Animating “Local Culture”: the Character Goods Industry in Taiwan and Hong Kong

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The paradox

- Taiwan designers are consciously trying to create characters based on their local culture, but feel they have failed at both creating a distinctive and coherent style, and at gaining global recognition.

- Hong Kong designers consciously avoid creating characters based on Hong Kong local culture, yet “Hong Kong toys” are recognized globally as having a distinctive and coherent style.
Taiwan
Taiwan
Hong Kong
Hong Kong
What Hong Kong and Taiwan toy designers have in common

- **Economic history:**
- Post-World War II toy manufacturing centers
- Since 1980s, factories moving to PRC
- Governments promoting switch from OEM to ODM, OBM
- Unlike Japan and US, very few companies doing animation and game design, “character designer” not a profession in itself
Careers:

- Most designers from working-class backgrounds, with technical school educations
- In their 20s and 30s
- Back and forth between company work and SOHO work
- Interaction at Asian Toy Festivals
Taiwan

- Local culture defined primarily in terms of content: religion, indigenous peoples, local history
- Style: negotiating between Japanese, Euro-American, and Chinese styles
Hong Kong toy themes: apes, explorers, submerged worlds
Hong Kong style
Michael Lau’s Gardener Series
(1999)
The 2nd generation of Hong Kong toys: Eric So, Jason Siu, Brothersfree
Hong Kong designers see their work as participating in a subculture
Taiwan designers see their work as participating in an industry
This is an ideological, rather than structural, difference
Homage and fair exchange vs. branding and anxiety of influence
Hong Kong design subculture: intertextuality
Parody for fans vs. creating a personal brand
But from the angle of consumption, a different paradox

- While “Hong Kong toys” popular in overseas market, they are not particularly popular in Hong Kong itself
- While Taiwan toys with “local culture” content have not been successfully marketed outside of Taiwan, some of them have become huge successes in Taiwan, especially “deity toys” (神明公仔)
Family Mart “Good God Figurines” (好神公仔)
1st series, July 2007
Cute Mazu figurines commissioned by temples
The diversity of Taiwanese deity figurines
Religious foundations of character consumption

- Figurines: icons:: characters: gods
- Characteristics of the figure:
  - Materialization of a virtual personality
  - One medium among many, including performance
  - Media for establishing social relations between real and virtual persons
  - Physiognomy and cartooniness
Overall research questions

- How do artists create fictional characters in different media?
- How do these artistic processes serve as models for how people imagine what it means to be human, and for how they construct identities in everyday social life?
Previous projects

- Taiwanese opera – performance and gender identity
- Pili puppetry – creating characters without the human body
- Taiwanese collectors of Japanese character goods
Animation vs. Performance

- Different models of and for human action in and on the world
- What gamers think they are doing when they play MMORPGs – avatars vs. pets
Animation as a model of and for human action in and on the world

- Tentative definition: the projection of qualities perceived as human – life, power, agency, will, personality, etc. -- outside of the self, and into the sensory environment, through acts of creation, perception, and interaction.

- In different character goods industries, what aspects of humanity are projected, and how?
The diversity of Taiwanese deity figurines *shenming gongzai* (神明公仔, deity toys)
Current project: Character goods design, (especially figurines) in Taiwan and Hong Kong
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Yuanzhumin (indigenous peoples) figurines
Hong Kong toy themes: apes, explorers, submerged worlds
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Differences between Hong Kong and Taiwan art toy designers

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