



IF THERE WERE VERY FEW CHINESE DESIGNERS SHOWING WORK AT THE 100% SHANGHAI DESIGN EXHIBITION IN ITS DEBUT YEAR, IT'S BECAUSE THE GROUND IS ONLY JUST BEING PREPARED FOR THE INDUSTRY TO TAKE SHAPE. BUT IF THE REST OF THE CHINESE ECONOMY IS ANYTHING TO GO BY, THE WORLD OF DESIGN HAD BETTER FASTEN ITS SEATBELTS

EMERGING GENERATION

Words Kristina Pérez

China's emerging design industry got a serious boost with the arrival of the first 100% Design Shanghai exhibition at the end of June. Not only did the timing coincide with the Olympic Games, but also with China's growing dominance in the luxury goods market. At present China accounts for 12% of the \$50bn luxury goods industry and is the third-largest consumer of luxury brands, but it is expected to surpass the United States within the next ten years. The rise of the middle class is closely monitored by China-watchers and hotly anticipated by consumer brands because by 2010, there are expected to be 250m people who can afford luxury goods.

There are currently 100 cities in China with a population greater than one million, compared with only nine in the United States; the majority of the wealth is concentrated in the first- and second-tier cities along the coastline. According to Credit Suisse First Boston, retail sales in China have already reached more than RMB 6 trillion per annum, and are expected to explode in the next decade to RMB 30 trillion.

Held concurrently with the International Home Decor and Design Fair, 100% Design Shanghai attracted 74 exhibiting companies from 15 countries and regions, representing over 100 premium global brands as well as industry leaders working with China. 100% Design London, which has been running since 1995, boasts Tom Dixon as its Creative Director and has become a permanent fixture on the design calendar. Michael Young is at the helm of 100% Design Tokyo, which debuted a decade later, and 100% Design Shanghai appointed New York-based Tobias Wong and Aric Chen to oversee its Middle Kingdom launch.

Tobias Wong burst onto the design scene in 2001 by turning a

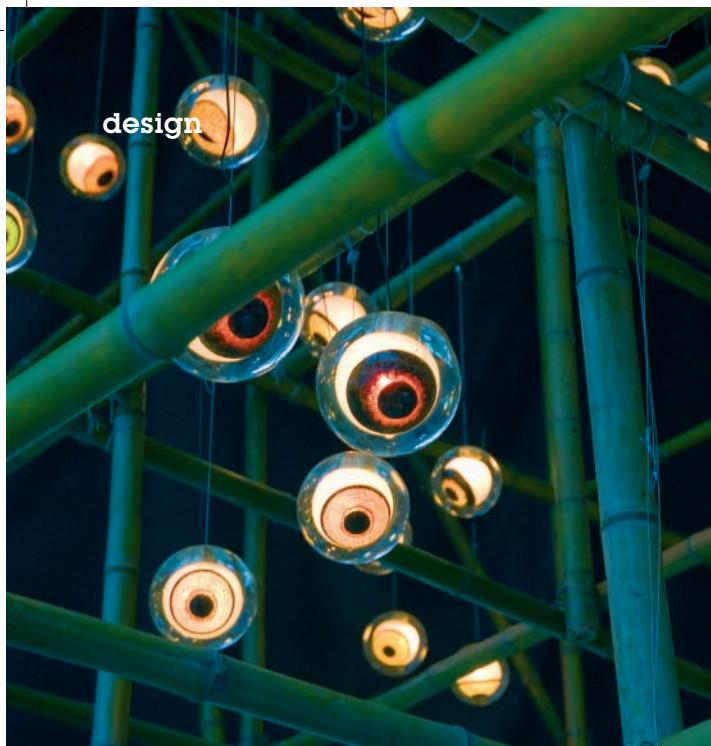
Philippe Starck armchair into a lamp and pre-empting its debut by Kartell, and has made a name for himself with iconoclastic projects such as the Killer Ring, a diamond ring set so that the sharp, tapered edge juts out. His provocative designs have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York. Aric Chen has been writing about design, fashion and architecture for over a decade and is currently a contributing editor to *Surface*, *i-D* and *Interior Design* magazines, as well as authoring a book on 20th-century Brazilian design.

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THE STAGE SEEMS SET FOR A DESIGN BOOM in China, although there were comparatively few Chinese designers or design firms on display at the exhibition. Lindon Neri, co-founder of the influential Shanghai design firms Neri+Hu and Design Republic, thinks that Chinese design is developing but the question is one of quality: 'We need to raise design to the next level. The

idea of cutting a Ming chair in half, sandwiching it with an Arne Jacobson chair and calling it Chinese design is, to me, just a sandwich.'

When I manage to catch Aric Chen and Tobias Wong for a quick chat on the steps of the Soviet-era Shanghai Exhibition Center, my first question is, Where are the Chinese designers? Chen says they simply can't find them. 'Everyone here has confirmed it. The main theory is that, as opposed to art or fashion or even film-making, there's no infrastructure here. That's what we're trying to help create. Design is more technically involved than art can be. To make a product and bring it to the market is beyond what one person can do.' Nevertheless, Wong says, they've been impressed with how design-savvy the Chinese are and feel that China is definitely ready.



design



Above 'Nightwatch': glowing eyeballs by Wolfgang Kaepfner *Right* Bamboo scaffolding and (below right) pots by Tobias Wong and Aric Chen

Chen's and Wong's inability to find Chinese product designers to showcase led to their inspiration to erect bamboo scaffolding as the leitmotif for the exhibition. 'We thought we were going to show Chinese work by Chinese designers. This is the main hall, all the other fairs do it, what a great place to show work ... until we started researching,' says Wong, disheartened. 'Then we thought, We'll commission something! But you'll notice the designers exhibiting are not even Chinese, they're just working here. We realised we had to address the issue right away. The bamboo idea came very fast.' Aric Chen says that when they were first brought on board back in February, they knew they had to do something very different from a typical trade fair, since this was the first event of its kind in China and they wanted to avoid all the clichés of dragons, phoenixes and lanterns.

LOCATED IN THE GRAND HALL OF THIS MASTERPIECE OF STALINIST ARCHITECTURE, the floor-to-ceiling bamboo scaffolding, a common feature on construction sites throughout China, filled the huge space as a metaphor for the unrealised potential of contemporary Chinese design, for which a framework has now been created. Chen says, 'The bamboo scaffolding is a motif that we all know, something we see throughout China as a symbol of rapid development. Here we take this motif but invert it so that it represents not a rising structure but a structure that needs to be filled. We hope to fill it with Chinese designers.' Wong nods his head. 'Not only are we trying to create a platform to exhibit work from around the world to China, but we want to show what China has to offer the world.'

For many people living in China, bamboo scaffolding conjures up the image of migrant workers and the harsh conditions to which they are subjected in order to facilitate such lightning-quick urbanisation, especially ahead of the Olympics. Chen concedes that there are ethical considerations that come with designing and manufacturing in China and that some designers refuse to work here. But, in his opinion, 'Things are changing in China, and the general trend is in a positive direction. Things don't happen overnight, but in China they happen very quickly, more quickly than in the West – it took hundreds of years for the West to start living up to its ideals.'

Indeed, Wolfgang Kaepfner from WOKmedia, who were commissioned by Wong and Chen to create the 'Nightwatch' installation of glowing eyes dangling from the bamboo scaffolding, recently came from London to open a studio in Shanghai: 'The question



now is, how can you not be here in China when the production is here? It makes sense as a designer to be here at the source.'

Chen and Wong will continue to call New York home, and I asked whether Wong will apply his incisive wit to Chinese cultural totems such as the Little Red Book. 'In my personal work, I don't know. We'll have to see. I think it's overlapped at this point.'

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WONG BEARS A TATTOO ON HIS ARM WITH THE motto, 'Protect me from what I want', which seems apropos given the context of China's nascent hyperconsumerism and the launch of 100% Design Shanghai. 'I don't like talking about the tattoo much. It's intentionally written this way [towards him] so it's just for me to read,' says Wong as he instinctively pulls his arm closer. 'It's a natural thing for a kid when you've got a new toy; you

play with it every day for the first few weeks and then you move on. This is an oversimplification, of course, because consumerism is what defines culture globally now, so it's here to stay,' adds Chen, steering the conversation towards the bigger picture. 'But we can reverse that, we can use it,' interjects Wong animatedly.

'At the same time, China is big enough that there will always be people commenting on consumerism that don't buy into it,' says Chen, upbeat. 'One of the reasons I think they asked us, especially Toby, rather than more conventional designers of products is, this being China, they realised they needed more of a statement to be made, not just cool seating for the public areas. Hopefully we were able to do that in a way that is appropriate.' ■