

Farewell My Tai Tai

Traditional Tai Tais were shopping-mad, trophy wives of Hong Kong's wealthiest. The new breed of Tai Tai has a career, raises millions for charity yet still loves her Vuitton. Rachael Oakes-Ash meets Hong Kong's two most famous all-new Tai Tais

Buy, buy, buy takes on new meaning in Hong Kong where the bigger your consumption the higher your status. High society women in this consumer haven recline on the top of the status ladder sipping French, driving German and wearing couture. Their name? Tai Tai, the modern day China concubine.

Traditionally trophy wives of wealthy Hong Kongers, these ladies of leisure spent their days brand shop-shop-shopping and goss-goss-gossiping. But thanks to the economic boom of the past half century a new class of Tai Tai has now emerged. Wealthy working women with a penchant for luxury have entered the fold and the modern day Tai Tai has reached celebrity status invited to the best parties, spotted in Hong Kong *Tatler* social pages and courted by Chanel, Bvlgari and Hermès.

With celebrity comes power, power to raise dollars for those less fortunate. If you're not doing your bit for charity then you're not welcome in the current Tai Tai circle. Similarly if you don't own property in and



This image: High tea in Hong Kong. **Below:** Danny Lai with the famous Hong Kong pink couple. She's a Tai Tai and always in pink and they own a pink Rolls Royce.

and doesn't work. In colloquial Chinese it means wife. Many see Tai Tais as just shoppers but they're not. Sure there's competition between them as to who can look the best but it's harmless, they're all part of a unique club. The latest breed of Tai Tai is educated, has her own job, helps the poor and does an enormous amount of work for charity. I feel very honoured to know them.

They raise millions of dollars at their charity events.

They are socialites

and know the power of their picture in the press. In one event last year we raised HK\$2.2million in one night, we hope to top that this year with \$3million."

The names to look for when scanning the social pages of *The South China Morning Post* or the more exclusive *Kee Magazine* for members of The Kee Club in Hong Kong are Jennifer Tose (cosmetic entrepreneur and wife of mega-millionaire, Phillip Tose) and Pansy Ho Hui (founder of Occasions and daughter of casino magnate Stanley Ho).

Old school socialites such as Brenda and Kaibong Chau (known as the 'pink couple' because of their penchant for and their equally pink Rolls Royce), are still on the circuit but since the handover in 1998 the new power belongs to the working heiress, Shirley Li

outside of Hong Kong, haven't travelled, don't understand the share market, don't know your Salvatore from your Ferragamo and have less than two servants then go to the end of the line.

Danny Lai is the King of the Tai Tais. The executive assistant manager for Guest Relations at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Danny has wined and dined Tai Tais for 30 years. His honesty, charm and discretion has earned him the trust of the city's most wealthy and influential women. So much so that when he was recently diagnosed with cancer the Tai Tai community put together a roster to visit and care for him 24/7 through his treatment.

"A Tai Tai is not always considered a good word" explains Lai. "It is supposed to be someone who is pretty, has a rich husband



MEET SHIRLEY LI

Shirley Li married a self-made businessman of wealth and is the mother of three – a barrister, a doctor and a sales director. She is 61 but looks 31 and has the energy of a 21-year-old.



Shirley and her daughter with Danny Lai at a New Year function at the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong

“You don’t choose to be a Tai Tai. I didn’t anyway. My husband made me promise him that I would devote all my time for him, our family and our children. I agreed never to work or start a business of my own. Anyway, just running our household is a business unto itself.

I am very old school, I took my children to Los Angeles so they could go to high school and university there. I don’t believe in leaving children in boarding school. As a woman I am a traditionalist. My husband was a self-made man who worked hard and made money and I worked hard to support him. Sadly, he died a few months ago but I am proud that I spent so much of our marriage ensuring he was well looked after.

Some people crave to be a Tai Tai, you get given a lot of free stuff by spas and fashion companies who want you to endorse their products or be seen in their stores. I don’t generally accept gifts from companies, though some do, mainly celebrities. You have to give them gifts if you want them at your ball.

I am involved with a number of charities. My most recent is Care for Children, where we help abandoned and orphaned children in China but my oldest charity is The Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education (CECES). I’ve been with them for 20 years and it’s important to me as I think children and old people are helpless and need our input. I go to my rich friends and get them to give money for charity. I feel very righteous about robbing the rich to help the poor.”

My Day

“I get up at 9am, have breakfast and go for a walk on Bowen Road, near my home in Hong Kong Mid Levels. During the walk I will contemplate my outfits for the day. My wardrobe is very organised, I have it co-ordinated by colour, designer and such, so it’s easy to envisage in my head.

Lunch is spent with girlfriends at The Clipper Lounge, Mandarin Oriental Hotel. Some of my friends are those I went to school with,

“I feel very righteous about robbing the rich to help the poor.”

some are my charity ball society friends, others are people from companies needing my help, still others are my daughter’s friends. We will talk about our children, what charity event we are next going to, what’s in fashion.

After lunch I might go for High Tea at The Peninsula Hotel. Twice a week I visit an old people’s home and help with fundraising, I’ll sit with the elderly and keep them company

Then I will talk to my maid about what to prepare for dinner. When my husband was alive I would naturally care for him. If there is a ball on for one of my charities I will go or I may attend other balls to support my friends and their causes. But I also love staying at home and watching Chinese soap operas.”



THINGS I LOVE

- **Favourite designers:** Valentino, Vivienne Tam, (www.viviennetam.com) and Arthur Lam at The Swank Shop (www.swank.com.hk)
- **Hair stylist:** Kim Robinson, www.kimrobinson.com
- **Favourite restaurant:** Gaia restaurant
- **Dept store:** Lane Crawford
- **Clubs:** Hong Kong Jockey Club, Happy Valley and Sha Tin racecourses



Celebrity hairstylist, Hong Kong’s most sought-after, Kim Robinson



*"You don't choose
to be a Tai Tai.
I didn't anyway"*

MEET KATHY CHUI

The richest woman and top Tai Tai in Hong Kong, Kathy Chui.



One of Hong Kong's richest women, Kathy Chui is the daughter of the late film producer, Chiu Sheang-Chow. She married one of Hong Kong's wealthiest families, the Lees

Kathy divorced her husband 16 years ago after setting up her own financial company and making her own mark in the business world. Refusing financial support from her father, choosing instead to study hard at the University of Toronto and make her own way in the world of finance.

I am now working with the Peace & Development Foundation which is a joint venture with the United Nations. We aim to educate the leaders of tomorrow from China at Oxford and Cambridge so they can return to help their own country move away from internal corruption and move forward."

"There is a lot of competition between women in Hong Kong, they don't know where to put me because I am single and divorced. I don't take any men to the charity functions because the press always comment on it and say the man is my boyfriend when he's not.

Men in Hong Kong want to treat me like a man because I'm a business leader. I recently went to the Mandarin Oriental in Chang Mai and while all the other women were off doing spa treatments, I did a cooking class. I thought it might help men find me less confronting if I knew how to cook!"

And it worked because in 1993 she was named the most Powerful Woman in Asia and in 1999 was awarded the *Cavaliere del Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana* for underwriting the refurbishment of the Bardi Chapel in Florence.

At 54, she now lives in Hong Kong, dividing her time between mainland China and Hong Kong Island. She is the chairman of Prime Investment Holdings where she works with companies in financial difficulty, owns five cars including a Ferrari and a Porsche and has her own Champagne label in France. Her son, Christopher Lee, is considered Hong Kong's most eligible bachelor.

"Charity work in Hong Kong is serious. It took seven years for me to become the chairman of Po Leung Kuk in 1992. It is the oldest charity in Hong Kong, more than 130 years old. You have to first become involved, then become a director, then a vice-chairman before being considered for chairman. We work with women, children and orphans giving them room and board, financial help and shelter.

THINGS I LOVE

- **Clothes for work:** Giorgio Armani, Prada
- **For evening:** Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel,
- **For handbags:** Louis Vuitton
- **For Shoes:** Salvatore Ferragamo, Sergio Rossi
- **For Jewellery:** Cartier Vintage
- **Restaurant:** The China Club
- **Drinks:** Champagne Bar at the Grand Hyatt
- **Lunch:** The office
- **High Tea:** Clipper Lounge, Mandarin Oriental



TAI TAI SPOTTING

If you want to live like a Tai Tai in Hong Kong then don't leave your hotel without the Luxe City Guide to Hong Kong (www.luxecityguides.com) which outlines all the lush and glam places to dine, shop and drink.

HOTELS Don't think about anything less than five stars. The Intercontinental, The Langham and The Peninsula are the ones to be seen in on Kowloon side. On the Island, stay at The Grand Hyatt, The Ritz-Carlton or The Mandarin Oriental.

CLUBS For private clubs ask your concierge to put you on the dock of The Key Club for the twentysomethings or the China Club for mid-thirties and older.



Above left: a bell boy has been shopping at Tiffany's for a Tai Tai staying at The Ritz. Above right: Toscana at The Ritz-Carlton in Hong Kong, a favourite Tai Tai hang-out.

SPAS Plateau at The Grand Hyatt in Wanchai, I-Spa at the InterContinental in Tsim Sha Tsui and Chuan Spa at Langham Place in Mongkok are all for queens.

DINING Dine at Toscana at The Ritz, Alain Ducasse' Spoon at the Intercontinental, Cafe

Deco's One Bar and Grill in Central, Gaia for Italian and Isola for drinks on the terrace.

WINE BARS Crown Wine Cellars offer the city's best wine list in a renovated Second World War bunker on the south side of the Island. But be warned, you must be invited by a member.

