



The Tie Breaker

Shanghai Tang's Executive Chairman Raphael le Masne de Chermont hasn't worn a tie for years – choosing instead to sport an Eastern-influenced look that packs expression and elegance.

STORY APPLE MANDY

Transforming Hong Kong-based fashion and lifestyle store Shanghai Tang from somewhat of a quirky souvenir emporium into a pioneering Chinese luxury lifestyle brand may not have been possible if it wasn't for Raphael le Masne de Chermont. Joining the brand in 2001, following stints at Cartier, Piaget, Baume & Mercier and Panerai under the Richemont Group, executive chairman Chermont has played a major role in the brand's exponential growth – both here and abroad. Today Shanghai Tang has presence in 45 cities around the world, including London, Shanghai and Singapore. We chat to the debonair Breton about risk, retail culture, his perception on the no-tie policy, and the importance of meditation.

What are the challenges and risks you've encountered in transforming the Shanghai Tang brand?

The risk was that the customers who were buying our souvenirs would not come back any more. We still kept the old items, but we tried to minimise the Maos, dim sum baskets and quilted jackets – the clichés of China. At the time I joined, 80 per cent of the customers were Westerners, but today the majority are Asians. Our number one customers are the mainland Chinese. We wanted to give China a brand that resonates with the Chinese.

When you first started out in the company, what was the first thing you wanted to improve or change?

I wanted to change nothing in the beginning. I spent three years looking for a way to grow the business and to draw more customers. Back then, the brand was selling a few pieces of clothing and people were buying them, but only a few would wear them. The only time you would see someone wearing [Shanghai Tang pieces] was on special occasions like Chinese New Year. I started inviting designers, as we wanted to dress people on a daily basis.

Several years ago you launched a campaign called the Mandarin Collar Society – a mission to persuade men not to wear a tie. What is the thinking behind that?

The Chinese know-how is silk, embroidery, cashmere and *qipao*, and these are related to women. When you think of men, it's long *cheongsam* or a Mao jacket. Men don't wear silk and embroidery; their clothing is more casual chic. So we created an elegant jacket and focused on the mandarin collar. We wanted to send a message to the world that there's an alternative elegance to not wearing a tie.

So you think it's a good idea for, say, a modern entrepreneur to go with a no-tie policy in the workplace nowadays?

Yes. The thing is people confuse themselves between wearing no tie and [looking like] trash, sometimes. That's why we are promoting alternative elegance. It means you may not be wearing a tie, but can still look elegant or different.

What is the one Shanghai Tang piece in your closet that you treasure the most?

My travel jacket. We call it the travel jacket because it has zips everywhere to put your wallet, passport and documents in it. I am in a plane 30 per cent of my time and I need to make sure I don't forget my passport. It also doesn't wrinkle and you can actually wear it in a meeting. I've had it with me for eight years now.

How do you spend your free time when not travelling for work?

I play polo. If I am not riding horses, I am either at the seaside or in the mountains. I love nature and I love hiking. I hike at least two to three hours on one weeknight, usually on Wednesdays, and six hours on a weekend. I have to be careful not to do violent sports and I need look after my knees.

You represent Hong Kong at polo. Why did you decide not to focus on pursuing professional polo, since it's such a passion?

My dad told me I should study instead. As a sportsman, you're good until 35 when you've reached the top and then you have to have another career. It's also a risky sport and you can get a lot of injuries. There's a lot of competition too.

Is there any particular watch you like to wear every day?

Piaget's limited edition Altiplano in white gold. It's actually a manual watch and the movement is extremely thin. I have had it with me for 20 years.

What things do you do in order to keep a stress-free lifestyle?

I meditate for 10 to 15 minutes in the morning. I started meditating over 10 years ago, but I am not disciplined. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a specialist in mindfulness, trained me. I am not that spiritual; I was born and raised Catholic, but as you grow older I think you need to be spiritual and be connected with the essence of the world. ☯