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## Rainbow effect

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Bold and bright hues are an integral part of the Asian landscape. In November the HKDI will host an exhibition called *Colours of Asia* which, as LISA LI reports, will offer new insights into the way that colour shapes every aspect of our lives.

# RAINBOW EFFECT



IN THE MINDS OF MANY, CHINA and the colour red are almost synonymous, but it has not always been that way.

"Few people know that 'China Red' became a symbol of the Chinese nation only after the Xinhai Revolution," says Freeman Lau, Vice Chairman of the Design Alliance Asia (tDA Asia), a collaborative network of designers in Asia.

Founded in 1999, tDA Asia serves as a platform for Asian designers to work together and exchange ideas. The study and analysis of colours has been one of their most productive projects.

"Designers make choices among colours everyday. Yet when choosing a colour, few are aware of its meaning and usage in different cultures", says Lau. "That's why the topic of colour aroused great interest among tDA Asia members. The meetings of tDA Asia associates have created fruitful results on this subject over the years, which we wanted to showcase so that the wider public could benefit from our work."

The result was the *Colours of Asia* exhibition that will open on November 3rd at the HKDI, which was chosen because "we share a mutual interest in understanding the people, culture and lifestyles of Asia," says William Harald-Wong, the Chairman of tDA Asia and the curator of the exhibition, which will run until December 31st.

The exhibition will be structured with five zones representing red, yellow, green, blue, white and black (white & black in one zone). Harald-Wong says, "in the colour zones, we will showcase hundreds of artifacts that tell stories about each of the five colours and their significance as well as images that are the most important to different cultures."



LEFT COLOURFUL MOTIFS ON TRADITIONAL FISHING BOATS REFLECT MALAY COSMOLOGY. RIGHT A BOY PAINTED BLUE TO REPRESENT LORD SHIVA (INDIA)

The images to be exhibited were selected from a research repertoire correlating cultures and colours, based on work by designers and academics from 13 different regions in Asia over the course of 2012.

Besides an extensive study of Asian literature, scholars spent a lot of time doing field research. For example, in order to uncover the subtle meanings of colours rooted in tradition and age-old beliefs, designers went to local communities and visited the elders, who are less influenced by global colour trends.

"Each researcher must have experienced fascinating insights in the process," Harald-Wong believes. "In Thailand, there is a colour for each day of the week. Children recite these colours in a sing-song manner in schools and older people in some traditional villages and towns still dress according to the colour of the day. For example, they wear yellow on Monday. Perhaps not coincidentally, the King was born on Monday and yellow is the royal colour."

Besides the mysterious links between colour and royalty, breathtaking discoveries about



colour were made in Malay kitchens, where an outsider might not be able to understand the dialogue between a mother and daughter as they cooked, since the descriptions of food are done in unique Malay colour terms, many of which were derived from observations of the flora and fauna in the environment around each village.

Colour terms used in the Malay language include Kuning Bunga Ketola (Angled Gourd Yellow), Kuning Lemak Ketam (Crab Fat Yellow), Kuning Pinang Masak (Ripe Areca Yellow), Hitam Lotong (Leaf Monkey Black), and Hitam Kelawar (Bat Black).

The variety of colours in the different segments of the exhibition ensured that its creation was an exciting project for those involved, although there were also many tough challenges.

“Communicating thoughts and ideas was not always easy given that our teams are located in different parts of Asia,” says Harald-Wong, “There was a great deal of diversity



FROM: THE BALANCE OF EMPTY SPACE AND RICHLY DECORATED AREAS IN THE KITE IS CHARACTERISTIC OF MALAY AESTHETICS; BELOW: WHITE KHADI WORN TO CELEBRATE GANDHI'S BIRTHDAY IN INDIA

and an unfamiliarity with the intricacies of each culture, even though we are all collectively known as Asians”.

Lau says the scope of international exchange involved with the exhibition was only possible with the full support of HKDI, which “became the platform that connects the overseas artistic community and the local

community in Hong Kong.”

The *Colours of Asia* is intended to be just the first step in a long-term programme of research. HKDI will follow up the exhibition by taking on the role of cultural ambassador for the study and by building up an Asia colour archive together with tDA Asia.


“As a database of colour studies in Asia, the archive will in the long

RIGHT: A MASTER DYER SUPERVISING AN APPRENTICE IN LAOS; BELOW LEFT: GARAEDDOEK (WHITE RICE CAKE) IS TYPICALLY SERVED DURING THE NEW YEAR IN SOUTH KOREA; BELOW RIGHT: A NAGA GUARDING THE ENTRANCE TO THE WAT ONG TIEU BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN VIENTIANE, LAOS; BOTTOM: BUKUL SIA IN SINGAPORE (AUSPICIOUS BASKETS). THE GOLD MOTIFS SIGNIFY PROSPERITY AND WEALTH

run benefit scholars, students and the design community as a whole,” says Lau.

The archive project would also allow the existing research results to be developed more thoroughly. For example, as part of the archive project, Lau is working on a book to be published after the exhibition, which will include more detailed explanations of the five colours showcased as well as academic reports from scholars in various regions.

“Some countries do not have representatives within tDA Asia, for example we do not have Japanese members, but we will have one paper in the book that was contributed by Japanese scholars, adding more perspective to the colours of Asia,” says Lau.

Celebrating the commonalities and differences among Asians is what inspired the *Colours of Asia* exhibition as well as the archive project. Most of all, this delicious banquet of colour will also “open eyes and minds to the power of colour in our daily lives”, says Harald-Wong. 



TOURISM MALAYSIA; SUPAHS MAUK

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