

# In Love With Asia, Muse and Market

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

Past the mannequins larger than Berninis near the entry of the Prada store on lower Broadway hangs a short-sleeve mandarin-collar fuchsia satin shirt, which will diminish the bank account of any future owner by a sum roughly equal to the cost of an airline ticket to Beijing: \$1,365. Around the corner at Miu Miu, Prada's girlish secondary line, a similarly styled garment, with the added attraction of printed fern leaves, can be acquired for the comparative bargain of \$495.

The pricing of Prada's foray into chinoiserie seems more arrogant than it otherwise might, given the luxury emporium's newest neighbor, Pearl River Mart, a 25-year-old Chinese department store that relocated from Canal Street to Broadway and Broome Street earlier this month. At Pearl River, where traditional Asian dress is sold alongside sake cups, lotus-flower night lights and green-tea sucking candies, a short-sleeve silk mandarin-collar shirt costs about the same as a bus ticket to Philadelphia: \$47.50.

Pearl River's move from Canal Street to SoHo — from a 13,000-square-foot space that resembled an Old World Sears & Roebuck to a 20,000-square-foot store that looks as if it might have been conceived by Armani — comes at a time when the high lamas of fashion have rekindled an infatuation with Asian style.

Obscured by the chatter surrounding the dominant trend for spring, the reappearance of the miniskirt,

tographers who consider themselves among the avant-garde. "It really is like Paris in the 20's," said Ms. Tam, who visited recently. The April issue of Vogue will feature a diary of John Galiano's recent excursion through China and Japan.

Of course, you can never underestimate the extent to which fashion is content to merely feed off itself. "I think a lot of what we are seeing now is a lingering hangover from 'In the Mood for Love,' which really was the last real fashion movie," said Sally Singer, fashion editor of Vogue. The ethereal film, made by Wong Kar-wai in 2000, is a favorite of Tom Ford's. It explores the relationship of two Hong Kong neighbors who suspect their partners of extramarital affairs. Not long after the film appeared, French Vogue commis-



ABOVE, TOP Asian looks in a Miu Miu ad.

ABOVE Shoes at Pearl River Mart's store in SoHo.

RIGHT Roberto Cavalli's Chinese-style flower-print dress with slit at the leg, shown in Milan last September.



Above, Frances Roberts for The New York Times; right, Franco Origlia/Getty Images

kimono draping, cherry-blossom prints and mandarin cuts were shown last fall on the runways for Gucci, Miu Miu, Roberto Cavalli and Andrew Gn, among others. This might have been forgotten, like the uptown shop Shanghai Tang, had the clothes not formed the focus of spring advertising campaigns for the various houses, as well as for retailers like Neiman Marcus.

Attendant on the arrival of any trend, of course, is the question why now? In some sense Western fashion has looked to Asia more or less since the mid-1870's, when Liberty & Company, the British fabric purveyor, began importing Chinese and Japanese silks. Couture began appropriating from the East in the same era. "Worth did it, Poirret did it," the fashion historian Caroline Rennolds Milbank noted. "It's almost a question of who hasn't done it."

In recent years designers like Donna Karan have drawn from the Asian reference bank largely as an outgrowth of personal exploration into Eastern philosophies and religion. But it is pragmatism, or a reductive form of it at least, that seems to be driving the current wave of interest.

"China is opening up, and all of these European brands want access to that vast market," Vivienne Tam, the fashion designer and a native of Hong Kong, remarked. Shanghai, now home to an Armani store, has become a mecca for stylists and pho-

sioned Mr. Wong to produce a fashion shoot for the magazine.

The luxury world's fascination with the aesthetic of the Pacific Rim has paralleled a mass interest in Asian paraphernalia, as Pearl River's expansion attests. When the store moved from Elizabeth Street to Canal Street in 1986, 80 to 90 percent of its customers were Chinese, said Ching Yeh Chen, president of Pearl River's parent company, Chinese Native. Now 90 percent of those who shop there are Americans or European tourists.

"People come to us for prom dresses," Mrs. Chen said. "American appreciation of Asian culture has increased 100 times in the past 25 years."

A native of Taiwan who came to the United States to study economics, Mrs. Chen opened Pearl River with other, mostly Taiwanese graduate students in the late 70's, at a time, she noted, when "China was still



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

being called Red China."

Filling the racks at Pearl River is the qipao, the Chinese dress with an asymmetrical closure at the collar; it originated in the Ching dynasty. In its most traditional rendering it is full length and loosely outlined. After

the revolution in 1949, as educated Chinese women left for Hong Kong, the dress narrowed and became closer to the body. The qipao was given its greatest display among Westerners during the late 1950's and early 60's when it formed the centerpiece



Frank Micelotta/Getty Images

ABOVE The singer Alicia Keys chose an Asian-inspired dress for a pre-Grammy party.



ABOVE Advertisement for Gucci.

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of the films "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing" and "The World of Suzy Wong," both set in Hong Kong.

The qipaos found at Pearl River are true to the dress's design: loose fitting, never risqué in length, signifying a kind of respectability. As interpreted on European runways for this spring, the qipao has been infused with a sexual aggression. Mr. Cavalli offered a version so short it made the idea of pants seem almost monastic.

"I saw a qipao recently up to a woman's crotch," Patricia Meade, costume curator at the Brooklyn Museum and an expert in Oriental garments, said. "This is the antithesis of what the Asian aesthetic is about: conveyance of sexual remove."

The kimono dresses shown in the Gucci advertisement, now the centerpiece of spring