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## Play by play

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# PLAY B PLAY



• **CATAPULT**  
Before plastic became popular, the interior lining of worn-out bicycle tires were cut into a piece of sling and tied onto a dry twig.

Hong Kong's toy industry has had a dominant role on the global stage in the past but after a recent exhibition that showcased some of its halcyon days one of the city's biggest manufacturers of playthings says it's time for the region to win back its place in the world's toy box. **DAISY ZHONG** reports.

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• **PULL-AROUND DOGS**  
Toy dogs, for infants to pull around, have a simple design and streamlined body. What makes them special is that they were one of the few non-household products from Red A, Hong Kong's famous and oldest plastic manufacturer of household products.





C.K. YEUNG,  
VICE CHAIRMAN  
OF BLUE BOX  
HOLDINGS  
LIMITED

AN OPERA PUPPET made of pig bristle, clay and cloth. The bottom of the puppet is tied to a piece of pig bristle so that it can move on top of an inverted iron plate. The game works like this: if you tap on the plate, vibrations will move the figure forward. If it falls out of the plate, you lose.

This kind of home-made toy, along with others made from clay, bamboo poles, cloth and paper, were the principle playtime companions for children in Hong Kong from the Qing Dynasty to the early 1960s, as revealed in the exhibition *Toys Paradise – the Creativity & Toy Culture of Hong Kong*, which ran from December 2011 until March 2012 at HKDI.

As a key event in Design Year 2012, the city's largest exhibition of toy culture told the vivid story of Hong Kong's 60 years of toy making. It was organised by the Federation of Hong Kong Industries, funded by Create Hong Kong, and supported by Hong Kong Toys Council, The Toys Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Trade Development Council. Around 1,000 toys made in Hong Kong during different eras were exhibited at the unique show.

"Fifty years ago, when I entered the toy industry, not many people in Hong Kong could afford to buy toys for their children," says C.K. Yeung, the organiser of the exhibition and the Vice Chairman of Blue Box Holdings Limited, one of the leading toy manufacturers in Hong Kong. "We made toys for ourselves. We would use a piece of paper, a frozen ice sucker stick, a piece of wood and bamboo, a soda-bottle cap or a rubber band. We used any materials that we could find to create something entertaining. The element of design was certainly there. Every piece was a unique creation."

These nostalgic items were showcased in the first section of the exhibition titled "Emerald City", where visitors could see how around 100 toys evolved from the early Qing Dynasty to the 1960s and how materials such as clay, bamboo poles, cloth and paper evolved.

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● **HUMAN-SHAPED CRICKET CONTAINER**  
A dried plant has been hollowed out as a container for crickets. Shaped like a doll, it is both aesthetic and functional as a toy. The figurine's hairstyle was common among children in the Qing Dynasty.



● **MOON MAN 001**  
Astronaut toys appeared in response to US astronauts landing on the moon. One of them was "Moon Man 001", a magnet-driven walking astronaut toy.



The second section of the exhibition, "Toy Town" showcased 800 toys made at the pinnacle of Hong Kong's toy industry, including games that specifically targeted boys, girls or both genders together. These toys reflected the widespread use of plastics, the application of electronics and other technological advancements, and how societal developments shaped the city's flourishing toy industry.

"Nowadays 70% of the world's toys are designed, created or processed from Hong Kong," says Yeung. "The city has been one of the world's most important toy towns for the last few decades." That is in sharp contrast with the city's reputation. "Ask anybody on the street about Hong Kong being a toy town, and not many people will know that."

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● **DOUBLE-HEADED HORSE**  
In the olden days, women farmers made stuffed toys out of old clothes (they normally wore dark colours so that stains and dirt would not be noticed).

Over the past 60 years, Hong Kong's toy manufacturers have become a major toy industry player. Exporting creative local products abroad, the city's toy men created global success stories, including Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures from Playmates Toys, educational electronics products like Lesson One from VTech, the mini Lamborghini series from Maisto and electronic pets from Manley Toy.

To demonstrate these achievements, the third section of the exhibition was called "Toy Legend" and covered dozens of selected toys from representative local toy manufacturers that have been mass produced and sold as award-winning products around the world. This is the section where visitors could recall the glorious days in which post-war Hong Kong emerged as the kingdom of toys.



**METAL TRUMPET**  
Before World War I, Hong Kong's small, primitive toy factories would recycle discarded cans (such as Eagle brand condensed milk cans) into hand-made toys.

**ROBOT**  
The black robot in *Aces To Places II*, the Hong Kong box office hit, was transformed into a plastic toy and became the first action figure derived from a local movie.

**BLACK DRAGON (YOUNG GANGSTERS) FIGURINE**  
Based on a character in the Hong Kong comic *Dragon Tiger Gate*, it is an early version of action figures.

"The toy industry is a cultural industry. It has a close association with cultural and social developments," says Yeung. Thus, as iPad and iPhone chic swept the globe, they became new toys for kids. "The current trend of high-tech toys has brought a transformation in the way children play, as well as in their behaviour.

"Most of the computer games lack the important element of direct communication or interaction among human beings. I think that's a pity. By playing computer games, children are more closed in upon themselves. In the past, children played and shared with each other, but today this sort of interaction is less common."

Yeung believes that playing has a huge impact on children's growth, and is a form of education. "In playing kids are learning knowledge, and more importantly, how to behave and how to be social."

For example, says Yeung, a doll is not just for entertainment, but also for a child to show how he or she can care for something other than their own feelings, through actions such as changing its clothes and role-playing. He thinks these actions train a child to express love for other people.

"I believe the most important thing for toy designers is to convey a positive message throughout society," says Yeung. "Toys should have a social function. Apart from amusement, toy designers should think about how toys can inspire a child or assist their education in terms of moral values, virtues and love."

«THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR TOY DESIGNERS IS TO CONVEY A POSITIVE MESSAGE THROUGHOUT SOCIETY.»

Yeung believes that ongoing themes, such as sustainable development, environmental protection, and social harmony should also become central topics for leaders in the toy industry.

"People are becoming more and more self-centred these days, and the route to becoming sociable again may lie in our toys," he says. "Kids could learn all these things by playing with the appropriate toys, learning how to live in harmony with the environment and with other people."

Workshops held during the exhibition offered examples of the way in which children and young people express their care for the environment or society through making their own toys.

"In the workshops, I found that these young designers do care about social issues. One of them designed a series of handicapped animal dolls, conveying a sense of concern about animal welfare."

The final section of the exhibition, "Return to Neverland", exhibited 300 new toy creations from teams of inventors who ranged in age from 14 to over 40. These toys blended the creativity of 12 local and overseas artists with over 200 local students, who created many innovative toys after getting inspiration and guidance from a series of workshops that helped them to build a "fun paradise" together.

"The exhibition aimed at showcasing the vibrant history of Hong Kong's toy development," says Yeung. "But it also promoted Hong Kong's toy industry, with a view to nurturing the next generation of local toy talents."

Yeung adds that although Hong Kong has a splendid past as toy town, not many young talents are joining the toy industry because this career means hard work and perseverance. There is especially a lack of talent in toy design.

"Playing involves lots of creativity and passion," he said. "And so does design. HKDI students did a great job in the toy workshops. Their designs are professional and inspiring. In the future, the toy industry would be very willing to share its practical experience with the students and assist them in a career full of amusement and fun."

And once that happens, everything else is child's play. ☺

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