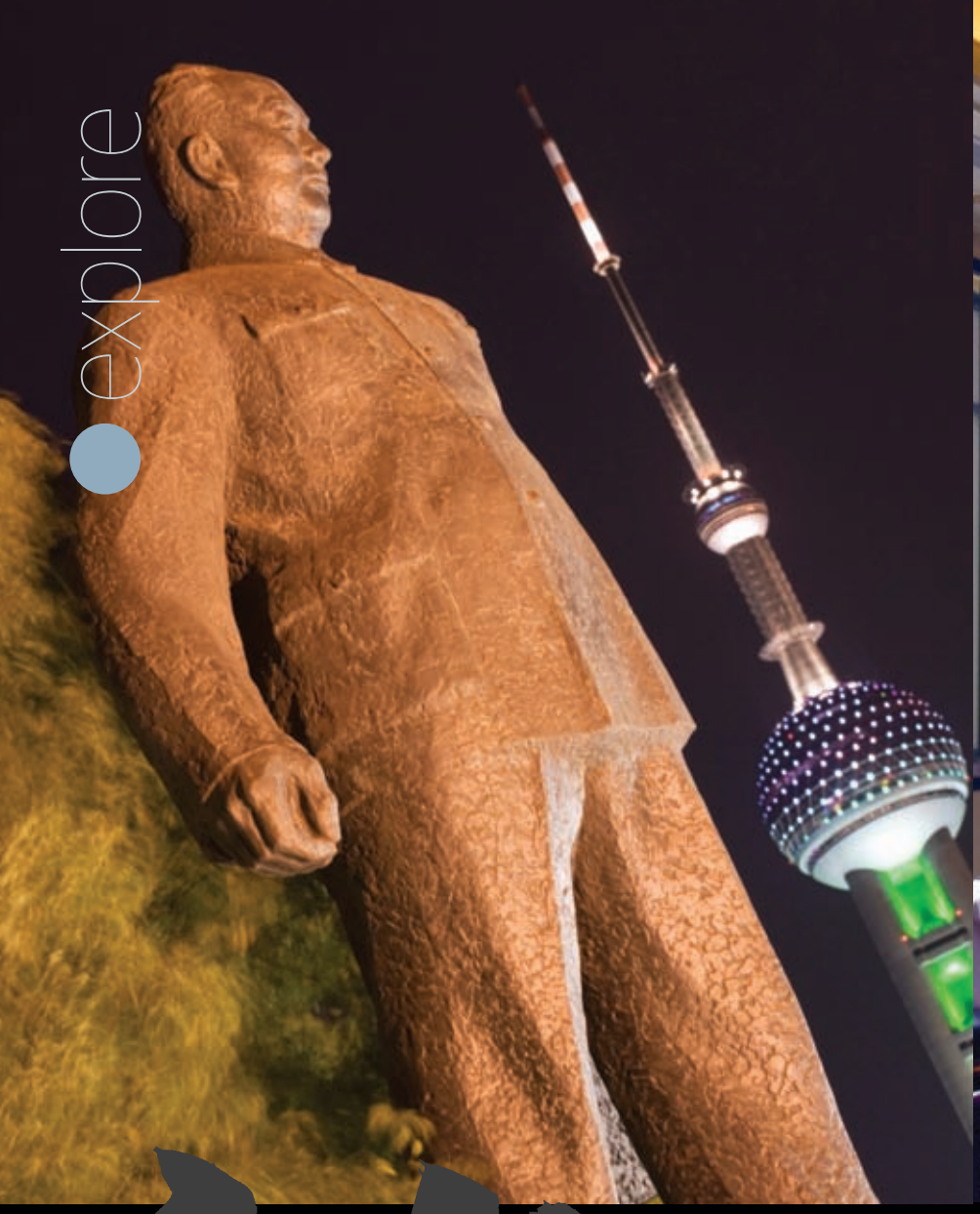
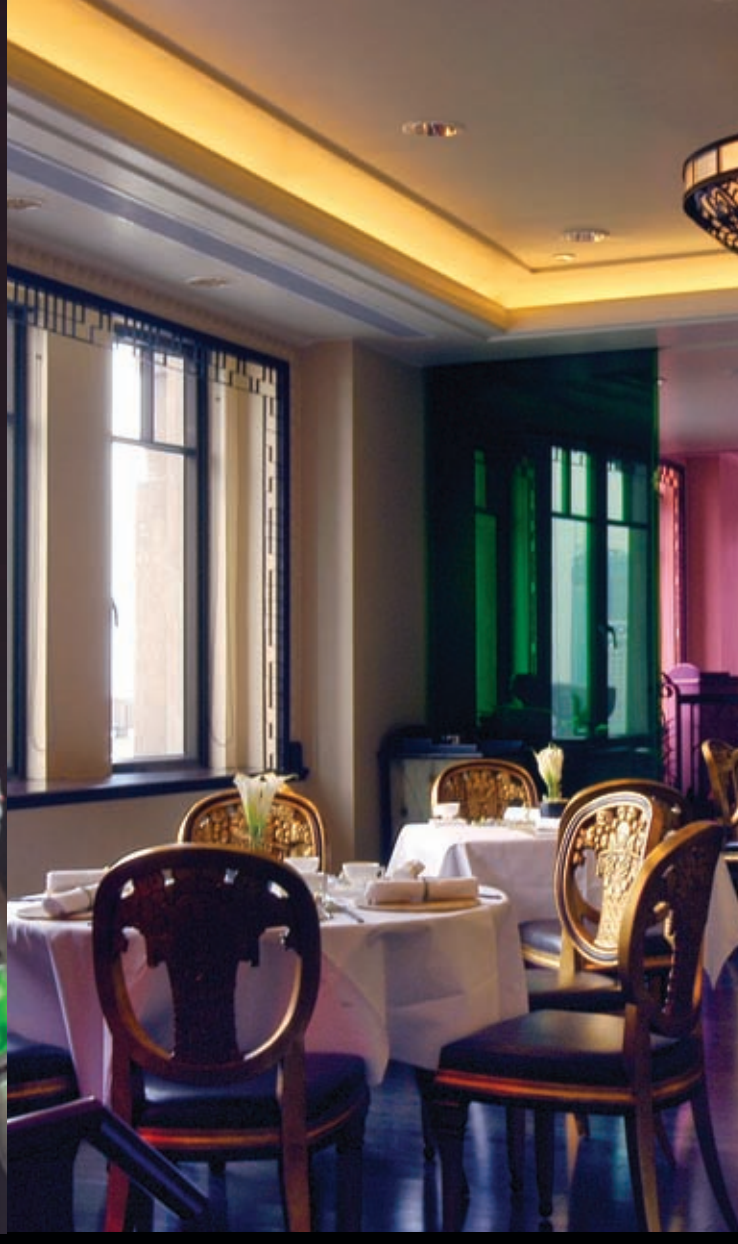
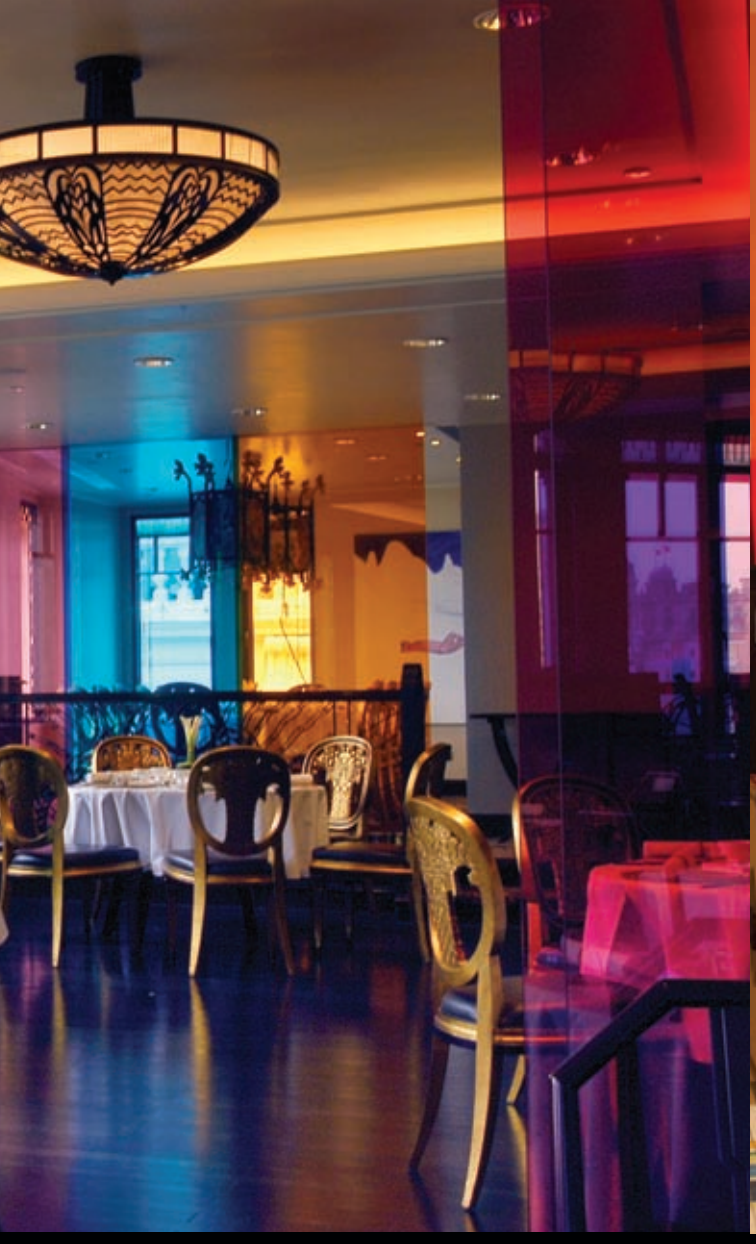


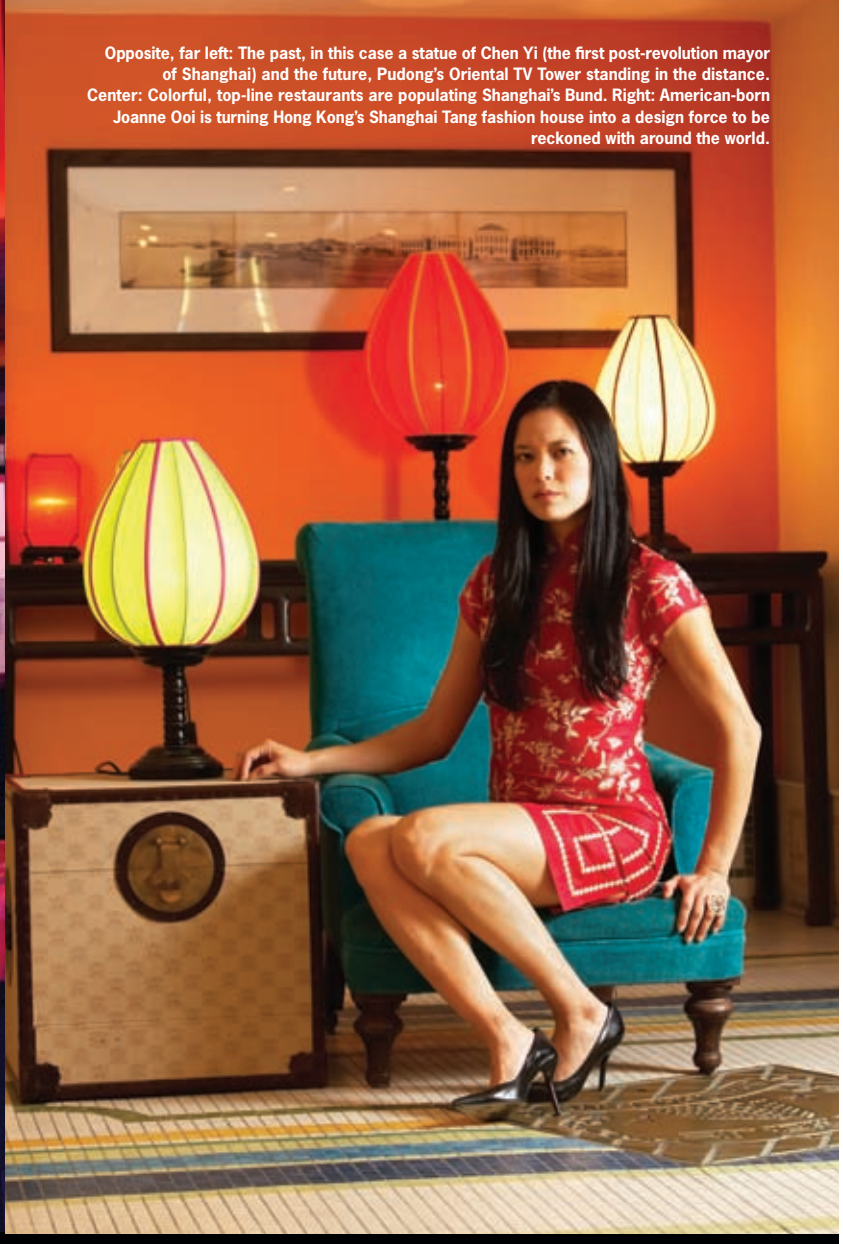


the glow of the 後

a dramatic re-awakening is turning China's major cities into world-class destinations for the most unlikely things: fashion and glamour

PHOTO OF STATUE AND TOWER: PAUL SOUDERS/CORBIS



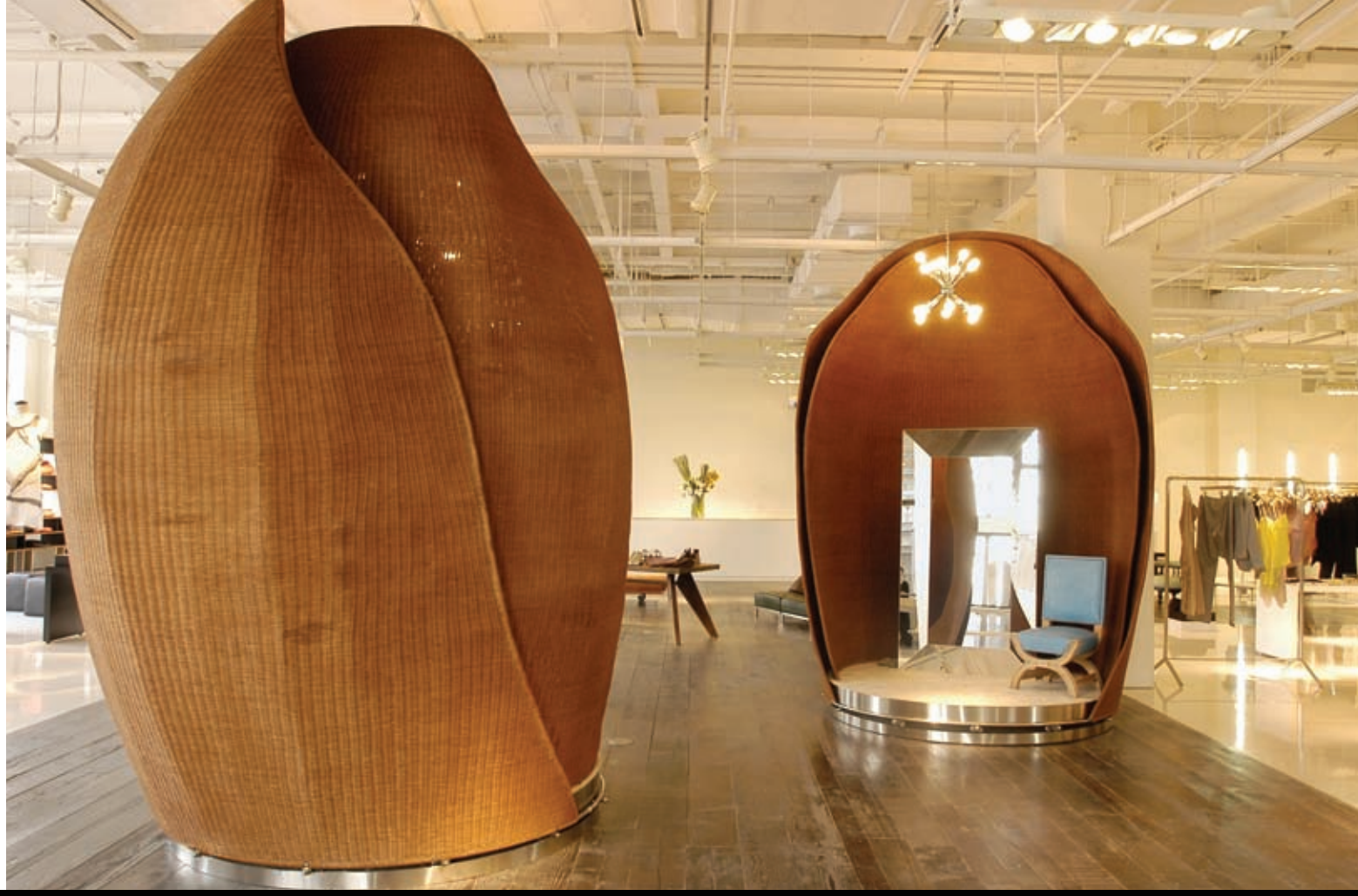


Opposite, far left: The past, in this case a statue of Chen Yi (the first post-revolution mayor of Shanghai) and the future, Pudong's Oriental TV Tower standing in the distance. Center: Colorful, top-line restaurants are populating Shanghai's Bund. Right: American-born Joanne Ooi is turning Hong Kong's Shanghai Tang fashion house into a design force to be reckoned with around the world.

new

BY TED C. FISHMAN

PORTRAIT OF JOANNE OOI: ANDREW ROWAT



People in Shanghai don't envy Hong Kong anymore, but rather look at how their city

Look at the cityscape of any of greater China's ever-greater metropolises and an inevitable question emerges: "How on Earth did all this new development happen?"

Then you start to piece together your amazement.

What hits you first is the furious, nonstop construction. Spend just a few days in one of China's popping municipalities and you feel as if some cosmic city planner has put you in the midst of his time-lapse photography documentary. Shanghai, where the building boom is more than a decade old, is the most rapidly sprouting big city in the world. It's changing so quickly that even the recent past—say 1997, when Hong Kong was returned to China—is now regarded as part of a quaint low-rise history. That year there was a lot of hope—and much doubt—that Shanghai would match Hong Kong's economic might and glamour.

People in Shanghai don't envy Hong Kong anymore, but rather look at how their city can top every urban center in the world. Since 1997 Shanghai has built more buildings 15 stories or taller than exist in all of Chicago, the birthplace of the skyscraper. By the end of this year, Shanghai, with some 17 million inhabitants, is predicted to have more commercial real estate than New York City. Recently, a city official who traveled the world to determine the best course for Shanghai's future said that cities like Hong Kong and even Tokyo are no longer seen as models or competition. London, Paris, New York? Yes. At least for now.

A FUTURE IN ULTRAVIOLET

Shanghai's new urban centers, like those in the city's competitor metropolises Beijing, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, dot the landscape with gargantuan domed shopping centers and showboat glass towers that glow green or gold or white by day, but at night blaze with moving neon and outdoor video screens that wrap the buildings. Upping the ante, Shanghai built Pudong, an entire new downtown created from scratch across the Huang Pu River from the Bund, its old and glorious beaux-arts downtown. Pudong is a space-age isle of skyscrapers that is so futuristic it was recently the backdrop for the film *Ultraviolet*, a sci-fi thriller starring Milla Jovovich, which was shot there even though the story gave no reference to China. Pudong is also home to China's tallest building, the Jin Mao Tower, an 88-story ode to both rockets and the aggressively angular bronzes of ancient China's Warring States Period.

But it's not just the plasma glow of Pudong that sheds new light on the changing China. Across the Huang Pu, a renewed Bund is redefining worldly glamour. Three on the Bund, the most striking of the reborn buildings, is a lavish 1916 wedding cake of a building that has been gutted and remade on the inside by celebrity architect Michael Graves. It's a palace to the senses. Ride the elevator up floor by floor. The doors open first to glittering fashion boutiques, including China's first Armani store, then to the therapeutic scents and cool tones of the Evian Spa. In again, and the doors open on the third floor to what may well be the world's most spectacularly situated art gallery.

The entrance to the Shanghai Gallery of Art, with walls of roughly brushed steel beneath a multistory vaulted atrium of wooden posts and beams, would be impossible in the old China. Huge paintings and photographs line the gallery's expansive white walls. Quite often the works are gruesome, almost always they are energetic, and in every case they are the creations from the group of Chinese contemporary artists, including Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, who are now igniting the international art market, setting records at auctions and claiming space in museum shows far from home.

And then there is that other form of creativity on the Bund—food. Cuisine in the city used to be so abysmal that a family might enjoy a good piece of meat or fish only once a year and rarely veered from the same dull plate of vegetables. Today the city is one of the world's greatest places to eat. The local eateries can offer excellent meals at pennies a plate, but at the top end, such as the restaurants at Three on the Bund, the city's kitchens rival the best anywhere. And, appropriately, the building's six restaurants occupy the upper floors.

BLENDING THE OLD AND NEW

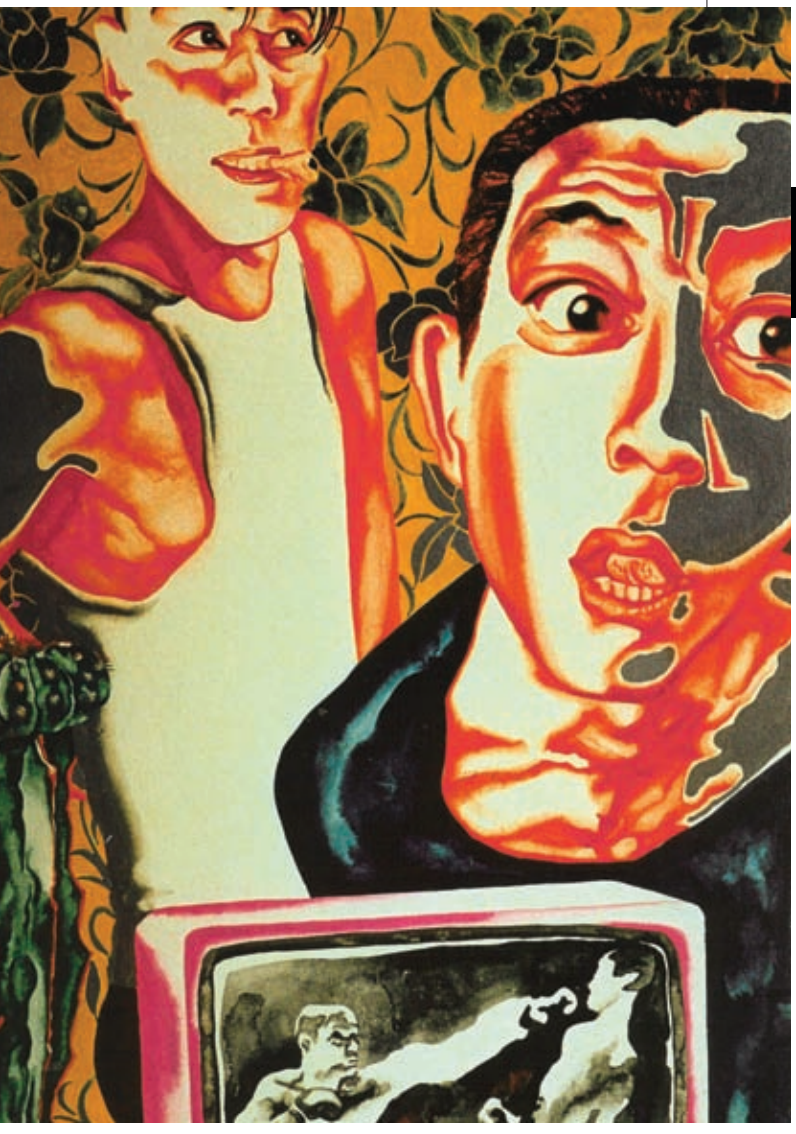
Shanghai, which is not an ancient city by Chinese standards, has a rich heritage in 19th- and early 20th-century French, British and Japanese colonial architecture. Most of its European-style buildings have given way to new development, but the city is now determined to hold onto much of what remains. Its once walled-off colonial-era treasures must be surrounded by see-through gates, a measure that has made the old French and Japanese quarters among the nicest walking streets in Asia. Walking around Luwan, Shanghai's tree-lined former French quarter, one can peer into the yards of old mansions and 1920s-era art deco apartment blocks. All this fresh interest has motivated the owners of the gardens to replant them, bringing flowers and decorative trees into the urban view.

The city also has renovated one of the former warehouse districts to create Xin Tian Di, a pedestrian mall of world-class restaurants, nightclubs and high-style shops. Xin Tian Di is one of the city's favorite spots for fashion shoots, so that on nearly any day one can find models on the outdoor benches surrounded by photo crews and curious crowds. It is the mix one finds so often in China: the new ultrachic side by side with recent arrivals from the countryside unabashedly looking on, imagining whether their own futures will look anything like those of their done-up countrymen. Ironically, the upscale complex also houses a museum dedicated to China's Communist Party, since one of the warehouses was the site of the Party's very first meeting.

can top every urban center in the world.

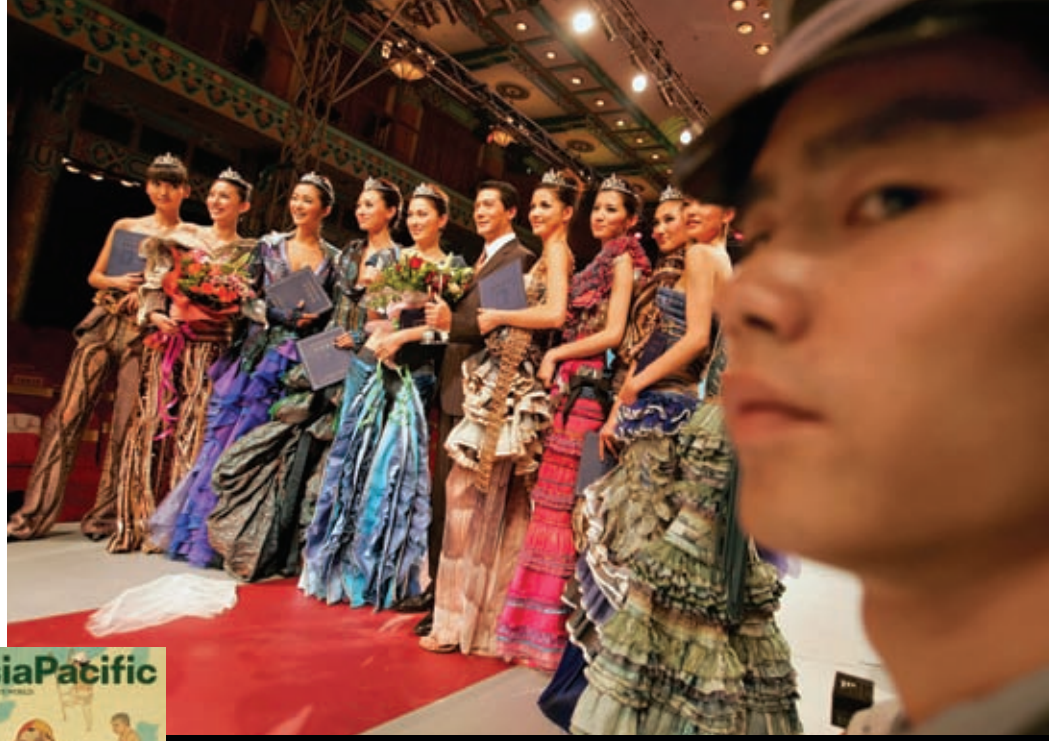
A GLAMOROUS CUT

Of course, world-class glamour was not always on Shanghai's mind. It had to be rediscovered after decades of national leadership under Mao Zedong, who saw glamour as antithetical to the Communist struggle and actively promoted a desexualized image of women, urging them to dress and behave like their male comrades. For years, practically the only permitted expression of personal style was a gilded pin stamped with an image of Mao.



Opposite, top: Delightful surprises are nearly everywhere in China. These unexpected shapes are dressing rooms found at Shanghai's Three on the Bund. Left: This captivating painting, created with acrylic color and gouache in 1998 by artist Wang Jinsong, is called *At the Moment*.

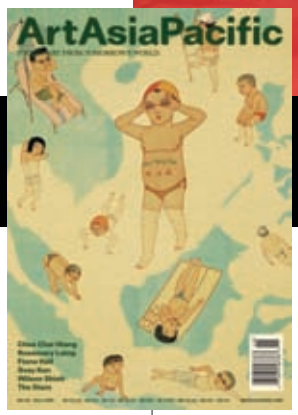
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE ASIAN ART COORDINATING COUNCIL



Right: Models gather after a fashion show for Mushi, the clothing line by Caroline Deleens, a young French designer living in Beijing. Below: Publisher Simon Winchester's gorgeous *ArtAsiaPacific* magazine is further evidence of a China coming into the mainstream arts scene.

It is hard to imagine in the new China, where fashion billboards cover entire buildings and street kiosks burst with new lifestyle magazines, but reigniting glamour in China has required its own champions and propaganda.

Take Wang Lei, for example. Wang was 19 years old in 1981 when he was the ninth student from Shandong Province allowed to leave for study abroad. The provincial leaders surely never expected that Wang would end up at a beauty school in Chicago, but he forged his dream there of bringing dignity to the business of haircutting in China. After years of working, then running and teaching



Chinese artists are racing to capture a disappearing world.

at tony beauty salons in Los Angeles, the dream gained shape. "In China, cutting hair was the very worst job, a taboo profession," he explains. "I thought I could use the value of my foreign training to bring respect to hair stylists in China. And also I could change how the customers saw themselves."

Wang arrived in Shanghai in 1993 and opened up Wanglei Image Commune, an ironic nudge against the old order. His shop's new graphic identity pictured Wang and two friends, each done up with stylish haircuts, set in the rising sun that is common in propaganda posters. Wang was the first to appropriate such imagery for a modern Chinese brand, and it caused a great stir. He faced accusations that labeled him disrespectful and unpatriotic. But it also provided the visibility his shop needed—and sent a shot over the bow of a culture in need of a style revolution. His was one of the first Western-style salons in reborn Shanghai. Today salons are booming in Shanghai and Wang has a big chain. His flagship salon on Nanjing Road is a regular stop for Shanghai's glitterati and Chinese film stars. International partners are betting on him not only to be a force in China, but also to grow into an international brand that sells a Chinese version of style to the world.

What was true for hair is true for nearly everything in China today where style matters. Once the cities themselves were regarded merely as holding places for industrial workers, and housing and office buildings were aggressively bland. Today cities compete with each other, employing Chinese and international architects for prestige projects that will advertise them to the world. Chinese car manufacturers, once content to ape old models of European manufacturers, now employ design teams from Italy, Germany and California to create sexy models that can capture an international market.

AN OUTPOURING OF ART

Of course, there is more dramatic growth to come. China has nearly 200 cities with populations of a million or more, and in most of them the time-lapse camera has just begun to run. The rapidity of change has its psychic and social costs, too. They can be seen in the streets, where demonstrations often erupt spontaneously. For all its impressive development, there is widespread anxiety that what once seemed enduring, but poor, is giving way to impermanent prosperity. In China, where discontent must stay muted, it is the contemporary artists who find ways to express this anxiety, and it's why their work is so often tinged with melancholy and violence. And perhaps it's why many are so Promethean in their output, racing to capture a disappearing world before it disappears.

Wang Jinsong is one of the artists who has captured the attention of international collectors and exhibitors. Working on the outskirts of Beijing in a brick house, he produces classically influenced ink paintings of modern subjects, Western-influenced oils, and photographic portraits and urban landscapes. In each medium, he is careful observer and master technician.

A petite man of 43 with intense but smiling eyes and a huge mass of black hair, Wang is perhaps most famous for his photographs of old Beijing buildings where some member of a work crew spray-painted the Chinese character for "demolish." Many of these buildings are contained within the city's centuries-old *hutongs*, the old clustered neighborhoods of traditional brick homes. Grouped together and numbering in the hundreds, the images give the sense that a world is coming down, making way for something new. Wang speaks carefully about his work, stressing that his message is personal, not political; observational, not strident. "I am interested in the aesthetic change of cities," he says, "and how people look at modernization."

FASHION SHOW: PIERRE BESSARD/REA/REDUX

More and more, the Chinese capital is a leading center for the arts. Lately galleries and museums have been springing up at a pace that matches the city's building spree. In the city's Dashanzi district, a complex of Bauhaus-style factory buildings built in the 1950s by East Germans as a gift to Communist China has been converted into a rambling gallery district where works, such as Wang's full-scale urban photographs, can be displayed no matter what their size. Now called Factory 798, the district has also filled in with cafés, nightclubs and bookstores.

In another still-sleepy part of town called Changdian, hundreds of artists have moved in among farmers and shopkeepers. But the area won't stay quiet much longer; it is slated to be home to Beijing's new, privately run Museum of Contemporary Art.

As Changdian fills in, artists find village homes elsewhere on the edge of Beijing. No matter how distant, the new areas still command attention. The F2 Gallery in the newly minted Caochangdi gallery area raised its profile by featuring the works of Sheng Qi, who, unlike Wang, is brazenly political and uses his own body as a medium. Sheng is best known in the West as the artist who cut off a finger in solidarity with those lost in the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

Opposite right: A night-time rendering of the 91,000-seat Olympic National Stadium, now under construction, has been dubbed the "Bird's Nest" for its steel latticework. Bottom left: Young Shanghai residents enjoy the alluring sight of the futuristic Pudong. Bottom right: The art of Beijing artist Sheng Qi, including this acrylic painting titled *Missing Girl*, gives witness to China's recent political history.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics will be the biggest coming-out party of the 21st century.

THE LURE OF THE CITY

Artists aren't the only ones looking for new city homes. The whole country is on the move, spurring the biggest human migration in history. Every month 1.5 million people uproot themselves from farms or leave their backwater villages to head to a Chinese city.

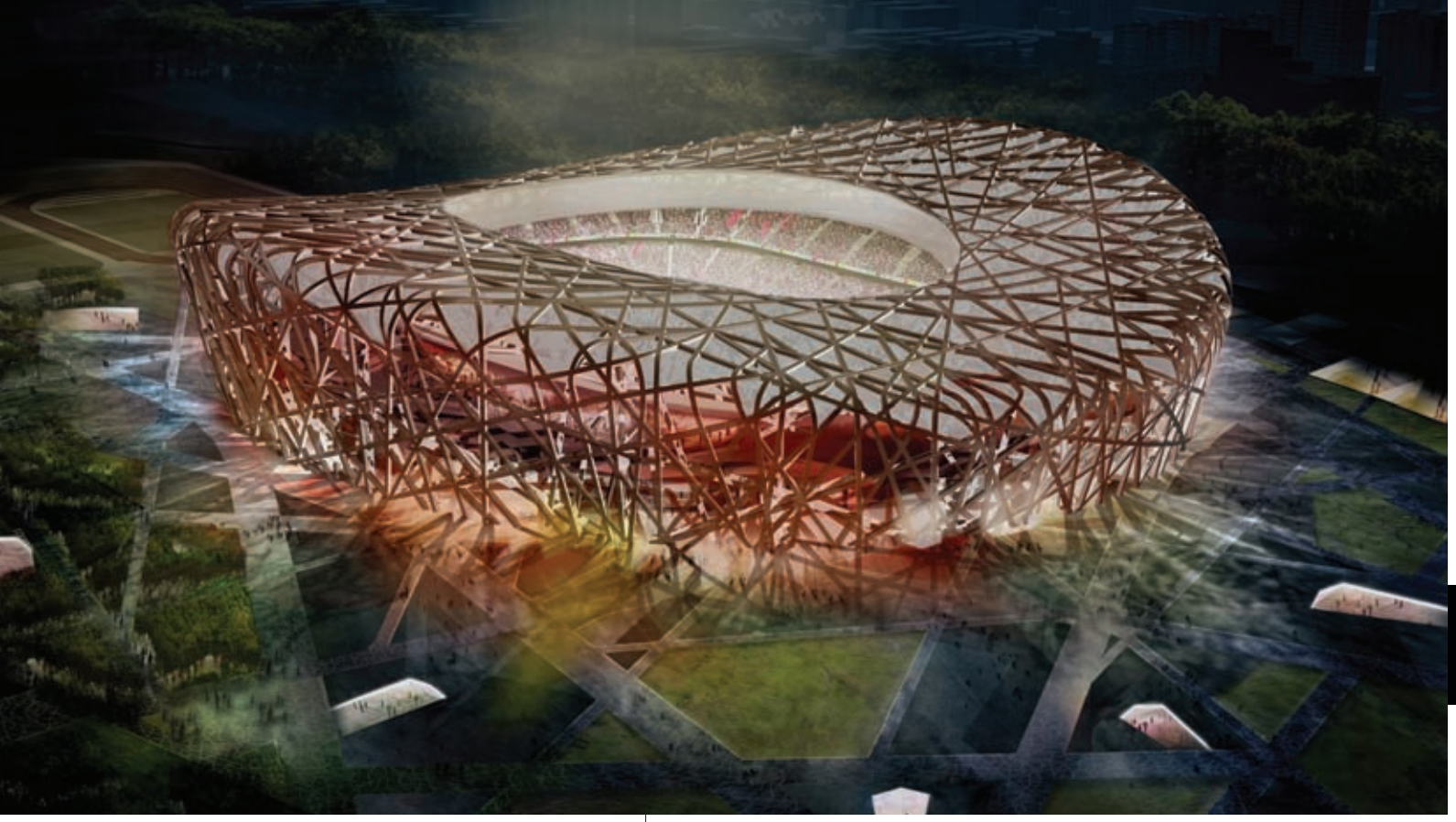
Shenzhen is one of the newly created cities. Fifteen years ago it was a tiny fishing village of 30,000 people on the Chinese side of the border near Hong Kong. Today it is a city of more than 10 million. Its inhabitants are not yet as worldly as their Hong Kong neighbors, as rich as their countrymen in Shanghai or as cultivated as Beijingers, but new Shenzhen is already the stuff of myth. Deng Xiaoping, on his famous Southern Tour in 1992, picked this former village as a place for a great metropolis, and like many promises the Chinese have made to themselves in the years since, it has simply come true.

Shenzhen's population, though situated in Cantonese southern China, hails from all over the country, beckoned by the call for jobs in all the new factories, offices, restaurants and hotels. It is a Babylon of local dialects, but the working language in Shenzhen is Mandarin, China's national tongue and Shenzhen's glue. Shenzhen also draws Hong Kongers for play. Ask people where the best restaurants are for Cantonese food, and first you'll get a short list of Hong Kong stalwarts, but then they may smilingly admit that in Shenzhen the food is better, the restaurants bigger and the prices drastically lower. They also may advise you to take your golf clubs. Just outside the city lies Mission Hills Golf Club, the world's largest and one of its best-groomed golf complexes, home to an astonishing 180 holes and an even more astonishing clientele who come from Hong Kong and all over Asia to play them all.

As Shenzhen has grown into a commercial powerhouse, it has exerted a powerful influence over its big brother and nearby neighbor, Hong Kong. The most Westernized city in China, Hong Kong was also once a place for tourists to shop for the lowest-priced goods, even if it meant dealing with notoriously surly shopkeepers. Today, with bargains beckoning in Shenzhen, the city competes on service and—to the surprise of any visitor here after a long hiatus—Hong Kong is one of the friendliest places on earth. The city also has changed from bargain center to one of the world's top destinations for luxury retailers. In fact, LVMH, Prada and Dolce & Gabbana all have their Asia-Pacific headquarters here. The city's shops don't just serve wealthy travelers, though; Hong Kong is among the richest cities on Earth, with a local population looking for ways to spend.

"The luxury market is huge here because there's so much wealth, yet the quarters are so cramped that people

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THE ASIAN ART COORDINATING COUNCIL



need ways to show how well they're doing," says Joanne Ooi, marketing and creative director for Hong Kong's signature luxury fashion house, Shanghai Tang.

FASHION STATEMENTS

With its jewel box–like flagship store in the vintage Pedder Building in Hong Kong's Central District, Shanghai Tang is an anomaly in greater China: It is a world-class luxury brand that is distinctly Chinese. Little more than a decade old, the company has already struggled with contradictions of its mission, which is to trumpet the values of traditional Chinese style but also to stay fresh. Several years ago, the brand found itself stuck in a narrow band of design that filled stores with elegant yet stale takes on Chinese-style dresses such as *qipao*, the slit-skirted dresses from Shanghai's Jazz Age, and Mao jackets. The tall, American-born Ooi was brought in to inject vitality into the lines—and she did just that.

Today, under Ooi's direction, Shanghai Tang's designs mix motifs from old and new China in startling ways. Her couture collection features a ball gown crafted out of silk printed with images from China's favorite boys' adventure comic, all cut in the tight contours of *qipao* but with a high-tech folded trim that looks as though it will give the dress flight.

Aiming to create a luxury vocabulary that fits a youthful China, Ooi works with budding artists from China's better academies and painters represented by Hong Kong's contemporary galleries. She also draws on nascent consumer culture and the ancient past for motifs that inspire her. "It's a thrill to do this," she says, "because we are building China's first real luxury brand. We are redefining fashion for a part of the world that is redefining nearly everything else around us."

THE FEVER OF CHANGE

Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Shanghai may have had the jump on fashion and shopping over their more serious civic peer Beijing, but even that stately ancient capital has been caught up with the fever of change. In the beginning decade of China's market reforms, Beijing tried mightily to maintain a more stolid image in line with the established aesthetic of Chinese Communism. While the other cities found the world's foremost architects to build their signature high-rises and city centers, Beijing chose homegrown firms to build immense, boxy, slightly Chinese-inflected behemoths along the city's broad streets. Today, no city in the world is building a more ambitious mix of high-style towers, stadiums, theaters and plazas.

This is all a prelude to the biggest coming-out party of the 21st century—the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics—when China intends to announce to the world that it must never again be seen as separate, drab and unsophisticated, but must be recognized for what it is becoming: a superpower in force, a driver of fashion and the place that is reinventing not just itself, but the world. Achieving goals of this scale depends not only on the continuing expansion of China's great cities, brick by brick, but also encouraging China's people that a stylish future is in their best interest.

Deng Xiaoping, reflecting on the gradualism that he thought was necessary for China to walk into a brighter future, famously advised his countrymen to "cross the river by feeling the stones." Gradualism in China is now antique, and the Chinese are not merely crossing the river, but diverting it into entirely new cultural forms, taking the stones and building a nation in a style no one has seen before. ●