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Shaping a City

Every product and toy design produced during the post-war Hong Kong industrial boom contained a library of history on Hong Kong's economic development. A closer look also reveals hidden stories of the Hong Kong spirit.

Normally, you would think designers come up with creative products right? In fact, most local classic designs in the early days are the results of industrialists who dare to create, or were inspired by the wisdom of ordinary people. Let's take for example, the simple red and white plastic toy ball is a Hong Kong invention by 'the king of injection moulding machine' Chiang Chen. Using technology that could successfully inject 2 types of plastic in one go, he created the popular 'watermelon ball'. Another Hong Kong classic that became popular around the world is the cassette tape storage rack from Chow Yun Sheung of Sun Hing Company. Taking into consideration that every inch of space in Hong Kong is priceless, Chow came up with an idea of stacking cassette tapes on top of each other by creating a storage box that even rotates. It became a classic selling all around the world, occupying every home of an entire generation.

The design of toys or daily necessities may seem trivial but these contain the wisdom and foresight of many Hong Kong industrialists.

Plastic goods are durable and inexpensive, ideal for meeting the needs of post-war Hong Kong. During the 60s in the last century, Starlight Industries started to produce a wide range of lightweight, practical and popular household items under the 'Red A' brand. This included the 6-gallon water drum used during water shortages in the 60s. Scenes of entire families holding water buckets, waiting for the water supply truck to arrive became a daily occurrence. Camel brand and Money brand launched a series of affordable but highly-insulated enamel flasks. Meanwhile, the influx of immigrants

from the Mainland provided a large amount of cheap labour for Hong Kong, supporting labour intensive industries such as clothing, electronics, plastics, watches and clocks manufacturing. These industries supported numerous families and are a part of our collective memory.

Once upon a time, 'Made in Hong Kong' was a symbol of internationally recognised quality, high standard and reputation. The TWEMCO flip clock represents high standard of engineering and precision of Hong Kong electronic products.

The timeless classic red-white-blue plastic bag was the invention of Lee Wah. Inspired by a soldier's backpack, he used plastic cloth invented by the Japanese and sewn it into heavy duty and durable plastic bags in which another mountainman dubs as a genuine Hong Kong classic.

Influenced by Hollywood films, Hong Kong became known as the "City of Neon Lights". The bustling neon signs on both sides of the street became a visual language during the 50s and very soon became part of our city landscape. A part of the logo featured in this exhibition is in the shape of a neon tube to form the font of 'VERY HONG KONG VERY HONG KONG'. Alan Chan remarked, "For many foreigners, one of most important features of Hong Kong is its neon signboards. First-time visitors to Hong Kong would deliberately roam Nathan Road to enjoy the surreal night view of neon lights in the streets. It symbolised part of a never-fading memory of Hong Kong's history."

Hong Kong's early product design mostly revolved around manufacturing and assembly. But in 1997, the electronic storage card Octopus was born. It uses wireless radio frequency technology to offer convenient one-touch payment experience for busy people. This technology was made popular in Hong Kong and is now adopted by many cities around the world. 'People-oriented' is the philosophy and focus of industrial and product design. Speed, efficiency, human touch is the essence behind the 'Made in Hong Kong' spirit.

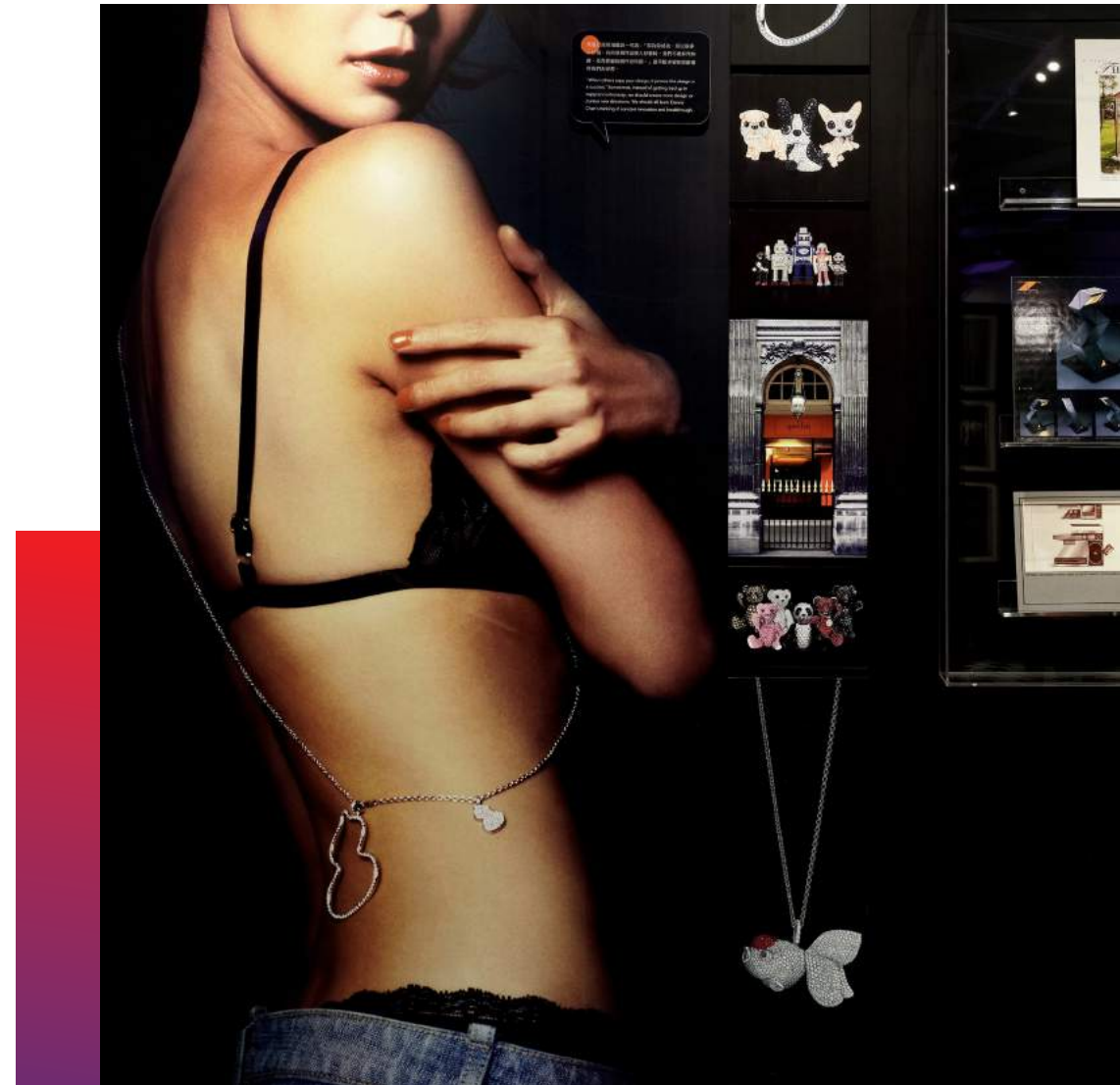
Dennis Chan

Product Design Portfolio

Dennis Chan is a well-reputed local designer whose works range from product to jewellery design. As a designer at the studio of Ken Shimasaki, a renowned product designer, Dennis was involved in various design projects, gradually developing a refined taste and personal style. His debut design-driven product Z lite is a versatile table lamp. Comprised of four geometric movable components, and without any electrical wires in the main body, the lamp can be sculpted into different forms. This playful and chic design has long been revered locally and internationally. Not long after, he founded his own design company Longford in 1989, providing design consultancy service to household brand names such as Philips. After Hong Kong's handover In 1997, Dennis had a revelation to bring the best of China to the world after his visit to the murals, statues and other cultural heritages of the legendary Dunhuang Grottoes along the Silk Road. Besides his personal timepiece brand Timestone, he also worked with his wife May Wong, who is also a product designer, on Living Gear's original line of delightfully childish yet functional products.

In 2004, he founded Qeelin with French entrepreneur Guillaume Brochard, a premium design jewellery brand, in Paris. He fuses his passion in Chinese cultural heritage with French flair and craftsmanship, creating meaningful, contemporary and universal jewellery.

Qeelin first caught the attention of the world when actress Maggie Cheung appears at the Festival de Cannes wearing Qeelin's signature Wulu collection. In 2013, Qeelin joined Kering Group, a world leader in apparel and accessories in luxury, sports and lifestyle brands.



“‘When others copy your design, it proves the design is a success.’ Sometimes, instead of getting tied up in copycat controversy, we should create more design or pursue new directions. We should all learn Dennis Chan’s thinking of constant innovation and breakthrough.” — Stanley Wong

Enamelware



Durable and functional, are the common threads that run through Hong Kong product design in the post-war period. Before plastic reigned supreme during the mid-20th century, enamel was another popular industrial and household material in the early days. Many household items such as lunchbox, insulating flask, spittoon, washbowl and gargle cup are coated with enamel. Originally used in royal cookware, it has been widely applied in mass production. The technique involves applying enamel on metal surfaces, the coating prevents rusting and adds a pleasant glossy sheen to the product. Among the many enamelwares, the insulating flask manufactured by I-Feng Enamelling was the most well-known in Hong Kong. I-Feng Enamelling founded by Dung Ji-fu frequented Hong Kong Brands & Products Expo during the post-war years. Its products embellished with colourful pattern designs were beloved by Hong Kong people. It is also one of the few factories that have an in-house design department for designing their products.

Michael Lau

Gardener Figures Series

Michael Lau is the figurehead of the urban vinyl toy movement in Hong Kong who transformed street culture into an art form. First started 1998 with the Gardener comic strip for East Touch Magazine, he has since created his own collection of designer's figures and exhibited them worldwide. His Gardener series are a mix of stylishly accessorised characters such as kids, basketball players, graffiti artists, rappers and skateboarders that epitomises the ideals of street cultures. Some of them are based on real-life muses he met in his career such as Terry Richardson and Hong Kong hip-hop group LMF. He is then most sought-after by international brands and collaborated with Colette, Sony, Nike and many others. While his style took cues from hip-hop and skateboarding culture, he is now a trendsetter of the subculture in the Asian community, and has linked the streets to art.



“It’s a bitter-sweet feeling when I talk about Michael Lau, the designer who shows a generation of Hong Kong street culture to the world. I have always wanted to work with him because I want to make figures myself. His Gardener figures are unique and rumour has it that he personally sewn the exquisite outfits for the figures himself.” — Alan Chan

Neon Signs



In 1898, scientists discovered neon, a colourless and odourless gas that, when injected into electrified vacuum tubes, emits red light. Its unmatched intense colour soon finds its way in billboard and advertising signs throughout metropolitan cities. Neon signs first lit up opera houses in Paris in the 1910s and arrived Hong Kong in the 1950s, lavishly lighting up dark nights of bustling streets. Making neon signs is labour intensive and time-consuming. Masters at China Neonlight Advertising Co., Nam Wah Neonlight & Electrical Manufactory Ltd. and Far East Neon Light Co. Ltd. have been performing impeccable craftsmanship to twist straight glass tubes into intricate characters and patterns by hand. An art object itself, neon signs display Hong Kong's prosperity in vibrant colours, creating an urban spectacle lasting for decades with Hong Kong being dubbed as the "City of Neon Lights" by travellers from overseas.

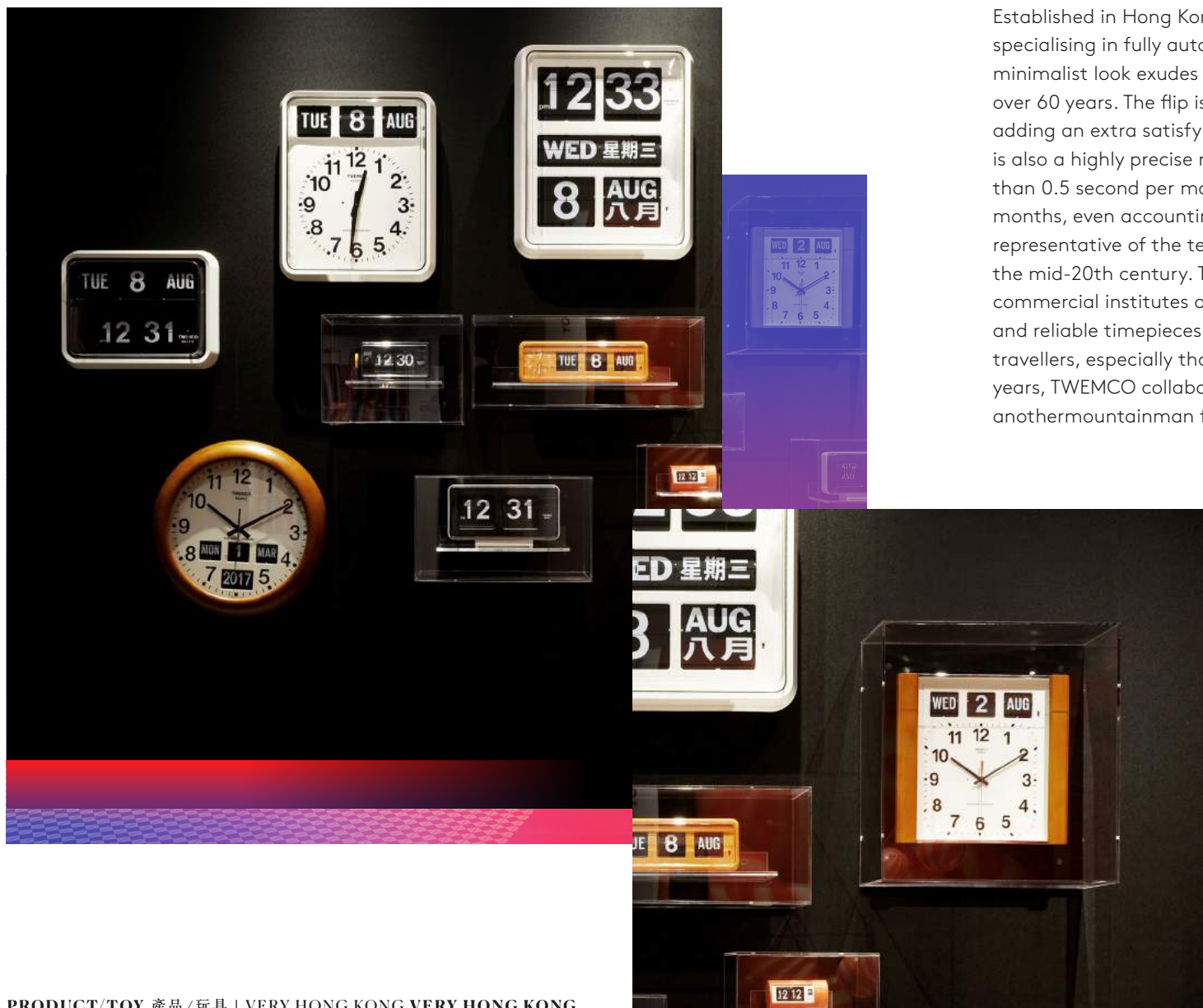
"For foreigners, neon signs are a key feature of our city. Many first-time tourists would spend time strolling along Nathan Road to enjoy the surreal night scene flooded with neon glow. They represent an everlasting sight of Hong Kong." — Alan Chan

Octopus

Released in 1997 as a stored-value card to be used on the MTR, the Octopus now permeates every aspect of Hongkonger's daily life. From paying for fares to purchasing snacks in convenience stores, the RFID chipped card allows users to pay for goods and services with a single tap, bringing immense convenience to city dwellers living in the fast-paced city. The Octopus is one of the earliest, most successful and popular electronic payment systems in the world. The innovative application of RFID technology heralded an era of digital payment, setting up the infrastructure of a cashless economy. The city-wide contactless payment system made possible by Octopus served as a model and reference globally and is now adopted in metropolis around the world, with different cities having their own version of e-payment for their public transport system.



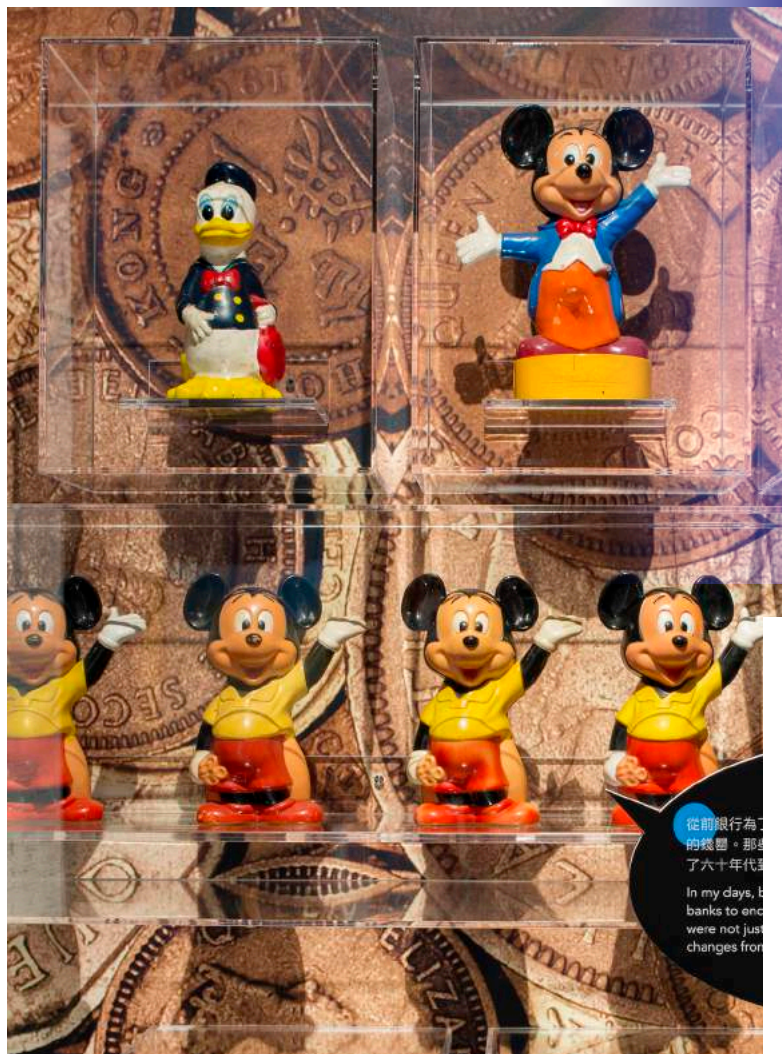
TWEMCO Flip Clock



Established in Hong Kong in 1956, TWEMCO is the world's only manufacturer specialising in fully automatic flip clocks for over half a century. The iconic minimalist look exudes a unique personality that stands the test of time for over 60 years. The flip is a brilliant revamp of the interface of timepieces, adding an extra satisfying dynamism to the clock. Besides its chic look, it is also a highly precise machine, it counts time with an inaccuracy of less than 0.5 second per month. It also automatically re-sets for days of different months, even accounting for leap days every four years. This timepiece is representative of the technical expertise of Hong Kong manufacturing during the mid-20th century. The design is widely adopted in banking corporations, commercial institutes and government departments that require accurate and reliable timepieces. The automatic flip clock is a popular item among travellers, especially those from Taiwan who want to bring it home. In recent years, TWEMCO collaborated with British design brand Established & Sons and another mountainman for the special product series.

Coin Banks of 60s and 70s

In the 60s and 70s, banks employed a handful of tactics to attract new customers, and one of their “marketing weapons” is the commemorative coin bank. The “piggy bank” stirs the childhood memory of Hongkongers in which they are taught to save their laisees and start saving for “their first bucket of gold” from a young age. Banks such as HSBC, Hang Seng Bank, Standard Chartered Bank had introduced the coin bank in various shapes and characters. Banks were competing to produce the best designed coin bank souvenir to reward customers who opened accounts for their children. The most iconic of all is the red coin bank released in the 60s in the shape of the old HSBC headquarters. One of the most popular, this coin bank is a collectible item worth over HK\$10,000 today. The bank has since rolled out different versions of coin bank every decade like the bronze lion coin bank and the cartoonised version in the 70s, the hexagonal bank logo coin bank in the 80s, as well as the coin bank in the shape of the new HSBC headquarters. They were not only bank souvenirs, but had evolved to a collective memory for a whole generation, reflecting Hong Kong’s prosperity through our habit of saving for over a century.



“In my days, banks released different versions of coin banks to encourage kids to save money. To me, those were not just coin banks, they bore witness to the social changes from the 60s till now.”

— Alan Chan

Egg Puff Maker



Egg puffs, the street food originated in Hong Kong, earned a spot on the Michelin Guide in 2016. While the signature snack has now acquired a gourmet status, its origin is much less glorious. Egg puffs, or eggettes, were said to be created in the 1950s. To reduce waste, grocery stores would mix unsellable cracked eggs with flour, butter and other ingredients to make into batter and being poured into different baking moulds. The traditional ones are cooked over charcoal grill. The batter swirls around as the chef turns the skillet over, evenly cooking the crust that took its shape. The result is a treat that is crispy on the outside and gooey on the inside. There are few verified sources that account for its iconic honeycomb shape. One story says the egg-shaped mould was created to make up for the sometimes eggless batter, as egg used to be a luxury. Other says the special iron skillet was a local twist on the traditional checkered European waffle press since the two street foods are often sold side by side. Regardless of its origin, the egg puff maker transforms a plain batter made from leftovers into an iconic local street delicacy that is known worldwide.

Traces of this popular street food are seen in Europe and the United States today.

“To me, the most satisfying part of having an egg puff is watching it being made. It is truly amazing to see the batter hits the sizzling iron skillets and swirls in the honeycomb moulds – a wondrous performance.” — Alan Chan

Tram

Affectionately named “Ding Ding”, Hongkongers are familiar with this renowned public transport only available on Hong Kong Island. The tram came into operation in 1904 and is one of the oldest motorised public transport vehicle in Hong Kong history following after the Hong Kong Peak Tram. The “Ding Ding” transports 180,000 passengers a day and is the only transport system in the world operated exclusively with double-decker trams.

As the population escalated at the beginning of the 20th century, old-fashioned transportation such as horse carriage and rickshaw could no longer cope with the public demand for transport. Thus the British Government devised a mass public transport system to improve urban mobility. The familiar tram began construction in 1903 and launched its service in 1904. Since 1912, trams have been made in Hong Kong. The double-decker tram runs through the Hong Kong Island, along six overlapping railways from Kennedy Town to Shau Kei Wan. The tram is the oldest means of public transportation in Hong Kong, slowly maneuvering the bustling city and taking passengers to their destinations. It has become an enduring emblem of Hong Kong’s unique history.



Chiang Chen

Watermelon Ball



The image of a plastic ball with the iconic red and white stripes, also known as “watermelon ball”, probably imbues the childhood memories of generations of Hongkongers who grew up in the 1950s to 70s. It was a popular toy on school playgrounds. Students would play ball-kicking matches during recess. This classic toy was an invention of the “King of Injection Moulding Machine”, a renowned Hong Kong industrialist Chiang Chen, who built a machine that sprays out plastic of two different colours to form the ball in 1959, which started a trend at the time. The first watermelon ball was only the size of a fist. Since they were made of light material and are relatively cheap, the toy was allowed into the school playgrounds because they would not cause damage to school property and is a classic childhood toy of many Hongkongers. This seemingly inconspicuous object embodies the mantra of early Hong Kong design: simple, cheap and mass-oriented. The watermelon ball was even used as an icon by the Festival of Hong Kong in 1969. It has since ceased production. Today, it is rare to find one of these watermelon balls.

“Watermelon ball may look just like an ordinary toy but its distinctive red-and-white stripe pattern is a technological breakthrough in injection moulding. It’s a product of Hong Kong to be recognised with and be proud of.” — Stanley Wong

Chow Yun-sheung

Cassette Tape Rack

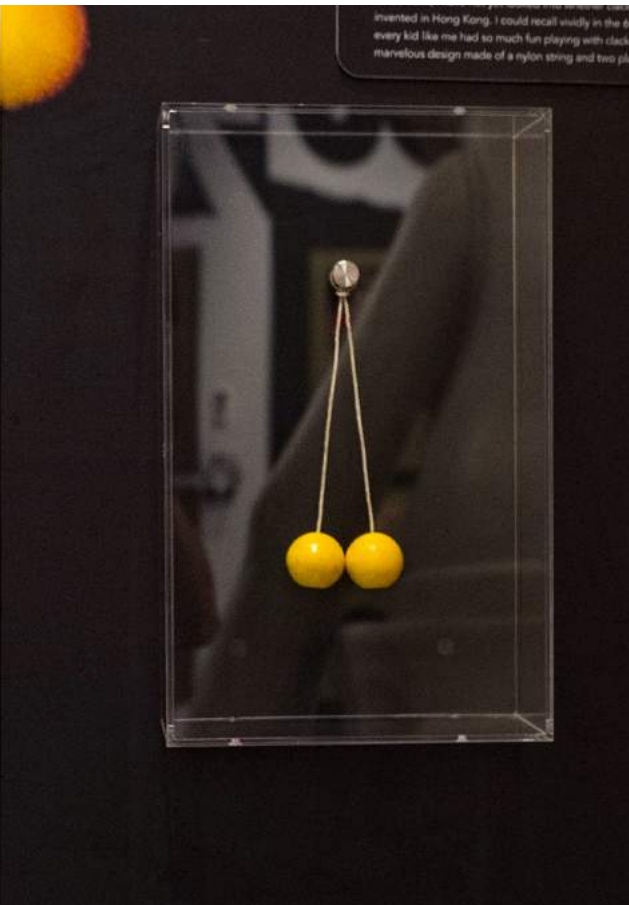
The popularisation of portable cassette players in the 70s and 80s made cassette tapes, the crucial part of this brand new way to experience music, an inseparable part of Hong Kong life. Singers released music in cassettes, laymen began bringing boomboxes to play music during picnics and parties. As everyone started to have their own cassette tape collection, Chow Yun-sheung, a Hong Kong industrialist saw the demand for a container to keep everything in one place and designed the Cassette Tape Rack. The 4 vertical sides of the cubic rack are hollowed out into shelves of dimensions that perfectly fit the tapes. The rack can also rotate horizontally for easy browsing and hassle-free storage of the tapes. The rack quickly rose in popularity. It has since become a staple living appliance for music lovers around the world.

“There was a time when we listened to music with cassette players. Solving the storage problem of tapes, Hong Kong industrialist Mr. Chow Yun-sheung designed an innovative rack that conveniently sorts the cassette tapes. It became an instant hit in Hong Kong and overseas.”

— Stanley Wong



Clackers



“To be frank, I have not yet looked into whether clackers were invented in Hong Kong. I could recall vividly in the 60s and 70s, every kid like me had so much fun playing with clackers - a simple yet marvelous design made of a nylon string and two plastic balls only.”

— Stanley Wong

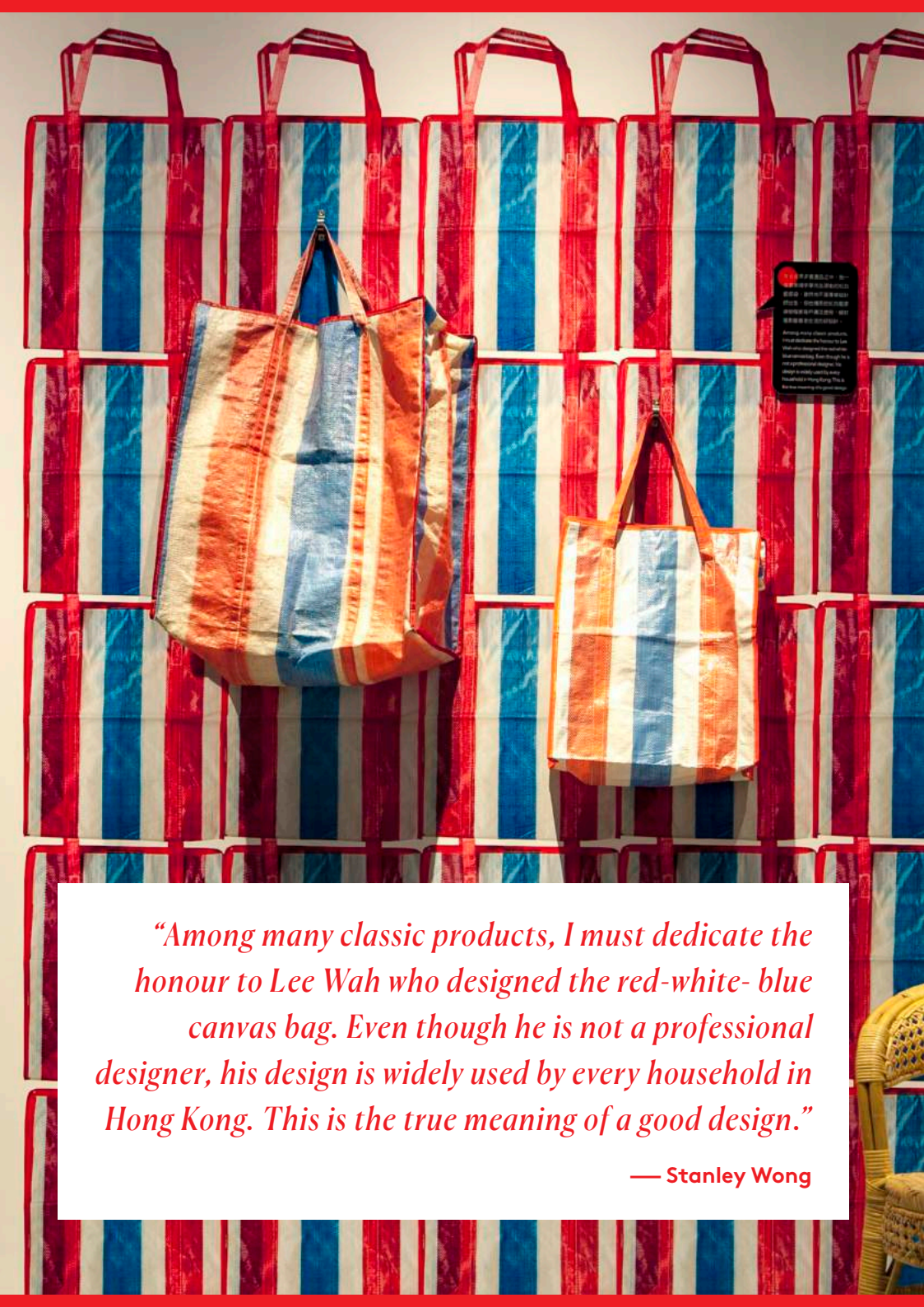


Many impoverished families had yet to benefit from the flourishing manufacturing industry in the 60s, hence children toys tended to be plain and cheap, some of them were hand-made from everyday materials. The post-war booming plastic industries have given rise to a myriad of cheap plastic toys. Clackers were popular among youths and children. The toy is comprised of two hard plastic balls tied to each end of the string. Players wiggle the middle part of the string up and down to guide the curved movement of each ball. The balls make “tik tak tik tak” noises as they hit each other. Despite its incredibly simple design, a common feature of early toys, clackers brought joy to the 60s’ generation.

Lee Wah

Red-white-blue Plastic Bag

The red, white and blue plastic bag is definitely a classic among Hong Kong classics with many overseas big brands drawing inspiration from to produce trendy goods. Tough and waterproof, the three-coloured PE plastic canvas first appeared in the 60s when they were mostly used in construction sites to shield the buildings from heavy rains and sand. Although the material is a Japanese invention, it is the idea of Mr. Lee Wah, who has been selling nylon canvas in Shum Shui Po for decades, to make a bag out of it. Taking inspiration from military canvas bags, the three-coloured laundry bag is completed with two strap handles across the base of the bag. These durable bags with a high weight-carrying capability are a brilliant design originated in Hong Kong. In the 70s to 80s, as Hong Kong experienced an unprecedented economic boom, many used these light canvas bag made of woven plastic to carry goods to their poorer relatives in the Mainland. Since then, the three-coloured bag has become a uniquely Hong Kong object synonymous with perseverance and diligence in Hong Kong culture. After Hong Kong's handover, Hong Kong people often used the red, white and blue plastic bag to represent the spirit of Hong Kong especially on the topic of identity. In 2004, 'God of Cantopop' singer Sam Hui donned a costume made of red-white-blue plastic sheet in a concert. Small red, white and blue plastic bags were also distributed to concert-goers as gifts and created a craze. In January 2007, French luxury brand Louis Vuitton pays tribute to Hong Kong by launching a series of designer bags drawing inspiration from the humble red, white and blue plastic bag.



“Among many classic products, I must dedicate the honour to Lee Wah who designed the red-white- blue canvas bag. Even though he is not a professional designer, his design is widely used by every household in Hong Kong. This is the true meaning of a good design.”

— Stanley Wong

Red A Lampshade



PRODUCT/TOY 產品/玩具 | VERY HONG KONG VERY HONG KONG

The product name came from the distinct brand logo, which composed of a white 'A' against a bright red background. In 1949, a series of Hong Kong top brand plastic products appeared and "Superior Quality from Red A" became a popular slogan for products 100% made in Hong Kong. In the late 1950s, the majority of the post-war Hong Kong population was impoverished, people were looking for affordable and durable products. The mass-produced, cheap yet well-made plastic goods of Red A became an instant success. Out of thousands of products, many are inextricably tied to Hong Kong's history. One remembers the Red A large water buckets used during Hong Kong's water shortages. Meanwhile, Red A lampshades, commonly known as 'The Butcher Lampshades', are omnipresent in Hong Kong street markets. One can recognise its simple shape and shiny red surface hanging over grocery stores all year round. Cheap and sturdy, the Red A lampshade is emblematic of early Hong Kong industrial design.

