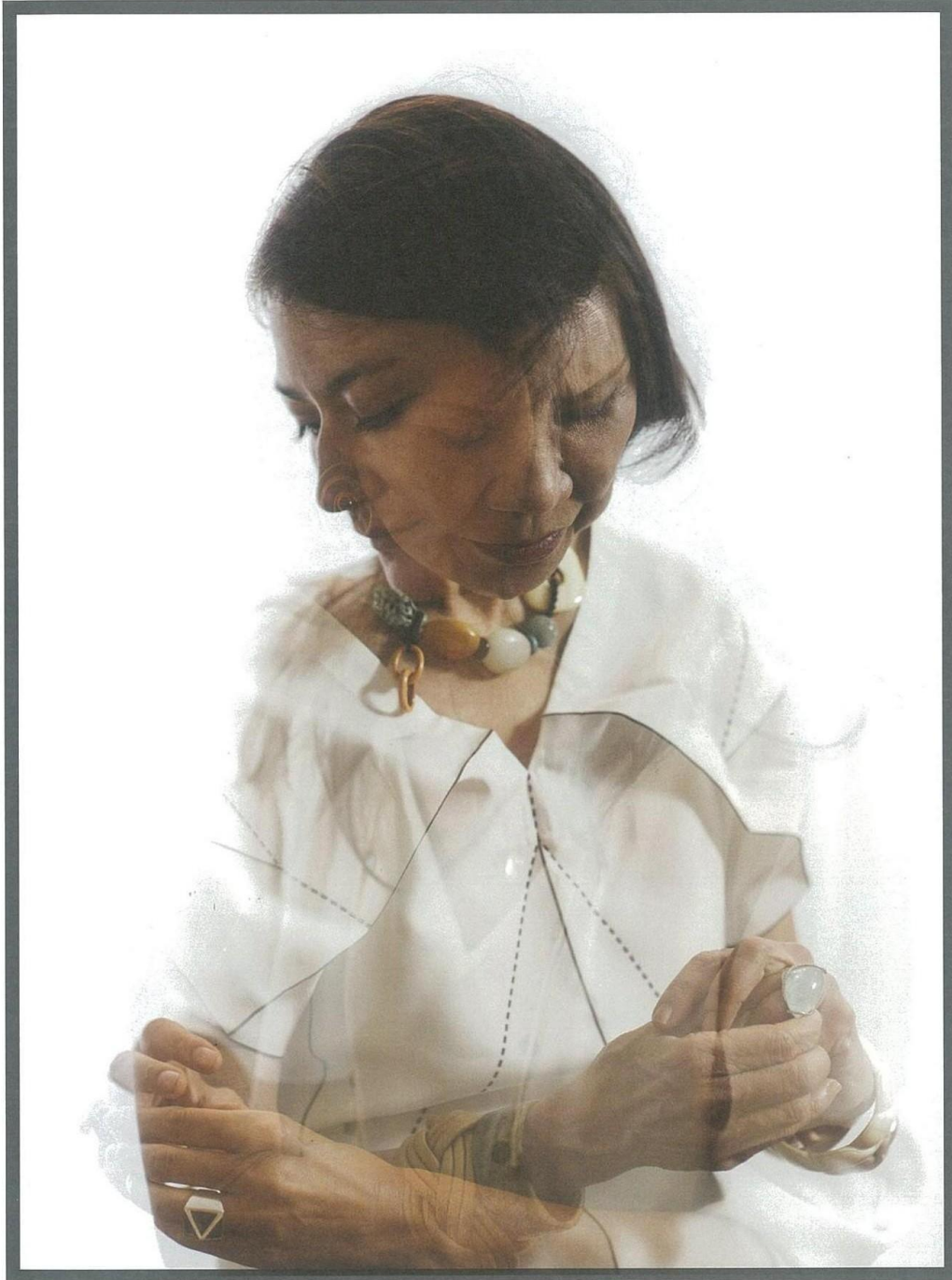


# FINANCIAL TIMES

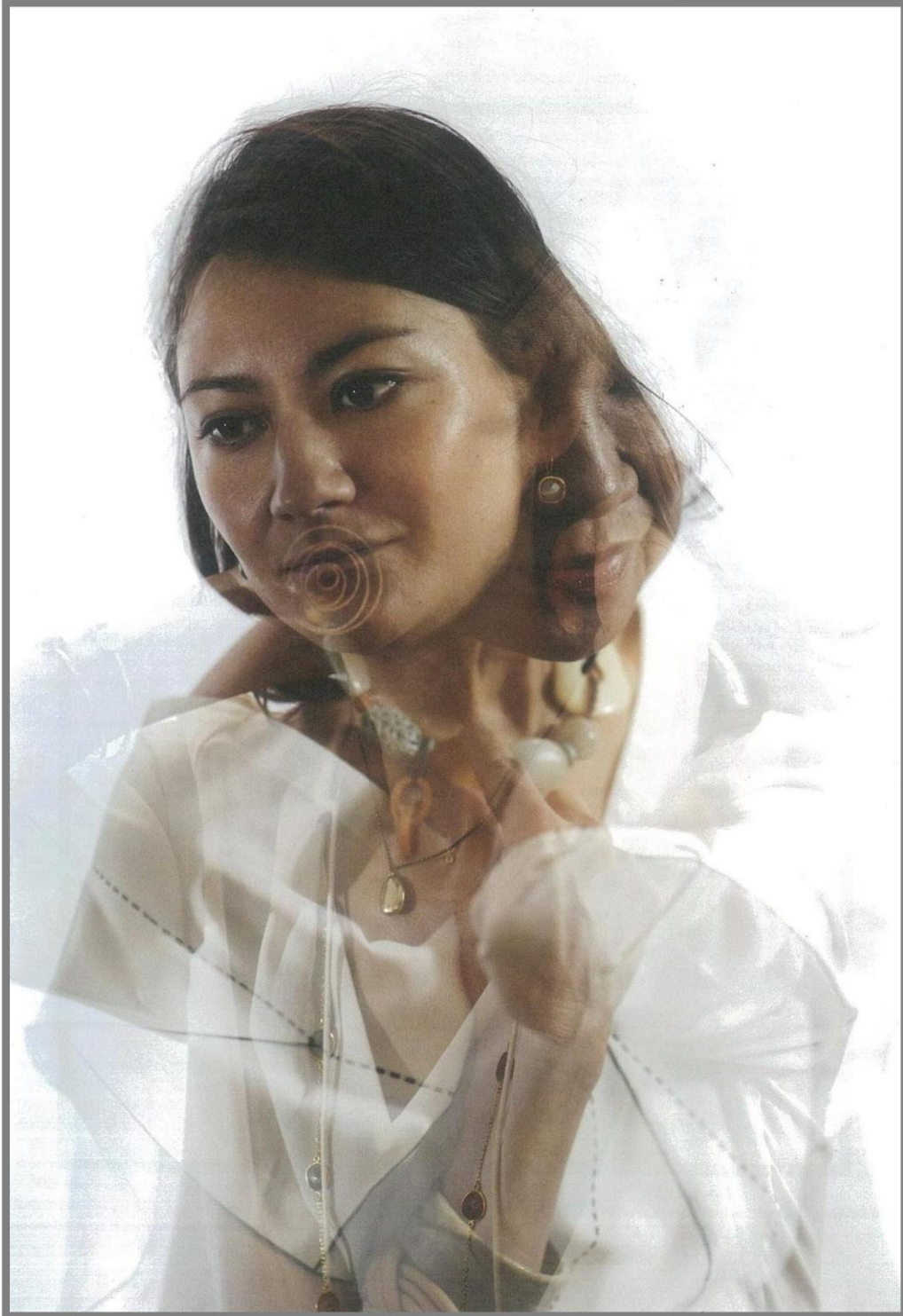
Haute horology & jewellery for men & women. Hong Kong. June 2013



Kai-Yin Lo and Melissa Lo

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Kai-Yin Lo and Melissa Lo

– GENERATIONS –

{ A thread of respecting heritage  
while embracing individuality runs  
through the life and work of Kai  
Yin and Melissa Lo }

# same same

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# but different

■  
Interview by LAURA LOVETT  
Photography by CARMEN CHAN

**K**ai Yin Lo always wears odd shoes. This is not so much a fashion statement as a nod to the motif of yin and yang that recurs in her jewellery. The balance of old and new, heavy with light, is something that she lives by. The Chinese philosophy also describes the relationship between Kai Yin's designs and those of her niece Melissa, created independently but complementing one another.

Kai Yin Lo's bold designs still look as avant-garde as they did when she launched in the 1980s. Back then, businessmen barked into mobile

phones the size of suitcases, every lunch was a 'power lunch' and smoking was still acceptable in the office. Women's gems were equally brash. In the *Dynasty* era, earrings had to be the size of gobsoppers to compete with oversized shoulder-pads and lacquered helmet hair.

Kai Yin's artisanal aesthetic was the antithesis of the 'greed-is-good' mentality of the decade. Her creations were crafted from century-old Chinese objects that infused the jewellery with a mystic beauty that hadn't been seen before.

The organic-looking, asymmetrical earrings and necklaces came

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about, she says, “because I just wanted to wear my things.” After studying European history at Cambridge University and a stint working in New York, Kai Yin returned home to Hong Kong and decided to embrace her own history using items she had collected.

“My disparate looking little bits were hanging around the house as ornaments, and I wanted to see what I could make with them,” she says. These ‘bits’ were in fact ancient objet d’art: beads, trinkets and carvings dating from as far back as 500BC that she had been collecting from Cat Street Market for her own amusement.

At the time so little attention was paid to this niche ephemera that it wasn’t possible to have them valued professionally and she picked up handfuls of carved jade, horn and ivory trinkets for next to nothing.

“These small pieces are a craftsman’s supreme expression: craft is such a tradition in China and in the East that it is almost art,” she says.

The market has now finally learnt to appreciate these small wonders and the items that Kai Yin gave away as Christmas presents would today reach US\$15,000 to US\$20,000 a piece.

Her work juxtaposes the primitive with the contemporary, the rugged with the refined in the same piece; each element has no relation to another, “other than the fact that I happened to find and pair them,” she says. She herself has made it her signature to “balance without balancing”, as she calls it.

Kai Yin soon won over the ‘power generation’ and the photo wall in her bathroom is a testament to the highbrow circles that she is used to mixing in. Bill and Hillary Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger all appear to be bewitched under Kai Yin’s genteel charm.

Her gems are given as gifts by the Hong Kong government to visiting dignitaries and some of her most loyal customers have included the Japanese Imperial family, Princess Diana and Elsa Peretti. Kai Yin is a jeweller like no other: “I’m a historian-turned-designer,” she says. “My instincts come from a historical awareness and appreciation of Chinese culture. I was the first to interpret the cultural past in a contemporary sense, making history wearable.”

Such is Kai Yin’s impact on the jewellery world, and as a representative of China, that she has been named ‘World’s Best Chinese Designer’, heralded as a ‘Renaissance Woman’ and honoured with a Silver Bauhinia Star by the Hong Kong government for her contributions to design and SAR society.

Given her stature as author, scholar and Chinese cultural consultant, it is no wonder Kai Yin’s niece, Melissa Lo, also took up the family trade.

“Her whole way of being has always been very individual and I was inspired by that growing up,” she says. “I was on a creative tangent and to see her forging her own path, that in itself gave me confidence.”

While Kai Yin challenged the prevailing trends of the day, Melissa’s aesthetic comes with the insight of a different generation. Today, jewellery has become even less ostentatious in size and in style, and Melissa’s delicate, more casual, everyday pieces fit with women who want something elegant, chic and yet easy to wear.

“There is something liberating about not wearing something exaggerated,” she says. “Our lives are faster, so things have become more practical and approachable.”

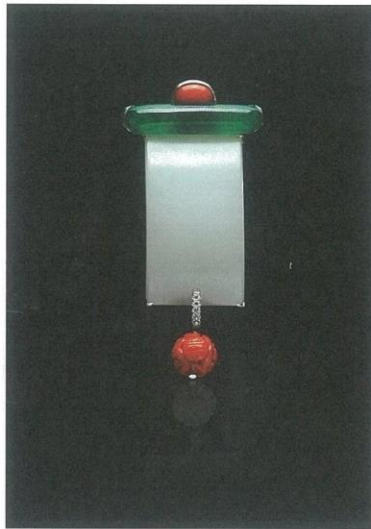
Her customers want to wear her designs wherever they are, whether on the beach or entertaining at the weekend. “Women don’t want jewellery that stays in a safe,” she says. “Back when Kai Yin started, women would have had pearls, diamonds and a choker – their ‘good jewellery’ – which would only come out on special occasions.

Today accessorising has become a lovely luxury of our times. You can wear the same jumper and change your necklace for a different look.”

Neither designers were formally trained and found themselves embarking on a career in fashion for different reasons. Melissa, who grew up delving in Kai Yin’s “treasure trove drawers full of stones,” had always handcrafted jewellery and set up her brand in London in 2002 after a piece she made for her sister received such adulation that she took the opportunity to create a collection to sell through a Regent Street retailer.

While Kai Yin is a true academic, Melissa is a hippy at heart. She refers to the beautiful turquoise, amber, garnet and coral that she uses in her designs as, “nature’s colours,” and loves to learn local crafting techniques when she travels to India, Tibet and Thailand.

Kai Yin’s work puts Chinese history and Asian heritage at the heart of her designs; Melissa aesthetic



Above: A Kai Yin Lo design

is borderless, international, fusing Asian handcrafting with a western fashion sensibility.

The duo share a passion for colour and wearability and both allow the stones to lead the design of a piece. As Melissa says, “Anything could happen today. I allow myself to not stick to a plan, to evolve, and to be inspired by what I see.”

There is even a crossover with their clientele. On a trip to London, Melissa met with a customer who opened up box after box of Kai Yin’s pieces that she has collected over the years and talked her through the stories behind each item.

“It happens quite a lot, and it is wonderful to share that family connection with clients,” she says.

Both women are hugely admiring of one another’s achievements: “She can make things with her own hands. Something I could never do,” says Kai Yin. While Melissa adds, “We share the same philosophy, of perfect in the imperfect.” ●