

Big figures for designer toys

Young enthusiasts in the Chinese mainland race to spend on limited-edition playthings likely destined for display only

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At 5 am on Sept 7, Kong Xiaoyu, together with hundreds of other young people, formed a long line that snaked from the street to an underground exhibition hall — four hours before the Beijing Toy Show was due to open.

When she finally entered the exhibition, the 22-year-old raced to buy designer toys. More than 300 designers from China, Japan, South Korea, the United States and Europe exhibited customized offerings for an increasing group of adult enthusiasts in China.

Kong, a senior student at an art college in the capital, was able to buy a limited-edition doll — a wide-eyed girl dressed in an astronaut's suit. Each toy cost 999 yuan (\$145) and Kong was one of the 300 lucky enough to get their hands on them.

The sum Kong paid for the figure, named Molly, was just a fraction of the more than 10,000 yuan she spent at the exhibition.

"I'm not an irrational spender. I only buy what I really like," she said.

Kong has a five-story cabinet at home that houses collectible toys from across the world. She does not allow children to visit her home in case they break the delicate figures, which are for display purposes rather than to play with, she added.

Kong is typical of the growing number of young fans on the Chinese mainland who have emerged in the past two years as the toy craze has taken off. They enjoy buying and collecting toys made from plastic or vinyl produced by designers or artists. These toys are often associated with pop culture such as hip hop, graffiti and street dance. The style can be cute, chic or quirky.

Wang Ning, founder of Pop Mart, which introduced designer toy shows to the mainland last year, said: "Such toys are like the younger generation's stamp collections. They are also art pieces."

When Wang staged a toy show in Shanghai in April, he was impressed by the number of enthusiasts who turned up.

The three-day exhibition attracted about 30,000 fans from cities nationwide. To buy rare editions, many set up tents on the street and lined up days before the show opened.

"Designer toys are still new on the mainland. The market is huge and promising," said Wang, 31, who started in the business just four years ago.

At the Beijing show, the most expensive items sold were from the Coarse brand of two life-size figures with giant shark heads by German artist Mark Landwehr, who runs a

workshop in Hong Kong. They cost one fan 120,000 yuan.

In the late 1990s, the launch of limited-edition chic action figures by Hong Kong designer Michael Lau triggered a craze among the young.

Comic-strip illustrators, graphic designers and advertising agencies joined in, making their own figures. They included designer Eric So, whose chic dolls resembled his hero, the late martial arts star Bruce Lee. The designer toy craze then spread quickly to Japan, South Korea and the West in the 2000s.

Wang said: "The quick development of designer toys in China can be partly attributed to the fact that there are many toy factories in the country. These factories accept small orders from designers who only make limited editions of less than 100 toys at relatively low cost."

Wang considers designer toys to be a combination of paintings and sculptures. They can be art pieces priced at hundreds of thousands of yuan, such as Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara's iconic doll Sleepless Night. They can also be aimed at young people who want to pay anything from less than 100 yuan to thousands of yuan.

The majority of the popular designers are from Hong Kong, such as Kasing Lung, the designer of cute monster-like figures, and Kenny Wong, who designed Molly, the wide-eyed girl bought by Kong, the college student.

About 4 million finger-sized Molly dolls, costing just 59 yuan, have been sold on the mainland in the past year, as well as various

series of limited editions priced much higher, according to Wang, who has signed a contract with Wong.

Kong bought dozens of limited editions of Molly dolls, with the most expensive costing 7,000 yuan. Apart from Molly, she loves toys shaped as monsters, and to find a good one she often travels overseas to visit toy shows or flea markets.

She and her cousin are fans of Zhang Shihao, who enjoys a good reputation for his toys created as art pieces.

Zhang, who works in Beijing, used to be an ardent collector and had thousands of designer toys at home. Before turning to designing them himself, he was a comic book illustrator and later worked at an advertising agency.

The 35-year-old mainly creates limited editions of his pieces.

"I prefer to be called an artist. These toys are my artistic exploration," said Zhang, who learned to paint when he was a child.

He said he loves to find inspiration from Chinese culture. His iconic piece is a three-eyed, human-like tiger. Different editions have been produced in a variety of colors, heads and hands. The tiger was inspired by a painting from the Song Dynasty (960-1279) that depicted various demons.

A limited edition of five designed by Zhang for the Beijing Toy Show, priced at 4,800 yuan, sold out quickly. "I think Chinese toy buyers are a little bit crazy," he said.

Zhang said buyers also love to trade toys on social networks, adding, "They have online chat rooms to show off

and exchange them."

With a team of four, including himself, Zhang supervises the painting of his collectibles. He uses social networks such as WeChat and also micro blogs to promote his work.

Xuan Yilang works as a part-time toy designer, which he said is common among Chinese designers.

He works at a design company in Beijing by day and creates his toys at night. The 30-year-old created two monster-like sculptures in 2015, naming the figures Mozzila and Yuki.

"They look very scary and strong. However, they're very kind and soft," Xuan said. Both Mozzila and Yuki are made from vinyl and are hollow.

Xuan started to collect toys in 2007. At the time, designer toys were only popular among small groups in this field. In 2015, he decided to become a part-time designer, and this was when the mainland toy market started to boom.

"The situation (on the mainland) now is very much like Hong Kong's toy market before the financial crisis — very prosperous," he said.

At the Beijing Toy Show, Xuan sold about 2,700 of his mini-monsters, including some limited editions priced from 300 to 500 yuan.

But he worries that people are making irrational decisions on what to buy.

"Toy shows were only introduced to the mainland last year. They are still very new. But the numbers are increasing rapidly due to the hot demand," Xuan said, adding that this year alone, more than 10 shows will be held.

Liu Yoyo, 29, an IT programmer in Hangzhou, East China's Zhejiang province, asked her company for several days off and flew to Beijing to visit the toy show to buy limited editions.

She arrived at the exhibition hall at 6 am on the opening day and spent 5,000 yuan, about half her monthly salary, but she said it was worthwhile.

"I could resell limited editions at double or triple price later," Liu said. "It's fulfilling my childhood dream to buy toys," Liu added.

She said that when she was very young, there were not enough varieties of toys in China, and more important, she had no money to buy them. But now that she is working, she cannot stop buying.

"I sleep with these toys and feel happy," she said.

As for Wang, the pioneer who introduced the toy shows to Beijing and Shanghai, the designer trend is inevitable, given the country's strong economy.

With more and more of those born in the mid-1980s and early 1990s now working and becoming key consumers, Wang said their interests will dominate pop culture.

