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BOOK REVIEW:
VIVIENNE TAM'S
CHINA CHIC (2000)

"How does East meet West?" designer Vivienne Tam wonders in her coffee table/memoir, *China Chic*—"to begin with, they're far apart," she replies to herself rhetorically, "so it takes time to get to know each other. But sometimes, it's like looking in a mirror."

Tam's little book was first published in 2000, but now, over 20 years later, it is apparently due not only for a reprint, but a sequel. Reading from today, the designer's formulation feels archaic, taken from another moment of zeitgeist: terms like "East" and "West" have fallen out of use since Tam harnessed their stylized "encounter," in favor of relational ideas of "diaspora," and with it, its more complicated colonial entanglements." Perhaps even posing her question as such—an encounter—presupposes a symbolic distance between East and West that doesn't exist anymore, as global neoliberal capitalism and social media have completed the illusion of interconnectedness that Tam was an early propagator of. If current diasporic aesthetics favor a more diffused relationship to their origins—"vaguely Asian," as New York art-fashion duo CFGNY termed it in 2017—what is the place of projects like Tam's, that feel, in this logic, "overtly Asian"?

Split into nine sections with titles like "Cheongsam" and "Chinglish,"

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Images courtesy of International Library of Fashion Research, Norway.

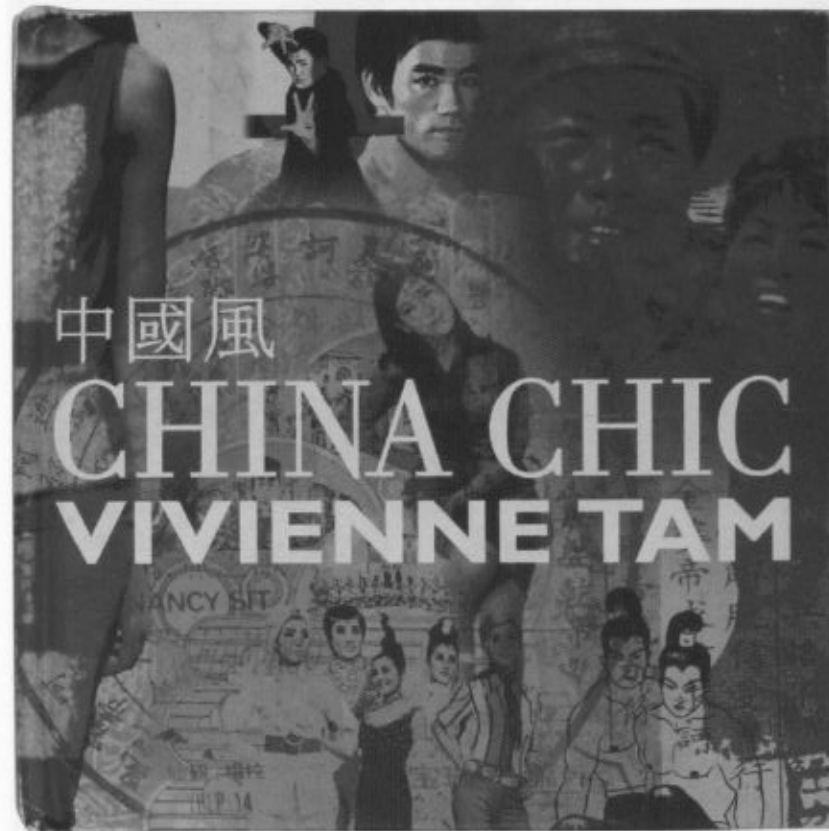




Image courtesy of Vivienne Tam.

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China Chic collects anecdotes and inspirations drawn from Tam's life as a Chinese-born, Hong-Kong-raised, American fashion designer most famously known for engaging Chinese aesthetics and iconography. Tam moved to New York in 1982 to establish her own fashion line, which was then called "East Wind Code," a Chinese proverb that indicates "good luck and prosperity." Her brand rose to prominence during the so-called zeitgeist of "Asian Chic," a moment between 1990 and 2005 when the North American / European publications such as *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *Harpers' Bazaar* ran huge spreads on topics such as feng shui, oriental medicine, and kimonos as nightwear, while designers like John Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier, Yves Saint Laurent and Ralph Lauren churned out collections filled with kimono-inspired silk dresses, tunics with intricate embroidery, and wool coats with mandarin collars. As cultural historian Thuy Linh Tu argues in her book *The Beautiful Generation*, although this moment was ostensibly an expression of appreciation for Asian fashion, the production of an undifferentiated "Asianness" in these sites ultimately only worked to reinforce its inferior position in the dominant cultural hierarchy. Via Tu, the answer to Tam's question—"How does East meet West?"—seemed to be that the West meets the East

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not to bring it closer, but to push it away, to reinforce the East as an exotic and faraway fantasy, an updated orientalist aesthetic for the globalized consumer-led new millennium.

As an Asian designer making clothes in the American context during Asian Chic, Tam became a sort of authority on the subject of East-meets-West relations, a role that she herself forged. This makes *China Chic* a fascinating time—capsule. Tam's project is not so easily dismissed as self-orientalization; it also engages with heritage, craft, and biography rather earnestly, even if in a problematic or totalizing way. This feels all the more interesting as we find ourselves in the midst of our own Asian Chic moment, mostly propagated by a younger generation of Asian and Asian American creatives. If contemporary critiques of appropriation by identity politics led us to the idea that "only Asians can wear Asian culture," self-orientalization has been reclaimed as a fraught, but also freeing, reinterpretation of one's cultural birthright. A contemporary re-reading of Tam's monograph, then, prompts the consideration: does our current moment share more in common with Asian Chic than we'd like to admit?

A central preoccupation of the book is comparing some idea of the "East"

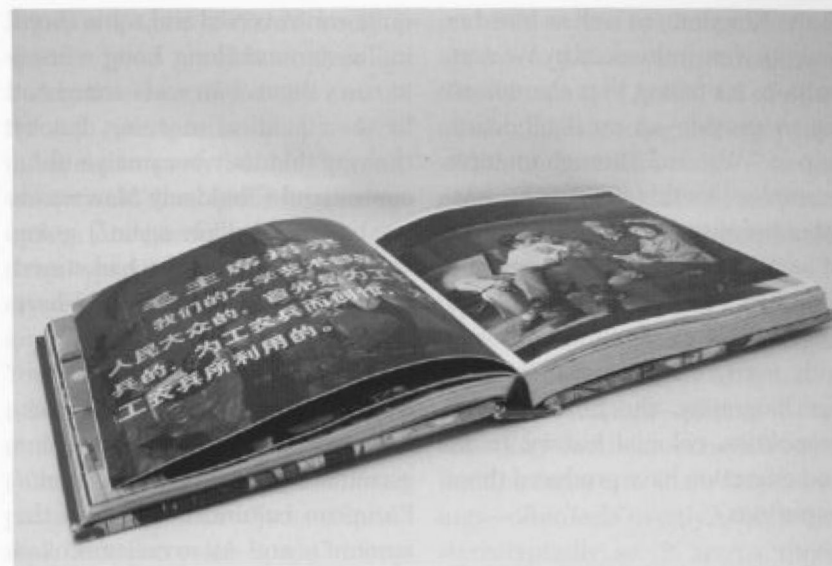
and that of the "West." She asks many of her interviewees point-blank, like in the following exchange with musician Tan Dun:

VT: What's the difference between Eastern and Western music?

TD: On the one hand, you can say there's no difference at all as long as the spirit of the music can touch you. But there are differences because each is constructed from a different language, and music is very connected to language. Chinese language is tonal, whereas Western language is rhythmic. When they come together it's very powerful. One is rhythm, signal and concept; the other is landscape, line, and movement. Chinese music is supposed to be written for yourself...

Notice the lack of scare quotes on terms like "Western" and "Eastern," but also how her respondent understands her question about "Eastern" aesthetics to effectively mean "Chinese." In other interviews, like one with Chinese garden photographer Chung Wah Nan, Tam uses the term "Chinese" instead of "Eastern," asking: "What do you think is the difference between the Chinese garden and the Western garden?" As it is often the case, and certainly has been in the history of Asian diaspora in the US, "Eastern" is effectively interchangeable with

"Chinese," which in turn becomes the signifier of all other Asian-ness. In *China Chic*, Tam is on the search for origins—in the most spectacular fashion, she is seeking the roots of her creative project in both her life and heritage. As such, she ends up explaining Chinese customs and ideas—like the origin of the character xi "double happiness" or the aesthetic philosophy behind a Chinese garden—mainly and directly in relation to their influence on her own style and taste. In "Cheongsam," for example, Tam traces a personal history of her relationship to the qipao, starting from the more traditional ones that her mother wore to the ones that included furs, lace, and striped fabrics on the "Shanghai ladies" in calendar ads from the 1940s: "I grew up with Shanghai lady images...I loved the packaging—the colors and patterns were all from a different time, and they made me conscious of how Western and Chinese aesthetics could be combined." Between the text of her narrative accounts are full-bleed images of these "Shanghai ladies," often chaotically collaged over other floral patterns. Presented without any specific historical context (there are no dates, captions, or attributions), they feel like free-floating mood boards assembled to convey a palpable aesthetic. As such, they recreate Tam's encounter with these references as ambient and



autobiographical, rather than analytical and scholarly. It echoes the impulse of many Asian Americans today, who are looking for their own kind of relationship to their "origins" or "roots," but who, in the process, end up relying heavily on abstractions and oriental fantasy. Tam also draws on the particularity of her upbringing in hybrid British colonial Hong Kong. In a section titled "Chinglish," she seems optimistic about this mixing: "Our culture was a mix of British and Chinese, it was something new. If you grow up hearing two languages, you know from the start that there's more than one. Some things are best said in one language, or avoided in another. Only with a mix of both can you truly say what's in your heart." Despite this,

she does wonder what constitutes the Chinese-ness of her upbringing. She ponders, "What is Chinese? As a child I never thought about it. I lived in a world where Chinese and English were mixed up, but there were things that were purely Chinese—my mom and dad, the food we ate at home, the chopsticks we used—simple everyday things..." This "pure Chinese," as she boldly defines, comes mainly from the culture of the Qing dynasty. She notes that "[t]he style and aesthetics of the Qing are what Westerners think of as Chinese, and what Chinese think of as Chinese." She further complicates this conception of Qing purity by immediately recounting how the Qing Dynasty was influenced by Jesuit monks and other travelers

to the Kingdom, as well as how her parents were influenced by Western fashion. It's telling that she doesn't try to provide an outright definition of "Western." Through multiple examples like this, *China Chic* narrates her discovery of the impurity of each of terms like "Eastern" and "Western," or that history would render those words almost obsolete with even one example. Through her biography, she hints at how geopolitics, colonial history, trade, and migration have produced these impurities.

There might also have been a strategic dimension to Tam's self—orientalization, a kind of scrambling of signs (a "running amok of signifiers" as Thuy Linh Tu suggests) to give new meanings to images stereotypically associated with the "East" or the "West." In the "Mao Crazy" chapter, Tang discusses her 1995 collection she made with the Chinese artist Zhang Hongtu, in which she printed Mao's face over dresses, t-shirts, and other garments, causing outrage, as well as considerable success, in both the West and in her native Hong Kong.

Her interest in Mao seemed tied to the power of his image to incite rebellious, "revolutionary" impulses, even if they were abstracted from their actual historical circumstances. After the garments became

quite controversial and some shops in Taiwan and Hong Kong refused to carry them, Tam was excited not by their political meaning, but by the way that they became youthful contraband ("Suddenly Mao was a symbol of rebellion again.") going so far to say that if she had stayed in China, she probably would have been a Red Guard.

It's hard to imagine any such positive mainstream interest in China germinating in North American/European culture today, given the amount of anti-Asian racism stoked by Trump, the COVID pandemic, and general malaise over China's growing economic dominance and open ideological competition with the West in their foreign policy, known to some as "Wolf warrior diplomacy." The book gives the impression that in the 90s, China could be fashionable and cute because it was, in essence, politically innocuous. Today's shift in geopolitics has made blatant Chinese imagery look something like anti-Americanism. In the context of mainstream appropriation of Asian aesthetics in the 1990s, Tam might have appeared like an enabler, a kind of self-orientalizing "postcolonial exotic." But Tam's interest in China seems more personal and more earnest than the fad of Asian chic—it just so happened to overlap with it for a period of time.

Between pages of Tam's book, I spent a good amount of time on Instagram. There, if you take a scroll through the profile of the NYC queer Asian party Bubble_T, you'll see tons of drag queens, make-up artists, and performers who take stereotypically oriental imagery—dragons, lanterns, qipaos—and reclaim them as their own. You'll see Instagram handles like @Kimchi_chic, @SookieSterling, @reignofdynasty or DJ names like @chopstixmami, @phantazn, and party names like "Jade Cloud" and "Mooncakes in Space." Many of these practitioners are Asian American—unlike Tam, who is not American, or most of the fashion houses of her time, who participated in Asian Chic but who were led by non-Asians. The participants of Bubble_T draw freely from a pan-Asian panoply of references such as Sailor Moon, Tony Leung, Japanese Anime, cosplay culture, and K-Pop—perhaps committing a similar totalizing appropriation as that of Asian Chic—but in this instance, as a decolonial reorientation or reclamation.

It's hard to say how successful this reclamation is. It appears that it is mostly Americans—be they Asian or not—who are forging this fantasy. If we are in a decolonial moment, are we once again distancing actual Asia into a distant moodboard, a

set of ahistorical references that we are free to pick looks from? Is there a re-flattening of Asia? Part of what allows this flattening to be permissible is an American media environment of increased Asian American representation, at least compared to the 1990s—so that these stereotypes might carry less of a material cost. *China Chic*, with its outright and specific references to symbols of Chinese culture—ancient Ming and Qing traditions, scholar rocks, Buddha faces and Guan Yin drawings—often feels "overtly Asian," even stereotypically so. It seems there might be something culturally dangerous there. This is where Tam's approach, although at times wildly totalizing, is actually kind of admirable, as a sustained engagement with one's heritage in the realm of fashion that goes beyond one party look or night. It might be a complement to "vaguely Asian" to also have "overtly Asian" aesthetics, borne of an unabashed specificity of various cultural heritages. It allows us to return to Tam's original question—how does the East meet the West?—from a diasporic perspective. Sometimes, they are indeed "far apart," and it can take time to get to know one another, but that distance maybe can be brought closer by bringing specificity and context, as well as fantasy and re-invention—to produce a more encompassing mirror.