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# LIFE

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\$2,000,000,000

The Kung Fu Panda film franchise amassed almost this much, in US dollars, at the global box office > ENTERTAINMENT C7



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Joy Chen is in demand on the mainland as a motivational speaker. Photos: Handouts, Antony Dickson

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DESIGN

# ART DECO – FROM EAST TO WEST... AND BACK AGAIN

**A Hong Kong exhibition explores how the 1920s French movement won over China, which then developed a style of its own that inspired Europe**

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The 2013 cinema remake of *The Great Gatsby* reignited a passion for 1920s nostalgia – not just for the joie de vivre that characterised the era but also for the opulence of the art deco movement, known for its rich colours, bold geometric patterns and ostentatious detail.

Art deco captured the energy of the times.

The City University Exhibition Gallery is evoking those heady days of fringed flappers and subterranean speakeasies with its latest showcase, "Art Deco: The France-China Connection".

Served with a 1920s twist, it focuses on the origins of art deco in France, the mutual exchange of influences with China, and the movement's development in the East. This exchange with China resulted in a fusion that became part of an acclaimed *art de vivre*, or art of living.

"Art deco is a distinctive style," says art historian Isabelle Frank, one of the show's two chief curators. "It is very unusual in that it is the only style that has really gone global; although modernism also did in a large way.

"From 1925 in Paris, you really saw art deco just spread. It is an easy style to carry. It is very attractive. Because it's flexible, it adapts to all the local styles. And, yet, it is still recognisable as art deco.

"The United States is full of art deco. Florida is famous for it. New York has iconic art deco buildings. All over Europe you will find art deco. South America has wonderful art deco. It is across Asia and particularly in Shanghai."

Its popularity is, in part, a

result of its geometric simplicity and the world's desire for modernity at the time, triggered by the technological advances made during the first world war.

It is a style that "travels" and keeps coming back into vogue.

"People like it," Frank says. "Look at the Grand Hyatt in Hong Kong. It was so clear that when it was built in the 1980s, the architects went back to their own history and ... intentionally copied the art deco style with specific motifs. [In the show] we have some of the small vases that inspired those huge vases in the foyer. This section shows how the style lives on."

Its movement to China can be mostly attributed to a man now known as the father of Chinese art deco, Liu Jipiao. Born in 1900 in Guangdong province to the wealthy owners of a silk dyeing factory, he studied architecture and interior design at the National School of Fine Arts in Paris.

Liu was part of a movement in Chinese intellectual history, in the early part of the 20th century,



Art deco facade of a block of flats on Prince Edward Road, Kowloon.

in which the government made a concerted effort to send young elites to study overseas, before they returned to China to create new departments at local universities.

Before returning to Nanjing to do exactly that, Liu gained a reputation for his approach to architecture – creating modern design with a Chinese aesthetic.

Liu also contributed to the Chinese pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts world's fair in Paris in 1925.

His design for the entrance, which included a dragon and a phoenix, was the first melding of Chinese elements with art deco: a uniquely Chinese style that was later embraced by generations of Chinese architects and artists.

Compared to French art deco, Frank says the Chinese style is slightly more decorative, giving designers space to explore the floral motifs that the French previously controlled. It results in work that has a "natural world beauty". There is also the use of characters and linear patterns you don't find in the European style.

Through the years, art deco European artists were then, in turn, inspired by these, and other, Chinese innovations.

In the area of furniture, for example, low tables never seen before in French interiors were produced, as were armoires whose decorations and bases were inspired by Chinese models.

Europeans also adopted the wood of Chinese furniture: sandalwood, elm, poplar and cypress. They also began using coromandel lacquer, a finish often applied to large folding screens.

"Art Deco: The France-China Connection", CityU Exhibition Gallery, 18/F, Lau Ming Wai Academic Bldg, City University, 83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon Tong, Until June 30