

LIVINGROOM by Amy Fabris-Shi

paramount significance

the rebirth of a landmark pleasure palace



Mick Ryan



When Chinese bankers built the Paramount in 1934 it represented the apogee of Art Deco design a thrusting, angular beauty capped by a luminous spire that shone into the night like a beacon to Shanghai's party people. Inside, it was the most luxuriously appointed dance hall in the Far East. Celebrities, socialites, playboys and prostitutes foxtrotted in fully air-conditioned comfort on a sprung wooden dance floor. Striking art deco detailing extended to the interiors too – even the men's urinals were deco inspired.

"This was the hottest club in Shanghai 70 years ago," says Elvis Wu, the stylishly tousled 20-something planning manager of the Shanghai Paramount Party Room which recently reopened as a night-club. "But times change and people don't ballroom dance anymore, so we've adopted a modern concept in order to make it hot again," he continues, rolling off the roster of themed music nights: '70s and '80s sexy R&B; electro parties; MC Mike and the Cross Culture Band. As we speak, the latter are on stage rehearsing Shakira's *Whenever, Wherever*, complete with raunchy hip-writhing. Laser lights flash across the newly-outfitted space, revealing low-slung lounges, red Formica bars and LED-lit floors. Upstairs is a smaller R&B lounge with giraffe print carpets leading through to a private suite equipped with karaoke and Wii.

The Taiwanese investors spent RMB 25 million on the latest revamp and installed a hefty sound system making the 1,200-capacity venue a fine new option for live performances. "It's decent," says Aaron Low of Lacuna Entertainment who geared up Public Enemy to play at the Paramount in September (they later cancelled). "Shanghai needs another place that is tricked out for live music."

The fact that the stunning heritage dance hall now looks remarkably like Babyface seems largely irrelevant in forward-focused Shanghai. Though, in all fairness, the original interiors were long gone.

When the party stopped in 1949, the Paramount was converted into a cinema screening propaganda films. In 2001, nicotine-hued and crumbling, it was taken over by Taiwanese investors who spent USD 3 million to refurbish the venue and reopen it as an ersatz interpretation of the original ballroom. Five years later and bleeding money, they decided to turn the second and third floors into a disco and move the original ballroom to the fourth level.

To the left of the main entrance, a ride in the lift to the fourth floor is like traveling in a time capsule to a different era. An RMB 80 ticket (afternoon price), buys you entrance to the gloriously tacky ballroom. Mismatched floral wallpapers, Belle Epoque mirrors and swirling disco lights make for a surreal setting. On a Tuesday afternoon around 10 couples twirl around the dance floor, heads poised in a kind of glazed reverie. Coiffed *tai tais* aged between 40 and 70 bat eyelids at their much younger partners/instructors. Like the infamous taxi dancers of yore, these good-looking young men in their buttock hugging black pants are for hire as dance partners.

In truth, the ballroom today is not nearly as classy (or decadent) as it was in the 30s, but happily that air of blissed-out bohemia remains. Hopefully, one day the legendary Paramount will get a design makeover befitting its glorious art deco heritage, but for now at least its halls are becoming a viable destination again, with old and new Shanghai spinning to their own beats. ■