

Victoria Tang on Restoring Shanghai Tang

The creative director talks about where she's leading the brand and what her late father, David Tang, would say about Hong Kong's protests.

By [Bennett Marcus](#) on December 9, 2019



Victoria Tang
Daniel Murray/WWD

HONG KONG — Victoria Tang was just 10 years old when her father, the late Sir David Tang, launched Shanghai Tang, making the luxe Chinese label part and parcel of her childhood memories. The younger Tang often wore the clothing on important holidays, while her father, she recalled, wore it religiously.

"He would come to pick us up from school in his Bentley, with a cigar, in his cheongsam," she said, referring to the traditional Chinese garment and a signature item of the house. "And I would just think, 'Wow, he really wants to stand out from the

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crowd.' I didn't really understand why he was doing it, because back then you just wanted to blend in. Why can't he just wear a suit like a normal person?"

The brand was one of the first to recognize that the [Chinese would become the force for luxury consumption](#) that it is now.

Initially, Shanghai Tang rose quickly — just four years after launch, it was sold to the Swiss luxury group Compagnie Financière Richemont. But while it was able to accurately predict the boom in Chinese appetite and taste for luxury, Shanghai Tang was never quite able to fully capture it.

Once hailed by a Fast Company magazine cover as "The Gucci Killers," the brand floundered hard, never turning a profit, while Gucci is continuing on one of its most successful periods ever.

Part of the original success of Shanghai Tang was the sheer force of the founder's personality. The elder Tang, [who passed away two years ago](#) after battling health issues, was a character for whom the term bon vivant seemed to have been specifically created. Having grown up with significant material comfort, he had an unmatched ability to place his brand's items on his well-heeled, glamorous friends.

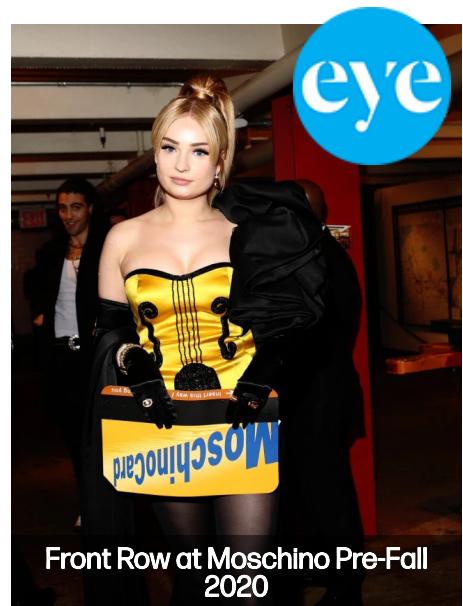
At the same time, Richemont — better known for Cartier, Montblanc and other hard luxury brands — has never cornered fashion very well, Thomas Chauvet, a senior equity analyst at Citi, told WWD in 2017, even though the group owns fashion brands such as Chloé and Dunhill. "It requires very different competencies from its core watches and jewelry businesses, where it excels," Chauvet said at the time.

Chauvet added that Shanghai Tang's "East-meets-West" positioning was confusing. "Was it a Chinese brand for Europe? A European brand inspired by China?"

By the time in 2017 that [Richemont sold the company](#) to an Italian investment group that included textiles entrepreneur Alessandro Bastagli and private equity outfit Cassia Investments, Shanghai Tang had gathered a reputation as a souvenir brand for Western tourists rather than something actual Chinese people would wear. The new owners unloaded the brand less than a year later.



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Now Victoria Tang has been Shanghai Tang's creative director for almost a year. It's a full circle of sorts, as the brand returned to Chinese ownership under a group of strategic investors led by Lunar Capital and Danxia Chen, with a sizable minority held by chief executive officer Maurizio de Gasperis, who came from eyewear-maker Safilo and before that, Fiat.

Tang herself doesn't hold an equity stake but she's been tasked with bringing back her father's flair.

"For me, that really shows the unique brand positioning that we can hold, still, and for the brand to kind of be created by Chinese," she said. "And being a part of Chinese culture, in a way, but expressing it through products, Chinese clothing or Chinese home wear and travel wear and so forth."

Tang has a point — even 25 years after the launch of Shanghai Tang, there are still no Chinese luxury household names to rival Dior or Louis Vuitton. The lifestyle label Shang Xia and beauty brand Cha Ling are attempting the space but it should be noted are part of European conglomerates — Hermès International and LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, respectively.



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Tang said the original vision for Shanghai Tang has always been that of a lifestyle brand, over a fashion one. “Everything that I remember of what Shanghai Tang was is very important for me to bring back, because there’s a nostalgic kind of feeling, that homey feeling that I got. It could be a plate, it could be a bowl, it could be a jacket, it could be a blanket,” she said.

For her first clothing collection for the house, called “Back to the Roots,” Tang returned to signature classics like beautiful silks and Tang jackets, to reset the brand as a first step to what will come later. “I just wanted a refresh. I wanted a new take on the brand,” the designer said.

Tang has been working with ceo de Gasperis, who said, “All markets and channels are marking amazing growth rates up to triple-digits, with the only exception being Hong Kong in the past few months due to external exceptional factors with significant impact on the company financials.”

To refine the brand’s identity, Tang is creating more dynamic “conversations” with consumers. “Think of a brand as a person; a brand needs to have friends to grow the circle, to kind of expand, and to be inspired,” she said. “And so I think as a Chinese brand, as we don’t have a direct competitor really, to this day, it really gives us an upper hand to explore different opportunities.”

Tang is refining certain product categories to reflect today’s tastes; for instance, introducing lightweight warm coats with travelers in mind. She’s working to bring ready-to-wear price points to a more reasonable level, moving production back to China from Italy. At the high end, they have brought back custom tailoring at bespoke prices; the company began as a custom tailor. Another goal is to attract a younger customer base.

“The clientele has always been 40 [years old] and above, and I really want to take it to the second generation, like my circle of friends, and a Chinese audience as well,” Tang said. “There are a



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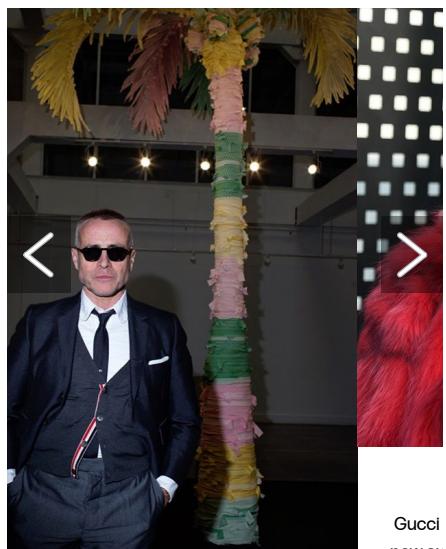
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Browne made his artist debut at Art Basel. He exhibited his first art sculpture, “Palm,” in the Moore Building Atrium in the Design cluster around the corner from his boutique. The scale palm tree was tailored in preppy fabrics, situated in a square plot of black sand underneath a black mirror within the industrial building. Tap the link in bio to what Browne had to say about his art. Report: @ktauer 📸 : @lexieblacklock

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lot of different products that we can create to speak to these people, and also I think the styling, looks and the storytelling behind each collection will be very important.”

On the agenda is more of a capsule approach, focusing less on strictly seasonal merchandise and moving closer to a see-now-buy-now approach. “When you look at the winter windows when it’s 30 degrees [Celsius] outside, it’s not appetizing. You want people to laugh, and have their interpretation and make it visual, to help say something about our brand, and themselves as well.”

To that end, Shanghai Tang has collaborated with distinguished Chinese artist Xu Bing to celebrate the company’s 25th anniversary this year. Art has been a part of the company’s DNA since the beginning, and Tang was inspired by a work of Xu’s square word calligraphy in her bedroom. “This square word calligraphy actually encapsulates everything I wanted to say about Shanghai Tang,” she said.



The artist Xu Bing. Daniel Murray/WWD

“It’s a form of Chinese wording but written in the alphabet in English, creating on the outside a Chinese word, but really it’s saying something in English. For Shanghai Tang, it has the Chinese essence, but also speaks to an international audience,” Tang added.

Xu developed this style in 1994, when he was working in New York and felt he was straddling two worlds. That year was also the start of Shanghai Tang, so it felt like kismet.

At a luncheon at the brand's Hong Kong flagship to unveil the artwork and capsule, Xu told WWD that he was initially cautious about collaborating with a commercial brand, but he felt it was a good match. "I think Shanghai Tang is a characteristic, stylish brand," he said. "It uses fashion as a way to bring out the Chinese culture. I think it's very special."

The design, bearing the phrase "Shanghai Tang — Created by Chinese" in Xu's calligraphy, launched on a variety of products, including shirts, tote bags, notebooks, sweaters and cardigans, with more to come. The original artwork is on view at the Hong Kong flagship, and the capsule collection will be sold at all Shanghai Tang stores worldwide, which encompass 13 boutiques and three luxury outlets, in addition to a web site, and a WeChat store.

Tang felt the time was right for her to take over the creative reins of what was her family's company. Five years ago, with her husband, Christopher Owen, she founded the creative agency Thirty30, and remains active there.

"I think building Thirty30 with my husband really helped me understand branding and image-making, and how to find creative solutions. Without that, I don't think I would be in this position right now," she said. Tang had also spent time working in London with fashion houses, as well as in publishing and as a professional photographer.

At one point, she worked in product development at Tang Tang Tang Tang, a short-lived home and lifestyle store set up by her father. "I always joke that my father would have hated me to become the creative director of Shanghai Tang because if he was still here — he loves what he does and he wants to be part of things — it would be very difficult for him to see that I could do it.

"I'm very glad that I am doing this. It's a weird feeling, I feel like it's his approval from above. I hope I'm able to succeed in what he wanted to do," she added.

At the unveiling of the Xu Bing artwork, Tang thanked attendees for coming during these troubled times, referring to the political unrest roiling Hong Kong. Some guests had flown in specially for the event, but with transportation hampered and roads blocked amidst the protests, even locals faced challenges moving around the city.

Her late father was quite outspoken, and one wondered what he might say about the current situation in Hong Kong. “He’d complain left, right and center, to be honest,” she said, but then referred to a 2016 speech he’d made at the city’s Foreign Correspondents Club about Hong Kong’s future, which she believes sums up what he would say today.

“I think he would have said the same thing he said a few years ago at the FCC: That there’s a lack of communication at the moment. Where’s the head of our city, of our government right now? Why can’t we just talk and resolve this?” she said.

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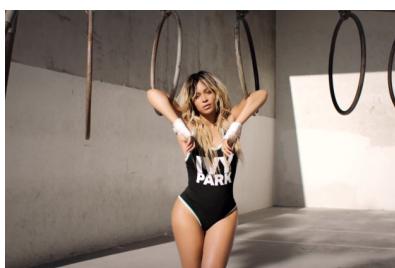
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