

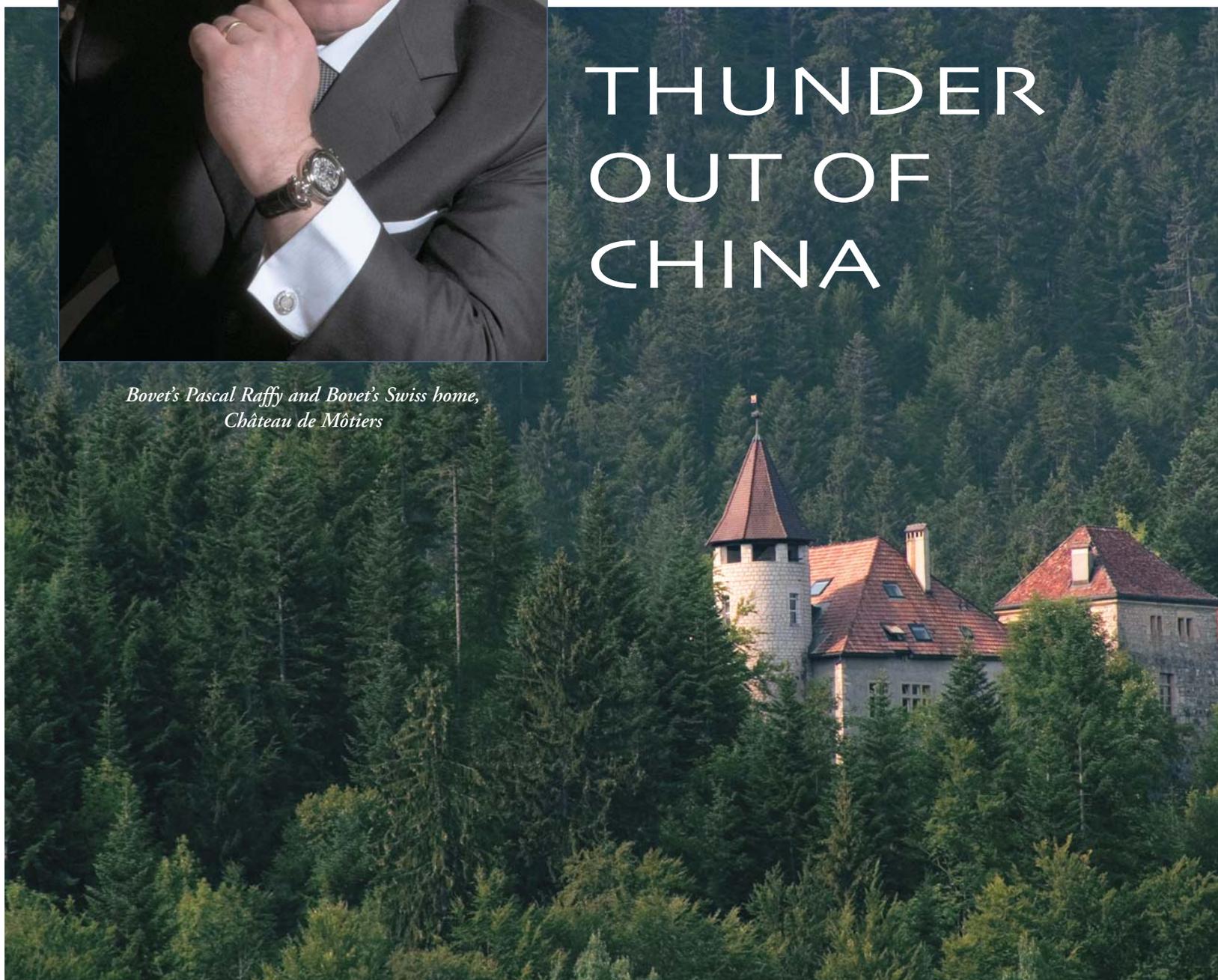


"Do you have a Bover?" It is a phrase that is probably heard more often in China than any other place in the world. That's because the watch world brand name has come to be used as a generic term for the word "watch" in that country, according to Roy Davidoff of Bover's sales office. He says the Chinese have appropriated the name the way Americans have appropriated Xerox or Kleenex. This claim seemed so incredible to me that I could not believe it, but it certainly intrigued me and made me want to know more about this brand.

After speaking with several Chinese journalists attending the Baselworld and SIHH shows—who confirmed the unexpected usage—and visiting the maker's offices in Geneva, I came away more impressed with the brand than I had ever been and more convinced—this particular Chinese peculiarity of language notwithstanding—that Bover is far from generic.

THUNDER OUT OF CHINA

*Bover's Pascal Raffy and Bover's Swiss home,
Château de Môtiers*





Bovet Chinese character watches from the Sportster Collection.

Unlike many other watch companies, Bovet was founded specifically to capitalize on demand for Swiss watches in China. The Bovet company was chartered in 1822 by then-24-year-old Edouard Bovet. Edouard's father had been a watchmaker in Fleurier; Edouard trained as a watchmaker in England, then went to work for a London-based company called Magniac, which specialized in selling watches to China. London was the center of the watchmaking world at the time, both because of English horology and because of England's vast and well-developed merchant shipping infrastructure. Because Switzerland had no seafaring industry, it made sense for even Swiss watches to be distributed through English ports. Young Bovet made several trips to China, realized how successful his employer's business was, and began to think about going into business himself. After all, he was from Fleurier, a town filled with watchmakers.

He figured that he could do what his employer was doing just as well and just as successfully.

He and his brothers established the Bovet company, with offices and a shop in London, a workshop in Fleurier and a distribution center in Canton (Guangzhou), China. Eventually, Bovet opened shops in Shanghai and other Chinese cities, and Bovet quickly became the premier watch company of the Chinese imperial family.

"Watches from Bovet went from Switzerland to London and then to Canton," explains Davidoff. "The cases were made in London, the movements and dials were made in Fleurier, and the business was very successful. Bovet was selling millions of dollars of watches to China. Vacheron was also strong there; there were a lot of Swiss watch companies doing business there, but Bovet was the most well known."

In the early days, the company used a

Chinese transliteration of its name, Bau Wei. Bovet began embellishing watches with enamel painting because of the Chinese interest in pocket watches adorned with portraits or pastoral scenes. Bovet was also one of the first companies to use exhibition backs on watches, allowing the owners to admire the highly decorated and adorned Swiss movements. The Chinese often preferred to purchase watches in matched pairs so that if something goes wrong with one watch, there would be a spare that was exactly the same. This is another specialty at which Bovet excelled. In 1855, Bovet was award-

ed a gold medal at the world exhibition in Paris for an absolutely identical pair of watches ordered by the emperor of China—a real feat, since creating identical enamel paintings was and still is incredibly difficult.

Today, China remains an important market for Bovet, enamel decoration remains one of the company's specialties, and in honor of its history in China, Bovet offers Chinese character watches—accounting for 50 percent its total production—in its Sportster Collection. Their dials bear the Chinese characters for the name Bovet and for the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, which take the place of hour markers. Pascal Raffy, owner and CEO of Bovet, describes the brand's relationship with the Asian nation in personal rather than business terms. "We have an unbelievable history in mainland China and Bovet in mainland China is still very well known," he says. "Chinese people are very keen on their sense of detail and the historical patrimony of the company. I have a lot of affection for customers in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau—I love the Chinese culture. The collectors of Bovet in that region are in love with the art of Bovet. It is an honor for



Reminding us of a pocket watch, the bow above the crown is a distinguishing feature of modern Bovet watches; the Fleurier Jumping Hours Wind Rose (right) is a 39mm watch in rose gold with automatic mechanical movement, central jumping hours and rotating minutes ring.

