmopolitan Hong Kong audience with Euro-American tastes. This example of Chan's work might be termed "international postmodernism" with a Chinese flavor, in which an already modernized Chinese figure and local reference is appropriated and reused, a Hong Kong version of Paula Scher's or Louise Fili's contemporary retro designs.

Another well-known early Chan design project is his corporate identity and packaging for the Fook Ming Tong Tea Shop (1987), comprising a series of tin tea caddies and packaging, decorated with reproductions of China Trade paintings which illustrate the tea-making and trading processes (Figure 2). The Fook Ming Tong Tea Shop is situated in the Prince's Building, in the heart of Hong Kong's wealthy business and tourist district, and its products are stocked in the Peninsula and Mandarin Oriental luxury hotels. Its trade consists of high-quality Chinese teas for tourists and local tea connoisseurs. In addition to designing the packaging and graphics, Chan helped design the shop's interior, which features antique Chinese furniture and traditional Chinese tea shop signage. The design project thus comprises a blend of traditional Chinese elements in the interior with Europeanized fragments from the eighteenth-century China tea trade in the packaging; all for a predominantly Western or at least a cosmopolitan local audience. The China Trade paintings featured on Chan's packaging were part of a large export trade in late seventeenth-century southern China in

Figure 2  
Alan Chan, Fook Ming Tong Tea Shop  
packaging 1987. Permission of Alan Chan.



12 H. Binks, *Alan Chan* (Hong Kong: Alan Chan Design Company, 1991), unpaginated.

Figure 3 (top)  
Alan Chan Creations, Calendar Girls coasters.  
Permission of Alan Chan.

Figure 4 (bottom)  
Alan Chan Creations, Calendar Girls notepads.  
Permission of Alan Chan.



goods produced specifically for the European market. Guangzhou was southern China's eighteenth-century trade center before the foundation of Hong Kong diverted much of the trade to the British colony. Interestingly, China Trade porcelain, lacquer work, silks, paintings, and other goods were either reproductions of European models or executed in European styles.<sup>13</sup> In a repetition of the China Trade, Chan is functioning as a cultural broker, reselling China Trade paintings as packaging for luxury goods in a style readily recognizable to a global market. As a marker of design success, Chan created a similar range of tea caddies and coffee containers for the Mandarin Oriental Cake Shop in 1989, then opened his own tea shop, the Mr. Chan Tea Room, in 1993 and added a Tokyo franchise in 1996; all utilizing a similar design style.

In 1990, Chan founded Alan Chan Creations as a vehicle for his nostalgic Chinese style, which then was applied to a wide range of products including stationery, T-shirts, tea containers, cards, coasters, watches, coffee mugs, and mouse pads. The products were no different from similar products around the world, except for the distinctive decorative veneer applied to them. Their staple imagery was modern design from 1920s and 1930s Shanghai, China Trade paintings, commercial imagery from early Hong Kong, and, more recently, Maoist and Cultural Revolutionary imagery. In Hong Kong, Alan Chan Creations were (and still are) distributed by large department stores and luxury hotels, as well as the Alan Chan Creations shop in Victoria Peak's tourist precinct. Initially marketed to tourists in Hong Kong, Chan soon began distribution of his products in Japan, and later even wider distribution throughout the U.S. and Europe.

In a copybook illustration of postmodern eclecticism and pastiche, Chan's products display a variety of recognizable signs, from his ubiquitous "calendar girls" appropriated from Shanghai advertising calendars (*Meinu Yuefenpai*), to early modern commercial images including newspaper and magazine advertisements, matchbox covers, fans, and old photographs applied to numerous products from coasters to stationery (Figures 3 and 4). A typical Chan coaster set comprises a pastiche of early-twentieth-century Chinese newspaper advertisements, mostly for Western or Western-style products such as toothpaste, butter, and medicines, with the text and simple line drawings converted to gold on a black background (Figure 5). A typical mouse pad is decorated with a pastiche of Shanghai calendar girls (Figure 6). Even the swimmer from the Canton Disco designs reappears on a notepad. What these images have in common is a narrative of Chinese history that will appeal to both Western consumers and to a local audience—a modern commercial China already integrated into global trade networks.

When asked in an interview why he had used the calendar girls, Chan replied:

13 Margaret Jourdain and R. Sloan Jenyns argue that the "China Trade" was a copying culture in which Chinese manufacturers "imitate models sent from Europe with the most exact and servile fidelity." M. Jourdain and R. Sloane Jenyns, "Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century," *Country Life* (London, 1959): 13.

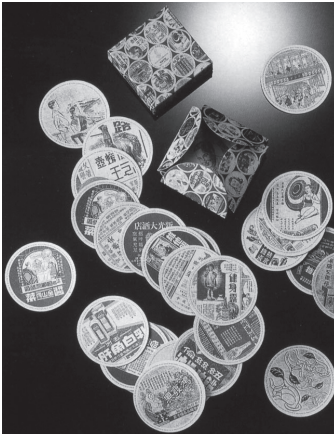


Figure 5 (top)  
Alan Chan Creations coaster set. Permission of Alan Chan.



Figure 6 (bottom)  
Alan Chan Creations, Calendar Girls mouse-pads. Permission of Alan Chan.

Firstly, the illustration technique and the attention to detail is unique.... Secondly, the concept of Chinese women seen from a European perspective is particularly interesting. I was trying to find a solution that would appeal to both Western and Chinese tastes. From a commercial point of view these paintings of fashionable Chinese ladies, as seen from a Western perspective and illustrated by both Oriental and Western technique, are a sound formula.<sup>14</sup>

In his search for an “East meets West” mix acceptable to Western taste, Chan had discovered an earlier period of hybrid Chinese culture in interwar Shanghai.<sup>15</sup> The other issue he raises, that of using images from an already existing European perspective, is one I will return to later. For the moment, the issue of the Hong Kong identity is worth analyzing further because, as Chan added: “Nostalgia for the past is growing. The products offer a sense of history and cultural identity.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Chan, while the products of Alan Chan Creations were supposed to appeal to Western tourists, they also were intended to provide Hong Kongers with some kind of cultural and historical identity. Their nostalgic appeal to prewar Shanghai modernism offered a continuity of identity for a colonial city-state heading towards potentially drastic changes after 1997.

Shanghai’s historical connection to Hong Kong is worthy of further discussion since it presupposes a different historical narrative to both the official British colonial and the Chinese narratives of Hong Kong. With civil war raging in China in the years immediately after the Japanese withdrawal in 1945, Hong Kong experienced waves of immigration from the mainland; particularly from Shanghai. In these years, according to Leo Ou-Fan Lee:

... while the majority of the refugees lived in dire poverty in the outskirts of the city, Hong Kong’s commercial and cultural elite underwent what might be called a process of “Shanghainization”: Hong Kong was no longer a city to visit or to take a vacation, but a place to stay.<sup>17</sup>

Lee cites the film industry, department stores (particularly Wing On and Sincere), restaurants, and textile manufacturers as examples of Shanghai cultural productions reestablished in Hong Kong after, or immediately before, the Second World War. Shanghai modernism and the impact of Shanghai capital, culture, and expertise on Hong Kong run counter to both the colonial narrative of the city’s modern development under benevolent British *laissez-faire* capitalism, and the mainland Chinese narrative of both Shanghai and Hong Kong as products of foreign imperialism. This alternative narrative highlights the continuity of Shanghai commercial culture in Hong Kong, reinforced by Chan’s many references to Shanghai-modern design.

14 Z. Lynch, “Reviving Those Sweet Shanghai Smiles,” *Hong Kong Apparel* 1 (1996): 52.

15 For a discussion of an alternative Hong Kong “East meets West” design aesthetic, see my article on graphic designer Henry Steiner: D. J. Huppatz, “The Chameleon and the Pearl of the Orient,” *Design Issues* 22:2 (Spring 2006).

16 Z. Lynch, “Reviving Those Sweet Shanghai Smiles”: 53.

17 L. Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 330.

The particular aesthetic Shanghai migrants brought with them was both cosmopolitan and urban, mixing American and European art deco and modern styles with local references. The advertisements and calendar girl posters used extensively by Chan reflect Shanghai's urban lifestyle of the 1920s and 1930s. Virgil Kit-yiu Ho has analyzed the adoption of modern Western lifestyles in Shanghai during this period, including an intriguing analysis of new models of beauty. He writes about the Shanghaiese adoption of Western criteria for (particularly female) beauty, whereby physical attributes became paramount:

In an article "On Woman's Beauty and Ugliness" published in a vernacular magazine, the author teaches his readers how to appreciate a beauty. The long list of the "basic" parts of the female body to be appreciated includes the breasts, buttocks, thighs and shins. The spiritual quality of charm, which used to be cherished as an essential hallmark, has almost completely given way to sheer physical attraction. The new concept of beauty has taken a more sensual and erotic orientation, which is almost certainly a cultural expression of the influence of the West on Cantonese values.<sup>18</sup>

These are the calendar girls reproduced on Chan's products: Chinese women conforming to Western stereotypes of beauty: images that would regain popularity in 1980s and 1990s Hong Kong. David Clarke argues that:

The allure of Chan's designs is reinforced by his frequent recourse to representations of the female body. Images culled from promotional calendar and poster art of a bygone era, and which in their time signified a specifically Chinese contemporaneity, now refer to a past with a feminized and modern flavour.<sup>19</sup>

In modern Shanghai, the male body image also was transformed into that of the modern Western gentleman in suit and tie—tall and muscular with a fashionable short Western haircut. Advertisements of the ideal new modern man "suggest the desirability of a visibly robust male body, perhaps a new, alien, yet 'modern' and ideal symbol for the urban male."<sup>20</sup> This virile new male is illustrated by Chan's swimmer of the Canton Disco, dressed in the latest swimwear with a fashionable short haircut.

As well as fashion and body image, the advertisements in pictorial magazines utilized by Chan were for a range of Western consumer goods—from soaps to electric and gas cooking equipment, cameras, phonographs, and fountain pens. The calendar poster also was developed as a form of advertising modernity to promote Western goods in the early twentieth century, chiefly by British and American tobacco, medical, cosmetic, textile, and oil companies.

18 V. Kit-yiu Ho, "The Limits of Hatred: Popular Attitudes towards the West in Republican Canton," *East Asian History* 2 (December 1991): 91.

19 D. Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 186.

20 V. Kit-yiu Ho, "The Limits of Hatred: Popular Attitudes towards the West in Republican Canton," 92.



Shanghai modernism thus was linked to global capitalism, adapting to local conditions via processes of selection and transference—the calendar posters typically combined elements of traditional Chinese painting with modern design. Lee suggests that traditional visual styles were used to “tone down” the foreign nature of the products.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while traditions were disappearing in modern Shanghai due to rapid modernization, traditional Chineseness became embodied in a style that could be used in a modern advertising format to make alien products seem familiar. In her analysis of Shanghai’s “Butterfly” fiction of the same period, Rey Chow argues that traditionalism was created by producing a traditional “aura.”<sup>22</sup> She notes that this Shanghai-style new “aura” of native culture later flourished in overseas Chinese markets, particularly Hong Kong:

With the “exiled” Chinese, the marketable quality of “tradition” has long been blended with a pragmatism that justifies modernized life-styles *and* Euro-American living standards.<sup>23</sup>

Chan’s Shanghai-modern revival suggests many parallels between the two periods, particularly Shanghai’s semicolonial adoption and adaptation of modernism, and Hong Kong’s colonial adoption and adaptation of postmodernism. In the 1990s, Shanghai-modern imagery was reframed by Chan and applied to consumer objects in a second-order nostalgia for an earlier period of both Chinese modernity and global capitalism. It also reinforces a narrative of Chinese commercial culture in which Hong Kong is seen as the inheritor of Shanghai’s position as a cosmopolitan and capitalist Asian metropolis. This is nostalgia’s continuity in the face of discontinuity—the threat that, first, such commercial culture may not continue after 1997 and, secondly, with China gradually opening up to world markets, Hong Kong’s unique position as mediator between China and the West may be lost.

### **Shanghai Tang: Branding Chineseness**

David Tang, founder of the exclusive China Club and fashion house Shanghai Tang, is a similar though more flamboyant cultural entrepreneur than Alan Chan. Like Chan’s designs, Tang’s aesthetic involves recycling images from prewar Shanghai, but his range of references is even more eclectic, taking in Maoist and Qing dynasty nostalgia as well. Schooled in Britain from the age of thirteen, Tang studied philosophy and law at London University. A contemporary “dandy,” famous for his upper-class English accent, love of Cuban cigars, and wide-reaching social network, Tang noted in an interview that he was “shocked China wasn’t marketed to an upscale audience before.”<sup>24</sup> Besides the China Club and Shanghai Tang, Tang also is involved in various other businesses including the Hong Kong art gallery Hanart TZ, well known for its promotion of mainland Chinese avant-garde art of the 1980s and 1990s. He described himself

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21 L. Ou-Fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, 77.

22 R. Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between the West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 38.

23 *Ibid.*, 83.

24 L. Skov, “Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma” in *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress*, S. Niessen, A. M. Leshkovich, and C. Jones, eds. (London: Berg, 2003), 230.

in a 1997 interview as a contemporary cultural broker between China and the West.<sup>25</sup>

Tang's first major cultural project, the exclusive China Club, opened in 1991 on the top floor of Hong Kong's old Bank of China building. The club, designed in a Shanghai-modern style, included a dining room, bar, smoking room (particularly for cigars), and library filled with rare books. The walls were filled with a variety of Chinese cultural references—from kitsch Maoist posters and art to contemporary avant-garde mainland art including Wang Guangyi and Yu Youhan's playful appropriation of Maoist propaganda. Tang's use of Shanghai-modern nostalgia was expanded to include the now-deflated seriousness of Maoist propaganda, appealing to Hong Kong's political and business elite as kitsch.

Tang's other significant cultural venture, the upmarket department store Shanghai Tang, sought to recreate the glamorous decadence of 1930s Shanghai. The store features not only men's, women's, and children's clothes; but also shoes, accessories, and home furnishings including cushions, photo frames, towels, and teapots. Readymade clothes primarily are variations on traditional Chinese clothing in bright colors and patterns in a variety of luxury fabrics such as silk, leather, suede, and cashmere, finished with fine detailing including the ubiquitous Chinese "frog" clasps or knot buttons. The store also offers an "Imperial Tailors" service, which "revives the diminishing art of Chinese haute couture" via a team of "traditional Shanghaiese tailors," some of whom fled Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution to settle in Hong Kong.<sup>26</sup> The tailoring service offers unique hand-cut and handsewn, made-to-measure fashion in luxurious materials. The flagship store in Hong Kong's Central district opened in 1994, and global expansion began in 1997 with a store on New York's fashionable Madison Avenue (closed two years later, but subsequently reopened nearby), followed by stores in Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, London, Bangkok, Honolulu, and Paris,

Figure 7  
Shanghai Tang, interior of Pedder Street store.  
Permission of German Elkin-Kobahidze.



25 O. Schell, "David Tang: Chinese Puzzle" in *Cigar Aficionado* (July-August 1997) (Accessed online August 6, 2006 at: [www.cigaraficionado.com/Cigar/CA\\_Archives/CA\\_Show\\_Article/0,2322,527,00.html](http://www.cigaraficionado.com/Cigar/CA_Archives/CA_Show_Article/0,2322,527,00.html)).

26 Shanghai Tang promotional brochure, "Imperial Tailors" (2003): unpaginated.



Figure 8  
Shanghai Tang, logo. Permission of German Elkin-Kobahidze.

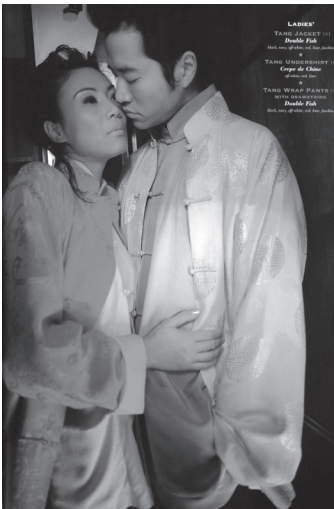


Figure 9  
Shanghai Tang, Tang Jackets, male and female versions. Permission of German Elkin-Kobahidze.

as well as two new stores in Hong Kong in the Peninsular Hotel and Hong Kong International Airport.<sup>27</sup> Riding fashion's "Asian wave" of the 1990s, the New York store's opening generated international celebrity interest, with fashion icons such as Diana, Princess of Wales, and various Hollywood celebrities photographed wearing Shanghai Tang.

Shanghai Tang's design aesthetic is all-embracing, extending from the store's interior to the staff uniforms, distinctive packaging, and stationery. The flagship Pedder St. store (Figure 7) includes not only recreation Shanghai art deco furniture, but also details such as reproductions of two stained-glass panels from Shanghai's famous luxury hotel of the 1930s, the Cathay Hotel. Even the clothing label, "Shanghai Tang: Made by Chinese," and the logo follow the same aesthetic. The logo features a pink line drawing of the Pedder St. building on a lime-green background. Stylized Chinese characters ("Shanghai Tang") in yellow with pink outlines encircle the building's top, while below it on a separate banner are the English words "Shanghai Tang" in lime green on a purple background surrounded by five yellow stars (Figure 8). Like the clothes, the logo appears on bags, stationery, clothing labels, and brochures in variations of the signature Shanghai Tang color scheme of purple, bright-yellow, lime-green, and pink.

Although design references from prewar Shanghai dominate, Shanghai Tang also recycles designs from imperial and Maoist China in what Lise Skov describes as "a pastiche-like appreciation of the Chinese past."<sup>28</sup> The "Tang Jacket," for example, is derived from a combination of a late Qing Manchu official jacket and the Ma Hwa hip-length jacket (Figure 9). Featuring low collars and central Chinese "frog" clasps in a range of patterned fabrics including silk, cotton, and linen, both male and female versions also are available in various colors including lime-green, orange, fuchsia, and red. In Tang's nostalgic Chinese fashion grab bag, Mandarin collars lose their associations with conservative Confucianism, Mao suits lose their political symbolism and no longer suggest the Cultural Revolution's authoritarian discipline, and "coolie" pants lose their connection to indentured labor. The Maoist and Communist party references also include military jackets, a liberal sprinkling of red stars on promotional material and clothing, and accessories such as the "Waving Mao" and "Waving Deng" watches. These garments, effaced of their practical significance and political and economic relevance, easily become stylized Chinese exoticism for an elite global market.

Shanghai Tang can be seen as a Chinese version of Ralph Lauren's Polo brand that recycled nostalgic styles from American "history" in the 1970s and 1980s. Lauren based his collections on Hollywood-filtered American fantasies including mythical figures such as the pioneer, the cowboy, the Indian, and the British aristocratic. His flagship store in Manhattan, Rhinelander

27 At the time of writing (June 2007), there were more than twenty stores world-wide, with plans for future expansion.

28 L. Skov, "Fashion-Nation: A Japanese Globalization Experience and a Hong Kong Dilemma," 230.

- 29 While the longing for tradition also may play a part in Shanghai Tang's *local* appeal, according to Hazel Clark, the Pedder St. store's customers for the Imperial Tailoring service comprise 40 percent local expatriates, 30 percent local Chinese, 25 percent Western tourists, and 5 percent Japanese tourists, suggesting that, even in Hong Kong, the local Chinese audience is not the primary one. See H. Clark, "The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity" in V. Steele and J. S. Major, *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 163. This emphasis on expatriates and tourists is further confirmed by their recent positioning in Hong Kong's International Airport and the Peninsular Hotel.
- 30 From the Shanghai Tang Website: [www.shanghaitang.com](http://www.shanghaitang.com).



Figure 10  
Shanghai Tang, Pagoda Print Qi Pao, 2003.  
Permission of German Elkin-Kobahidze.

Mansion, provided a theatrical staging for nouveau riche American aspirations—stately English aristocratic room “sets” in dark wood and finished with family portraits complete the fantasy of tradition for a newly wealthy clientele who have none. Lauren presents a pastiche of American nostalgic styles, reflecting a yearning for tradition, stability, and history in a rapidly changing society. Shanghai Tang produces a similar nostalgic “stylism,” with similar theatrical set interiors suggesting that, while the content they sell (Chineseness) is “local,” the forms and marketing are imported. What differentiates the two brands is that, unlike Tang, both Lauren’s designs and his public persona are imbued with an aura of authenticity and sincerity at odds with Tang’s parody and playfulness. Lauren’s styles, while on the one hand particularly American, on the other seem to have crossed cultural boundaries with ease to become part of a global fashion language. While the global appeal of Lauren’s clothes can be explained by the postwar spread of American popular culture, particularly Hollywood cinema, Shanghai Tang’s appeal is less obvious.<sup>29</sup>

The global appeal of Shanghai Tang’s kitsch design mix may be explained in terms of its debt to a particularly Western cinematic vision of China. Their “Kung Fu” pants and shirts, for example, evoke Bruce Lee films, while the tightfitting cheongsams are familiar to Westerners from *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) or, more recently, Wong Kar-Wai’s nostalgic cheongsam homage, *In the Mood for Love* (2000). Shanghai Tang’s peasant clothing references evoke the costume dramas of fifth-generation historical films by directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Thus, it was no coincidence that Shanghai Tang’s promotional “face” during the late 1990s was the mainland Chinese actress Gong Li, best known for her lead roles in many of Zhang Yimou’s nostalgic films. As a period actor adorned in sumptuous costumes—from the imperial China of *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1992), to the decadence of prewar Shanghai in *Shanghai Triad* (1995)—Gong Li has been associated with several Chinese historical periods and, for a Western art house cinema audience, she was *the* face of Chinese nostalgic cinema during the 1990s.

As a local phenomenon, Shanghai Tang’s statement of intent reveals the store’s position within Hong Kong’s stereotypical role as the conduit between East and West:

Shanghai Tang sets out to create the first global Chinese lifestyle brand by revitalizing Chinese designs—interweaving traditional Chinese culture with the dynamism of the twenty-first century. Thus, resulting in a vibrant fusion of “East Meets West.”<sup>30</sup>

A specific example is Shanghai Tang’s “Pagoda Print Qi Pao” (2003), a sleeveless, tight-fitting, lime-green dress with hot-pink trimming (Figure 10). Available in silk or cotton, the green fabric is printed

with a white “pagoda print” reminiscent of eighteenth-century Chinoiserie patterns, which were used to decorate Chinese exports from ceramics to furniture fabrics. Both the pattern’s history and the dress’s form are complex. According to Hazel Clark, the tight-fitted qi pao, or cheongsam, came to signify Chinese (and not necessarily Western) modernity in the 1920s and ‘30s, while its association with calendar posters, makeup, and art deco interiors made it a symbol of Western decadence after 1949. In the 1950s, the cheongsam was associated specifically with Hong Kong, particularly with the popularity of *The World of Suzie Wong*, but by the late 1960s its handmade process proved too expensive, and it was replaced by imported ready-to-wear fashions such as the miniskirt. In Hong Kong in the 1960s:

Foreign goods and culture were desirable as they connoted social progress, informed taste, and elite style. The cheongsam, by contrast, appeared too old-fashioned and too obviously “Chinese,” especially for a younger generation who wished to be seen as “modern.”<sup>31</sup>

In contrast then, Hong Kong in the 1990s saw a revival of the cheongsam in the form of an off-the-shelf, colorful, and patterned symbol that could function both nostalgically for local consumers and as Chinese exotica for expatriates or tourists.

Shanghai Tang’s global expansion in the late 1990s highlights David Tang’s aim of selling Chineseness to a global market:

I thought it was crazy that there wasn’t a recognized or respected Chinese brand on the market ... “Made in China” had the bad connotation of poor quality and tackiness. But I knew China had the capacity to produce the best clothes on the market, because they were already making clothes for famous Western brands.<sup>32</sup>

And following this logic, mainland Chinese workers manufacture the bulk of Shanghai Tang’s ready-to-wear line, while a handful of Shanghai tailors custom-craft fashions in Hong Kong. However, despite the Chinese rhetoric, Shanghai Tang was taken over in 2001 by the Swiss-based luxury brands conglomerate Richemont, whose other brands include Cartier, Montblanc, Piaget, and Alfred Dunhill. The latter collection is far from Chinese and, while David Tang remains the company’s spokesman, current CEO Raphael le Masne de Chermont and creative director Joanne Ooi are not locals. Nor indeed are most of the other head designers, who were trained overseas, primarily at Central St. Martin’s College of Art and Design in London. While mainland Chinese provide the labor, the design, branding, and marketing is dominated by Western-educated designers who produce Chinese exotica for a global market.

While known for promoting a playful Orientalist position, Shanghai Tang recently pursued a slightly different direction under

31 See H. Clark, “The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity.”

32 J. Meili Lau, “Recasting Chinoiserie as Modern-Day Chic,” *International Herald Tribune* (online edition, September 17, 1997, accessed August 6, 2006 at: [www.ihrt.com/IHT/SR/091797/sr091797e.html](http://www.ihrt.com/IHT/SR/091797/sr091797e.html).)

creative director Joanne Ooi. From 2003, she initiated the idea of Chinese-themed collections: the first in autumn/winter 2003 entitled “Miao Hinterland.” Drawing inspiration from traditional dress from southern Chinese ethnic minorities, particularly their embroidered patterns and silver ornaments, this collection typifies a type of “internal Orientalism,” whereby living Chinese minority culture is appropriated and exoticized.

Losing its humorous pop cultural edge, in this collection, Shanghai Tang has resorted to repackaging clothing and functional objects of some of the poorest and most disadvantaged Chinese ethnic groups for a particular global market nostalgic for “authentic” (that is, premodern) native culture.<sup>33</sup>

### Globalizing Chinese Nostalgia

In the lead up to the 1997 handover, the nostalgia of Chan’s or Shanghai Tang’s designer goods helped construct a particular Hong Kong identity that was opposed to the conformity of communist China. While their use of pastiche and appropriation can be seen in the light of international postmodernism, it is important to note that not only were their references specifically local, but these techniques also were key design techniques in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai design and advertising; with imitations and adaptations of modern Western styles and processes common. Their work thus can be seen as a continuation of the local processes of cultural transfer typical of eighteenth-century Canton, 1920s and 1930s Shanghai, and early twentieth-century Hong Kong. In the anxious years preceding the mainland’s reclamation of the city, Hong Kong thus is identified with the particular historical narratives of South China’s port cities and their connection to global trade and capitalism.

In this context, Shanghai’s romance and glamorous decadence, and Canton’s commercial culture, could be seen in opposition to the mainland’s collective expressions exemplified by the Cultural Revolution (and, more recently, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre). However, even imagery from the Cultural Revolution eventually was adapted by Chan and Shanghai Tang, and marketed as luxurious kitsch.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that, while Hong Kong’s pre-handover nostalgia fever may have provided the fertile ground for such designers, their flowering continued in a global context beyond 1997. If the pre-handover condition of Chan’s and Tang’s work can be perceived as defining possible Hong Kong identities via nostalgic appeal to Shanghai’s interwar culture, the post-handover condition would seem to demand a different perception: by the early twenty-first century, selling Chineseness was becoming extremely profitable. While the 1980s saw the emergence of high-end Japanese fashion brands including Issey Miyake, Comme des Garçons, and Yohji Yamamoto—all in one sense or another selling “Japaneseness”—in the 1990s, Hong Kong emerged as the launching pad for the construction and distribution of brands such

33 The Shanghai Tang Website provided the details of this collection: “Taking its inspiration from the traditional clothing of ethnic minority tribes of Southern China. The Miao, the Yao, and the Dai are a few of the disparate tribes, residing in Guizhou and Yunnan provinces, which inspired the fall collection. Highlights of the collection include the black dupioni silk coat embroidered with cloud pattern and worn with fringed red cloud scarf, the denim coat trimmed with ribbon and sequins with welt seams, fringed velvet qi pao with asymmetrical hem, and the peony-embroidered, three-quarter silk coat. In the tradition of the Miao style, various outfits were adorned with delicately made antique silver ornaments.” (Accessed online November 2003 at: [www.shanghaitang.com](http://www.shanghaitang.com).)

34 The general 1990s Mao revival in mainland China and Hong Kong is well documented in G. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

as Alan Chan and Shanghai Tang, similarly selling “Chineseness” in the global cultural economy.

Although the initial stage of Hong Kong’s design nostalgia can be associated with handover anxieties, both Chan and Shanghai Tang expanded in the years after the handover both in new products lines and in their international reach. Chan’s 1999 packaging for Kee Gift biscuits and pastries, for example, comprised tins and bags decorated with collages of old postcards and paintings from colonial Hong Kong. In the same year, Alan Chan Creations produced a new line of mouse pads featuring Shanghai calendar girls and advertising collages. His international distribution in the twenty-first century expanded, particularly with the creation of a Website for online sales. Similarly, Shanghai Tang’s nostalgic project has expanded globally since the handover, with an online sales Website in addition to projected new stores opening worldwide in the near future.

In the global context, Arjun Appadurai argues that generalized nostalgia has become a significant trend in contemporary global culture:

Rummaging through history has become a standard technique of advertising, especially of visual and electronic ads, as a way to draw on the genuine nostalgia or age-groups for pasts they actually know through other experiences; but also as a way to underline the inherent ephemerality of the present. Catalogs that exploit the colonial experience for merchandising purposes are an excellent example of this technique. ...Rather than expecting the consumer to supply memories while the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia, now the viewer need only bring the faculty of nostalgia to an image that will supply the memory of a loss he or she has never suffered. This relationship might be called armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory.<sup>35</sup>

The “armchair nostalgia” experienced by the tourist or the cosmopolitan expatriate is separated by Appadurai from “genuine” (personally experienced) nostalgia which might be experienced by Hong Kong’s older generation. However, the latter are no longer the primary target market for either Shanghai Tang’s or Chan’s designs (if, indeed, they ever were). Their designer nostalgia, comprised of stylized and decontextualized fragments, evokes a safely depoliticized past—a nostalgia common to postmodern cultural production in general as, for example, Fredric Jameson argues with regard to film.<sup>36</sup> While both Chan’s and Shanghai Tang’s most popular “lost object of desire” was prewar Shanghai, by simultaneously evoking modern Shanghai, the Maoist era, Qing dynasty China, and colonial Hong Kong, they present mutually conflicting historical narratives for the “armchair nostalgia” enthusiast, creating a Chinese historical pastiche invested with the aura of tradition.

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35 A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 78.

36 See F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 19.