



TOP DESIGNERS FROM HONG KONG

By Sarah Frater

While British designers eye opportunities in Asia, Hong Kong creatives have long been established on the international design stage. Indeed, if their number at the upcoming Creative Hong Kong in London event is anything to go by, the former British colony has produced a disproportionate number of world-class designers.

Fashion designer Vivienne Tam, illustrator and Shrek 3 co-director Raman Hui and Ford Motor Company chief designer Chelsia Lau are among the best known names. All three trained in Hong Kong, and their work strongly influences what we wear, watch and drive. The trio cite Chinese culture as an influence, but also emphasise the cross-pollination of ideas and the universal principles of good design.

Tam has built an international fashion empire on her bi-cultural upbringing. 'There was no Asian luxury brand when I started,' says Tam, whose work is now collected by the Victoria & Albert Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. 'Everyone looked to the West, but Hong Kong is a hybrid.'

Now based in Shanghai after years in the US, Lau echoes this sentiment, although she adds, 'Cars have universal appeal, and the key is modern usage – the functionality, purpose and craftsmanship. Good design has no boundaries.'

The only boundaries Hui encountered travelling from East to West were the language variety. 'When I first came to PDI [now owned by DreamWorks], everyone agreed with me the whole time,' he laughs. 'I thought everything I said was right, but it's just that nobody understood what I was talking about.'



VIVIENNE TAM

# Beijing beat

UK designers have been slow to move into mainland China, but this looks set to change as a massive market is opening up. **Clare Dowdy** explores opportunities for those who are ready to take the plunge beyond Westerners' traditional foothold, Hong Kong

'OUR GOAL is the transition from "Made in China" to "Designed in China".' So says He Renke, chairman of the industrial design department at China's Hunan University. This surely is an opportunity for UK design consultancies of every persuasion, from product, retail and branding design to everything in between.

But while some UK consultancies have been working in China for some time – notably the industrial designers and the international networks – the UK is almost unknown to the Chinese as a design country, according to Christine Losecaat, creative industries adviser to UK Trade & Investment.

'There is very little knowledge of the UK offer in terms of design consultancy,' says Losecaat, who researched and wrote A Strategy for UK Trade & Investment to Help British Design Consultants Enter the Chinese Market.

Martin Darbyshire, whose product design consultancy Tangerine started working in China two years ago, agrees. 'The UK is late in going in,' he says.

These observations apply to mainland China rather than Hong Kong, which has offered its own opportunities for some time. 'Hong Kong is, of course, extremely design savvy with its own thriving design community that is heavily networked into the UK,' says Losecaat.

Indeed, many groups start there on their road to the mainland. Darbyshire sees Hong Kong as a gateway, and has done seminars there to raise Tangerine's profile. Such presence-building has paid off and the consultancy now has two clients an hour away by train in Shenzhen – consumer electronics business Konka, and a big, unnamed telecoms company.

Others, like Fitch, have actually had offices in Hong Kong, as that is where many clients have historically located their regional headquarters. However, with more headquarters moving to mainland China, it makes sense to follow suit. 'We are very close to having a studio in Beijing,' says Ian Bellhouse, managing director of Fitch South East Asia.

And while Hong Kong has always been its geographical neighbour, culturally its credentials as a test-bed and springboard into China seem to be on the wane.

A successful presence in Hong Kong gives client brands looking to expand into the mainland valuable credibility and kudos, says Susie Hunt, founding director of Hunt Haggarty, which works with Motorola, Coca-Cola and others in China. She says, 'It also gives a vital learning opportunity to understand and prototype how a brand resonates with Chinese consumers, with high numbers of mainland consumers heading to Hong Kong for shopping opportunities, especially in holiday peak seasons.'

However, the challenge is for brands to stay humble enough to recognise that although China's commercial halo may have been created in Hong Kong, 'simple cut-and-paste migration strategy' is unlikely to be successful, as the markets and their consumers are of course vastly different, in language, consumer mindset and economic outlook,' Hunt adds.

Middle-class consumers in cities such as Shanghai have been indulged with attention and spoilt for choice by global brand owners. 'Such consumers will therefore respond well to bespoke brand experiences especially designed for them and created in China,' Hunt says.

Designers with consumer experience back this up. 'Don't underestimate what the Chinese consumer wants,' says Eric Chan, founder of New York's Ecco design, who was brought up in Hong Kong and whose work features in the Creation Hong Kong in London event at Harvey Nichols. 'They are very progressive. Now they don't see themselves as a second-class country.'

Darbyshire gives an example of this difference. 'They wear their mobile phones around their neck and attach frilly things like a piece of decoration,' he says.

It is the very nature of China's difference that means consultancies must really commit to the country if they want to build relationships there.

That could be opening an office, like Fitch, employing a native speaker back in London, like Tangerine, or taking international clients on fact-finding tours, like Chan, who says, 'When people talk about China it can't be theory it has to be experience.' He takes his client Herman Miller on two-week cultural tours to help it 'form the strategy for designing for China'.

And it's not only the consumers who must be understood. The clients too, whether they are local or global, behave differently in China. For a start, 'those companies that do see the benefit of using external consultants will mostly turn to consultants closer to home – either within China itself, or in Japan and Korea, for example,' says Darbyshire. Not surprising given the UK's low profile and the fact that 'the most expensive local groups are probably a third of our costs', says Darbyshire. According to the UKTI's Strategy, fees are 40 per cent less than London levels, though it's acceptable to invoice 45 per cent of fees in advance, which may soften the blow.

On top of that, Bellhouse has discovered that speed is of the essence. The explosion of retail means that infrastructure, logistics and service standards are suffering, he says, and in their rush to open stores 'global brands are spread a bit too thin too quickly'.

Fitch's solution has been to adapt its business model 'without sacrificing our principles', says Bellhouse. 'It's more about being a rapid response team. But there's still a high expectation of the quality of what we are designing.'

So while China may be a massive learning curve, it is no different from any emerging market, where local knowledge, patience, humility and a portfolio of international clients go a long way to opening doors.

Creative Hong Kong in London runs from 28 May to 12 June. It includes an in-store display at Harvey Nichols (28 May to 4 June), an exhibition at the Design Museum (6-12 June), and a one-day conference at the London Business School (3 June). Work by Vivienne Tam, Chelsia Lau and Raman Hui will be on display

THE CHINESE DESIGN MARKET

- According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, the Chinese middle-class with incomes between \$7230 (£3700) and \$60 240 (£31 000) includes 75 million people – 5.7% of the country's population of 1.3 billion people
- Another report published by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimates that 40% of the population will be middle class by 2020
- Beijing, with a population of 15.3 million, has for the past six years maintained a 10% growth rate and the service sector accounts for 70% of GDP
- Shanghai's emphasis is on industrial design because of the historical link to the Yangtze River Delta Area which has a total GDP in manufacturing of RMB8000bn (£590bn). The total manufacturing of the Yangtze region is 25% of the whole of China's and there is a big need for design in industry and manufacturing

• Nanjing is a large market for the automobile and consumer electronics sectors. They have some creative industry skills, but not enough to service future market demand

• Shenzhen is home to 60% of Chinese graphic designers. The industry is growing by 40% a year

- China has more than 400 design schools, turning out thousands of students every year ●

Source: Excerpts from A Strategy for UK Trade & Investment to Help British Design Consultants Enter the Chinese Market



1-3 Three examples of the ten collaborations between top brands and Hong Kong designers to mark the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong independence. First is the Stringless Pleasure mini-stereo system featuring antique wood, created by Lo Chi Wing for KEF. Second is Ecco 9707 chair, designed by Eric Chan and Herman Miller out of the traditional Chinese material bamboo. Third is Hong Kong My Love, designed by Alan Chan and inspired by Salvatore Ferragamo's silk scarves. The ten can be seen at the Creative Hong Kong in London event

4-6 Hong Kong design talent: Ford's chief designer Chelsia Lau worked on the Mercury MC4 concept vehicle (4), fashion designer Vivienne Tam mixes elements from East and West (5), and Shrek 3 co-director Raman Hui's Shrek sketch (6)