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**Stitching across time: Heritage and history in contemporary Hong Kong fashion**

**Key words:** Hong Kong, cheongsam, tailoring, fashion marketing, intangible cultural heritage

**Abstract:** Popular media celebrates the iconic Hong Kong dress: the cheongsam, yet its existence is threatened as Hong Kong's population of master tailors is rapidly dwindling. Hong Kong's fashion identity is closely intertwined with the changing patterns of the global fashion industry. Hong Kong once buzzed with factories supplying the world's wardrobes, but recent developments resulted in the loss of its manufacturing base, and as fashions changed the once ubiquitous cheongsam was consigned to fashion history. With the recent focus on heritage and slow fashion, making has become a key component in fashion marketing. Companies in the UK and US are reviving old brands and launching new ones, using abandoned industrial equipment and reinvigorating local economies. This increased focus on country-of-origin, artisanship and sustainability also offers opportunities for Hong Kong to reposition itself and this article surveys the contemporary fashion landscape in order to inform a debate on cultural heritage in fashion and its marketing.

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ARTICLE

*'We can feed the thread through the needle with our eyes closed'*

Mrs Leung, Linva Tailors, (Wong, 2013)

## **Introduction**

June 2014 saw the Hong Kong government publish its inaugural list of 480 items of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' which included the specific sewing techniques of *cheongsam* making and the accompanying 'flower button' trimmings (Legco, 2014). The list is drawn up as part of a UNESCO initiative that recognizes and seeks to preserve diverse culturally situated practices and specifically identifies the *cheongsam* as opposed to the *qipao* as a Hong Kong creation, one that is strongly associated with Hong Kong's very fashion identity. The publication of this list drew media attention to the plight of the Hong Kong tailors and there has been widespread reporting of the imminent loss of a tailoring skills-base due to the underemployment and ageing population of Hong Kong tailors. Yet despite the dwindling numbers of practitioners there is a continued interest in and nostalgia for the Hong Kong tailor and some recent innovative initiatives to ensure the living skills of the Hong Kong tailor are captured for future generations.

In a presentation of Autumn/Winter 2015/16 Megatrends, Director of Trend Services at WGSN Kim Mannino introduced the trend 'Essence' one which highlights artisanship and an appreciation of detail in fashion products manifest in timeless classics and personalization, connoting bespoke tailoring and detailing such as monograms with new luxury. The new geographies of international fashion consumption and the expansion in product offer from established fashion brands have

led to an increased focus on the provenance of fashion goods. Marketing analysts have highlighted the concept of ‘trading up’ whereby middle market consumers are increasingly spending on luxury goods and services (Roche, Silverstein & Charpilo, 2008). This practice has been particularly evident at the luxury level where the traditional European fashion houses have leveraged their long histories to support their credibility with consumers (Okonkwo, 2007). Concurrently fashion consumers are increasingly interrogating the ethical practices of fashion producers and more consumers expect brands to comply with sustainable production along the value chain (Varley & Rafiq, 2014). With the growth of social media and an abundance of reports on unethical practices in the fashion industry there has been an increased focus on the production of fashion garments and consumer demands for increased transparency and traceability (Radclyffe, Roncha & Varley, 2014).

However industry evidence shows that many consumers suffer from ‘green fatigue’; not wanting to be ‘guilted’ into purchasing from ethical companies, which means ethical fashion brands, must focus on the key differentiators of quality and design (Angel, 2013). The combination of these factors make heritage and authenticity key drivers for fashion consumers (Kapferer & Bastien 2012) and brand positioning around artisanship, ingredient branding and country of origin are key fashion marketing strategies. The changing relationship between fashion brands and consumers enabled by digital platforms and social media has encouraged brand storytelling which has become a necessary differentiator, adding value in an increasingly saturated and homogenized marketplace (Hancock, 2009; Lindstrom, 2010). Adopting and showcasing ethical values as part of the positioning process can

add value for brands<sup>1</sup>. With the rejection of fast fashion and Shenzhen factory-made suits the cultural heritage of tailors can add value for Hong Kong manufacturers, but the pool of available skilled tailors is diminishing rapidly in Hong Kong.

Based on field research in Hong Kong's dynamic fashion retail environment and qualitative interviews with fashion retailers and tailoring studios this article investigates the current interest in Hong Kong's fashion heritage and the renaissance of tailoring in Hong Kong. A range of contemporary Hong Kong brands are surveyed with specific focus on Shanghai Tang and Bonham Strand Tailors as examples of brands engaging with heritage marketing surrounding key iconic production by Hong Kong tailors for modern consumers. And the studio Qipao Tang which captures the handcraft skills of the master *sifus* keeping Hong Kong tailoring traditions alive as well as informing and educating local Hong Kongers. In addition to field research and interviews, a press review and content analysis of the brands' promotional activities were carried out. In order to contextualize the results within the wider fashion system consumer trend research was carried out in London regarding both macro fashion-lifestyle trends with international trend company WGSN and also with regard to the design and marketing practices of London heritage brands as part of a British Fashion Council industry seminar.

### **Fashion Nostalgia**

Maggie Cheung glides across the screen in a series of delectable *cheongsams* as Su Li-Zhen in Wong Kar Wei's 2000 classic *Fa yeung nin wa/In the Mood for Love* establishing the *cheongsam* as an iconic Hong Kong garment for a new generation of

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing Kering Group had just published its Environmental Profit and Loss Account highlighting their use of sustainability as a differentiating factor across their stable of brands.

fashion consumers. Her co-star Tony Leung as Chow Mo-Wan parades an almost equally captivating menswear wardrobe of Italian-style suits. The tailored wardrobes of the two lead actors perfectly captured the audience's nostalgia for a city at its peak of fashionability and continue to resonate with fashion consumers worldwide. While the wardrobe may be one of the stars of *Fa yeung nin wa/In the Mood for Love* the Hong Kong tailoring industry itself is central to Wong Kar Wai's 2004 film short *The Hand*, which revolves around the relationship between a Hong Kong tailor Xiao Zhang (Chang Chen) and his *cheongsam*-clad client Miss Hua (Gong Li). The story is told in flashback tracing a complex relationship between the two protagonists: the fashion consumer and the craftsman-maker. The *cheongsam* itself is fetishized in the film through lingering camera shots and close-ups that feature a succession of exquisite, tightfitting *cheongsams*- in white satin with black lace overlay, in floral brights, knee-length, floor length with side-slits. The construction of the garments themselves feature in interior scenes at the tailors' workshop, where middle-aged and elderly tailors stripped to their vests, work in cramped conditions surrounded by bolts of decorative materials, chalking patterns onto fabrics, machining, hand-stitching, snipping threads, pressing and finishing glamorous *cheongsams* which are then folded and presented to clients in brown paper bags.

The contemporary viewer can only imagine a time when it was common practice for women to have made-to-measure clothes and fittings with their personal tailor, or *sifu*, and as fashions have changed the once ubiquitous *cheongsam* seems likely to be consigned to fashion history. Not such an iconic image as the *cheongsam* but one equally encoded into Hong Kong's fashion identity is the Hong Kong tailor-made man's suit. The post-war period saw a boom in men's tailoring in Hong Kong which

lasted until price competition shifted production away from Hong Kong to the Mainland during the 1980s leaving many tailors underemployed or abandoning the tailoring business altogether. Although most current fashion consumers are far removed from the production of their clothing; brand authenticity and an appreciation for artisanship are macro trends in twenty-first century fashion that offer opportunities to revive specialist production and associated iconic products in locations such as Hong Kong. There are specific rules for constructing the *cheongsam* and traditional materials, tools and methods that are rarely codified but rather passed on from *sifu* to apprentice. Although constructing the authentic *cheongsam* is a highly skilled practice, its key product identifiers are simple and so recognizable that they can be imitated across market levels.

Hong Kong's fashion identity is closely intertwined with the international fashion system, its role changes reflecting patterns and issues of the wider industry. The inclusion of certain cities in the fashion calendar necessarily excludes others, and anachronistic perceptions of (generally) non-Western locations prevent cities like Hong Kong from participating fully in modern fashion. In the past Hong Kong benefitted from a cost imperative that led the Western fashion industry to systematically deskill their indigenous manufacturing workforces and offshore production to Asia. Hong Kong buzzed with factories supplying the world's wardrobes and its thriving tailoring industry was known worldwide and Hong Kong exploited its 'low-cost-high-speed' reputation making a visit to the tailors a must-do on many tourist itineraries. Hong Kong's fashion associations have mostly been with manufacture; its position as a major manufacturing hub was established in the mid-twentieth century, with a proliferation of mass and custom making. Alongside the

factories, both men's and women's tailors ran busy workshops- there is even a construction method known as the 'Hong Kong seam'. Yet despite the existence of a pool, albeit a dwindling one, of specialist makers and a long-established Fashion Week, latent associations with copying have diminished Hong Kong's fashion equity as illustrated by Dilnot's (2003:12) description of a 'Hong Kong' product development model as one whereby 'R&D' represents 'replication and duplication'. In the last decades of the twentieth century Hong Kong lost its competitive advantage to Mainland China; the population of makers greatly reduced as production shifted, and without a supply of tailoring apprentices the skill-base of Hong Kong tailors is in danger of being permanently eroded.

The established hierarchy of fashion cities (Breward & Gilbert, 2006) maintains a status quo that advantages certain cities and necessarily disadvantages others in terms of prestige and perceptions of quality. One of the key differentiators for fashion products is country of origin whereby products made in or associated strongly with certain geographic locations add or diminish value (Kotler & Gertner 2004). Where country of origin had been a core strand of brand identity, the practice of off-shoring production undermined the authenticity of many fashion brands. It is a current strategy internationally to bring some production back on-shore bringing production closer to the market and reviving dormant industrial areas, giving added value for consumers. Porter and Kramer (2006) describe this strategy as one of creating *shared* value as it can simultaneously serve both business and societal needs. Countries or cities can be conceived as branded products and consumers perceive images of countries that represent 'a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information' (Kotler et al., 1993 in Kotler & Gertner 2004: 42). Thus the city as



brand is a core competitive asset when the city is associated with fashion heritage and artisanship. Arnholt (2004:27) argues that in order to gain brand equity the place of origin and product must concur with consumers' perceptions i.e. matching 'provenance with product'. Although Hong Kong has strong associations with tailoring in both menswear and womenswear, its city brand equity has been eroded over recent years due to the factors outlined above. However an increased focus on country of origin, artisanship and sustainability (Porter & Kramer, 2006) offers opportunities for the Hong Kong fashion industry to reposition itself.

### **Shanghai Tang**

Many European fashion houses have opened their archives both literally and in terms of inspiring their current collections, linking their products to an established lineage of craft production which is often supported by digital marketing in the form of product development and construction videos giving consumers the reassurance of buying into a piece of history. British fashion brand Burberry had a much-publicized and analyzed brand renaissance through focusing on its core product- the trenchcoat- tracing its lineage back to its military associations, and designing retail spaces that celebrate the brand's history whilst also embracing the possibilities enabled by digital technology both in store design and also in terms of the possibilities of mass customization of product. The Hong Kong *cheongsam* can justifiably claim to be one of the most iconic fashion products and as such offers possibilities to add value to Hong Kong's own brand equity. Although its construction techniques are now outlined in the Hong Kong government's Intangible Cultural Heritage documentation (Legco, 2014), the process is not exclusive to one maker and much as the 'Chanel

suit' has become shorthand for a design aesthetic reproduced at all market levels and with a degree of artistic licence, the *cheongsam* does not belong to one brand and its style is continually reworked by designers internationally.

The Hong Kong brand Shanghai Tang has built much of its success on the reworking of the *cheongsam* and key design elements thereof. In its twentieth year the brand is seeking to reposition itself but arguably the brand remains anchored on the *cheongsam* which informs multiple areas of the brand identity. Shanghai Tang founder David Tang envisioned the brand as an ambassador of Chinese style at a time when Made in China had negative connotations for many consumers. The *cheongsam* has been produced as an iconic product for the brand over the years originally in authentic silk weaves featuring symbolic Chinese designs such as *zhou* and fish and more recently in digital prints that draw their inspiration from the geography and history of China. A field trip to the Shanghai Tang outlet in the Horizon Plaza outlet mall uncovered a striking pink-gold two-tone double-fish silk *cheongsam* from the 'Authentic Collection' of the early 2000s, its original swing tag still in place which contains the following text:

'...Shanghai Tang is dedicated to the preservation of traditional Chinese clothing. The Authentic Collection is the result of this ongoing mission: we have chosen some of the most recognizable and time-honoured silhouettes in China's illustrious sartorial history and enshrined them as Authentics because of their iconic significance. At the same time we have injected the Authentics with vivacity and color in our inimitable Shanghai Tang style.'

2014 saw the twentieth anniversary of the Shanghai Tang brand, which now sits within the luxury Richemont group. Interviews with marketing managers at the brand's new Hong Kong flagship store confirm the brand's intention to transition away from the nostalgia marketing that has been prominent in Shanghai Tang's product and promotions (Radclyffe-Thomas, 2014). The rising Chinese consumer and the increased interest in Chinese cultural products mean the customer base has shifted away from the Western tourist cliché towards creating a luxury fashion brand with Chinese cultural influences able to compete on the runway alongside international fashion brands. The original Pedder Street store was a staple on the tourist shopping route that made use of sensory branding to underscore the brand's DNA with its high glamour art deco interiors harking back to the golden era of 1930's Shanghai, its distinctive 'Ginger Lily' scent branding and a soundtrack of Shanghai Divas. The back half of the store was the home of the Imperial Tailoring Service where bolts of fabric and cutting tables recreated the tailors' studios of old Shanghai. The tailoring element of the brand gives Shanghai Tang value through its heritage associations but there is a question as to how viable a service this can remain due to the declining number of master *sifus* able to produce *cheongsams* in the traditional manner and to the highest quality which according to the Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory subsection 5.71.3 'hinges on perfect fitting and good embroidery' with authentic making consisting of 'fitting, pretreatment of fabric, fabric cutting, sewing silk lining, stitching, ironing, turning over silk lining, collar sewing, binding tape, felling seam, setting in sleeve and button fastening' (Legco, 2014:85).

**Figure 1:** Interior Shanghai Tang Duddell Mansion, Hong Kong showing the modern rebrand. Note the use of the auspicious *yun*/cloud symbol in the display shelves. Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas 2014.

April 2012 saw the opening of the new Hong Kong flagship on Duddell Street- just around the corner from the original store- and whilst the store retains many of the elements of the original, the rebrand is evident in a more modern interpretation of Shanghai glamour and the use of more minimalist materials in the shop interiors. Imperial Tailoring is less prominent in the new store; a small room off the womenswear floor houses fabrics and look-books- and is also home to Michelle, one of the original Shanghai Tang caged songbirds. There are no tailors evident in-store and the made-to-measure service is advertised through in-store trunk shows. The Imperial Tailoring line has inspired a ready-to-wear capsule collection available in-store and online, the pieces of which all contain some *cheongsam* design elements e.g. mandarin collars, cap-sleeves or diagonal front openings but which detour from the authentic *cheongsam* by fastening with zips at the centre-back seam. Whilst the client base for made-to-measure is likely to be extremely small, the styling of *cheongsam* informs many of the womenswear products released for the twentieth anniversary collection, as evidenced by stand collars and cap sleeve details seen on form-fitting dresses in-store and on display at Pacific Place this summer as part of the brand's anniversary celebrations. As Shanghai Tang repositions the brand the product offer has also changed; moving away from what has been perceived as its 'costume' element towards a fashion identity with products that feature Chinese cultural influences such as bamboo, clouds, knots, Chinese button fastenings. The rebrand is aimed at a new customer and is focused initially on the Asian market with a move to

capture consumers who want to celebrate their Chinese culture in a high fashion way. The heritage of tailoring is core to the brand's credibility but is also a risk for a brand wanting to 'curate modern Chinese chic' if customers always associate the brand with the past. Perhaps this is why Shanghai Tang did not take part in the recent 'Hong Kong *Cheongsam*' exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of History in what would have previously seemed a natural fit for the brand.

**Figure 2:** The key style elements of the *cheongsam* style are evident in this Shanghai Tang *cheongsam* from the Spring/Summer 2014 collection, photographed in the Duddell Mansion store. Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas 2014.

### **Bonham Strand**

History is central to the burgeoning menswear market which has seen its expansion as one of fashion's key trends with events like London Collections Men focusing on capturing the new male fashion consumer. At the same time technological advances have made mass personalization possible and desirable. The menswear market has seen the success of brands like Burberry and Dunhill trading on their brands' heritage highlighting craftsmanship as a key differentiator and capturing a new clientele. Heritage labels such as Gieves and Hawkes located at Number One Savile Row- arguably the most prestigious address in tailoring- are using storybuilding to reposition: as Chief Creative Officer Jason Basmajian shared at a recent British Fashion Council seminar the whole brand identity 'hangs off the suit'. Gieves and Hawkes is using its 240-year history to inform a product and promotional makeover that includes displaying iconic items from the brand's archive in-store at its London

base. The resurgence of menswear is also evident in Hong Kong's retail scene and Gieves and Hawkes, (currently owned by a Hong Kong conglomerate), is leveraging its heritage of English tailoring and expanding into Asia, recently opening a store in Central's Ice House Street.

Anholt (2004: 28) argues that a country's brand image can 'profoundly shape its economic, cultural and political destiny'. It seems the renaissance in men's tailoring, the emergence of a new clientele and an increase in demand for women's tailoring could positively impact Hong Kong's fashion industry. The appeal of English tailoring gives competitive advantage in the menswear market and for many consumers the idea of a 'Hong Kong' suit may be one associated with speed and low prices rather than quality and fit. This perception is being challenged by some emerging Hong Kong menswear brands and Tony Leung's sharp suited character Chow Mo-Wan in *Fa yeung nin wa/In the Mood for Love* (Wong, 2000) has played a part in inspiring a revival of men's tailoring in Hong Kong. The retail landscape of Hong Kong is changing with the area around Aberdeen Street seeing not only the PMQ development but also new independent stores such as Moustache. Tailor Ellis Kreuger founded Moustache in 2009 and has built the brand's identity around the tradition and craftsmanship of tailoring a man's bespoke suit, employing a handful of locally-based Shanghai tailors. Moustache offers a ready-to-wear menswear collection as well as a bespoke tailoring service from their store whose interior recreates the inimitable experience of having one's first suit fitted by a skilled Hong Kong tailor. The brand concept is built on nostalgia for a time when a visit to the Hong Kong tailor was a rite of passage and the owners see the menswear market in Hong Kong

affording plenty of scope for bespoke tailoring especially for brands like theirs that focus on providing a quality product for clients working in the creative industries.

Another local brand- Bonham Strand<sup>2</sup>- is offering an innovative business model with Hong Kong tailoring at its core which aims to provide a quality tailoring service for a new Hong Kong clientele by re-employing the ageing population of Hong Kong tailors and bringing a new generation of tailors into the industry. Designer Fong Wai Keung believes that ‘deep inside people want to dress well’ and Bonham Strand are and positioning Hong Kong tailoring as a prestigious craft skill. Ingredient branding is important in tailoring and Bonham Strand has partnerships with European fabric houses e.g. Cerruti and their bespoke service offers a series of fittings and hand detailing e.g. hand-stitched buttonholes. With side-by-side photos under the heading ‘True Bespoke or Made to Measure ‘Tailored’?’ the brand’s launch website (now relaunched) contrasted an image of a pair of hands holding tailors’ shears working on a suit jacket marked-up with tailors tacks, against a photograph showing machinists working on a production-line of identical suit jackets. Such imagery clearly distinguished the brand as an authentic Hong Kong heritage tailor and as such adds value to the product. Many luxury brands have supplemented brand stories by including images and videos of skilled craftspeople constructing their products and Bonham Strand has taken this a step further by having head tailor Mr. Cheung working in the window of their second floor studio on Hollywood Road just across from the Mid-levels Escalator. Intrigued tourists and commuters can enjoy the live show and also watch a video loop shown on a large digital screen that shows a report

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<sup>2</sup> The address Bonham Strand is one associated with Hong Kong’s historical tailoring industry.

from the Wall Street Journal explaining the brand's particular form of social entrepreneurship.

In recent years there has been an increase in the prevalence of social enterprises in fashion, where businesses are functioning with a profit imperative that co-exists with their ethical or charitable practices rather than relying on large charitable or government support; the One-for-one brand TOMS is an example of a for-profit international company that uses its ethical stance as a key differentiator (Radclyffe-Thomas, Roncha & Varley, 2014). Bonham Strand has also adopted a for-profit business model wherein the charitable activities are a core strand of the brand DNA. This has provided a clear brand story for Bonham Strand who have garnered much publicity; the website is branded as 'Bonham Strand: A Social Enterprise for Hong Kong' and highlights press coverage of the unique business. Brand engagement is fostered when consumers feel emotionally connected with brand values (Kawamura, 2005) and Bonham Strand's 'Give and Receive' initiative is one designed to foster strong bonding between brand and consumer; the scheme encourages consumers to donate suits in return for a personal visit from the tailors and redeemable vouchers, the suits are recycled and remodeled by tailors and their apprentices for recipients identified by partner local charities. The Bonham Strand website showcases multiple international editorials on the brand championing its business model which pursues, brand loyalty based on quality and value rather than charity or 'guilt premium'.

**Figure 3:** Mr Cheung Head Tailor Bonham Strand sewing in the studio window, Hong Kong. Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas 2014.



Bonham Strand was founded by venture capitalist Jong Lee and has brought together previously under or unemployed tailors, many of whom had set up businesses in China but have now returned to Hong Kong. Media reports and anecdotal evidence suggest that young people are showing an interest in becoming tailors but the apprenticeship system has broken down and consequently the youngest of the Bonham Strand tailors is in his forties. In order to build a sustainable and scalable model for tailoring in the twenty-first century Bonham Strand is collaborating with local charitable organizations and using tailoring as a form of rehabilitation for young people recovering from substance abuse. Social enterprises are beneficial for internal brand management as they increase employee satisfaction and the master tailors at Bonham Strand gain personal value by sharing their craftsmanship and introducing former addicts to tailoring skills via simple projects e.g. making a man's tie and additionally the participants can potentially identify a trade. Another added value for employees is that they are paid a salary rather than piece work and that they work out of an airy communal tailoring workshop in Lai Chi Kok rather than the poor and isolated conditions reported by many sole trader tailors. CEO Brian Ng describes the Bonham Strand business model as a 'distressed asset turnaround' in a video link introducing a collaboration between Bonham Strand and SOW Asia shown on the brand's website, he explains that as opposed to many such venture capital investments, in this case 'The distressed assets aren't the machines or the factory or the real estate but the assets are actually the people in this industry, the sewers the tailors' (SOW Asia, 2013). Having established local Hong Kong production initially to serve its own tailoring business Fung explains that an ability to respond to small orders means Bonham Strand can facilitate the short production runs emerging

fashion designers often require and as such it can play a part in the wider regeneration of the local fashion industry.

## **Qipao Tang**

Businesses like Bonham Strand and Moustache have a business model with potential to help revive the Hong Kong men's tailoring industry but the fate of the most iconic of Hong Kong's fashion identities – as embodied in the *cheongsam*- does not seem to have any such safety nets. Much tourism and marketing relies on retro images of *cheongsam*-clad Chinese beauties and the public's imagination is still sparked by the skills of Hong Kong's *cheongsam* tailors, as evidenced by the popularity of the recent Hong Kong History Museum exhibition, however the majority of *cheongsam* available to buy in Hong Kong are not made according to traditional methods and as such the authentic *cheongsam* is at risk of disappearing. The *cheongsam* retains a place in popular culture that informs Hong Kong's fashion identity and that shows no sign of diminishing. *Cheongsams* appear in stores designed for cultural shoppers e.g. Yue Hwa Chinese Products Emporium and Chinese Arts and Crafts, in contemporary fashion collections e.g. Yi-Ming, Rane K and Kenki as well as Shanghai Tang as explored above. Iconic *cheongsam* tailors such as Linva still trade in Hong Kong's Central district but the *sifu* numbers are dwindling and those employed are increasingly ageing. In response to changing fashions and a reliance on tourist trade Linva has adapted its product offer to include ready-to-wear, but its owners understand the symbolic significance of the tailor-made *cheongsam* for Hong Kong and Chinese fashion identities and argue for the importance of keeping the traditional techniques alive (Wong, 2013).

**Figure 4:** Store counter Linva Tailors showing the tools and materials of the cheongsam tailor, Hong Kong. Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas 2014.

It is with this evangelical mission that Jody Kan founded Qipao Tang in 2006 for a small group of qipao enthusiasts who had been attending sessions with Hong Kong tailor Sheung *sifu* at his workshop since the early 2000s. The apprentices subsidized the shortfall in rent that had resulted from a downturn in income that meant a workshop, which had previously housed eight master tailors, was reduced to three. A combination of reduced income and poor working conditions led to Sheung *sifu* relinquishing his workshop in 2006 and Qipao Tang was founded.

Kan believes the *cheongsam* is an important part of Hong Kong's cultural heritage. Her interest in its development, the rules and regulations of its construction, informs her work with Hong Kong's Cache<sup>3</sup> to keep traditional heritage artisan skills alive: 'when you saw the *sifu* do the pressing it's so amazing just like magic how he make the *qipao*.' The scarcity of traditional qipao artisanal skills is revealed in an anecdote that Kan shares about a Taiwanese University lecturer, Sister Fung, who visited Hong Kong in 2013 in order to codify the skills of the Chinese button-maker as there were no *wajies* left to ask in Taiwan. Kan has been running workshops in schools and took part in a Cache 2014 exhibition: 'Passing on: Exhibition of works by Master Craftsmen and the apprentices' which involved running workshops and demonstrations about Hong Kong tailoring skills and included opportunities for

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<sup>3</sup> Cache (the Conservancy Association for Heritage) was founded in 2005 to promote Hong Kong's tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

schoolchildren to try on some of her private collection of historical Chinese dress; believing that in a time of fast fashion and tailor-lite *cheongsams* it is important that ‘the school kid know that... this is our Chinese, because they have all the meaning. When they make the dress, they have all the meaning and when you look at the fabric or we look at the embroidery they all mean something good.’ Despite *sifu* Sheung’s initial bewilderment that ‘Europeans’ would be interested in, or in fact capable of, learning the traditional techniques employed in the *qipao* studio Jody’s belief in sharing the traditional tailoring techniques of the *qipao sifu* led to a series of classes<sup>4</sup> advertised through special interest groups e.g. the Hong Kong Textile Society being run. Initially with a translator but later learning by copying, myself and a small group of *qipao* enthusiasts were taken through each stage of the process as described above. Language issues aside the differences in body type between Chinese and Westerners are often a source of amusement when taking measurements necessary to draft individual patterns.

**Figure 5:** Sheung *sifu* demonstrates how to press a *qipao* at Qipao Tang studio, Hong Kong. Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas 2008.

Kan’s interest in Chinese dress has led her to building up a collection of original tailoring books and equipment that she uses to demonstrate how she believes *qipao* making developed through the twentieth century. Contrary to some, Kan believes the maker’s cultural background is integral to the form of the *qipao*, and she shows me examples of the Canton, Taiwan and Shanghai ruler and describes how each place has

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<sup>4</sup> My abiding memory of these classes - and of those taken with *wajie* to learn flower buttons - was of being told one was doing it wrong in a variety of ways!

experienced separate developments in *qipao* making. Fung, Bonham Strand's designer, had told me how Shanghai and Hong Kong tailors 'fight like cats and dogs' and Kanalso argues that apart from a few Shanghai tailors (twenty) who had been taught by Taiwanese tailor Master Yeung on a study tour to Shanghai, many modern Shanghai tailors do not follow the authentic construction methods of the original Shanghai tailors who came to populate the workshops of mid-century Hong Kong: 'in China they don't have old *sifu* know how to make this... they apply quite a lot of the European style in making it.' Kan states that of those instructed by Master Yeung only two or three are continuing to make authentic *qipaos* and sees the lack of tailoring skills on the Mainland and their gradual disappearance in Hong Kong inevitably dilute claims for the *qipao* as a sartorial representation of Chinese cultural identity: 'they don't have anything like *sifu* do it; all the technique is Western technique... They still look like the *cheongsam*, but they don't have the taste of the *cheongsam*. The *qipao* taste is not there.'

**Figure 6:** Exquisite workmanship is evident in this Qipao Tang *qipao*, Hong Kong, Photo Natascha Radclyffe-Thomas, 2008.

## **Conclusion**

An increasing interest in the provenance of fashion goods and a focus on the menswear market and its associated tailoring practices is supporting a revival of men's tailoring in Hong Kong. Local production enables personal attention and transparency in the supply chain which can add value to the fashion product, and this article has shown how local brands are leveraging the skills of Hong Kong tailors in

building brand identities that appeal to twenty-first century consumers and building businesses that can differentiate themselves against fast fashion or factory-made suits. In contrast there is limited action to preserve the skills and studios of the *qipao sifu*, and without an injection of new talent in the industry it seems likely that the authentic product will become increasingly rare. Indigenous fashion crafts form an integral part of fashion cities' identities; Karl Lagerfeld underscored the necessity of keeping Paris' fashion artisans in business to support the haute couture system when Chanel established a subsidiary to promote and protect companies such as embroiderers Lesage. The codifying of the construction techniques as part of Hong Kong's Intangible Cultural Heritage (Legco, 2014) offers the opportunity for tailors to reclaim this heritage product from the fashion world but this is not currently evident and it seems as though as the authentic garment becomes a rarity, the *cheongsam's* shorthand for Chinese chic will continue to inspire fashion designers and captivate fashion consumers who associate its style, if not its substance, with a Hong Kong pedigree.

Note: The terms *cheongsam* and *qipao* are both used throughout this paper; the Cantonese term *cheongsam* is primarily used except when informants have specifically used the term *qipao*. The author is mindful of the differing connotations these two terms may have.

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#### IMAGE ID

Fig 1: ST268

Fig 2: ST265

Fig 3: BS306

Fig 4: LV396

Fig 5: QT067

Fig 6: QT904