The Spirit of Hong Kong: Ambition and Creation

Editor: Lisha Xie

Every designer may have a dream to establish his/her own brand, but there doubtlessly is no easy way to go. Some designers might have no idea where to start, some might be right in trouble and do not know how to move on. This time our brand new column starts our journey to design from the first stop Hong Kong. In this cosmopolis known for ambition and creation, by interviewing various talents from prominent Hong Kong image stylist Tina, to emerging fashion designer Rose and Polly, to former copy writer Andrew in creative cultural industry, we bring their stories right in front of you and hope to bring you some inspirations.
Once we mentioned Tina, many may associate the name with various titles, actresses, singers, hosts or directors, and of course the most impressive one image stylist, with honorary name such as “Image Guru” and “The Chief Image Consultant of China”. When we brought many designers’ problems with us and tried to start this interview with a pleasantry about her recent work, she broke in “If we are discussing design, let’s focus on it and save all those entertainment reporter’s opening speech!” obviously revealing her serious attitude toward this interview.

Whenever we asked a question highly concerned by designers, she often raised her head in meditation and gave her opinion wisely; when we described designers’ inner doubts, she would stop me with her answer. This is Tina, the CEO of Tina’s Choice select shop. From a whole new point of view, we hope you will be inspired by this short interview by opening up this fabulous life book of Tina and extracting her understanding of brand and design.
TINA'S CHOICE NOW HAVE AROUND FIFTY ACCESSORY BRANDS, AND DESIGNERS FROM EACH BRAND HAVE QUITE DIFFERENT STYLES. FROM YOUR POINT OF VIEW, WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING BEING A DESIGNER?

Passion! I know it seems like an ordinary answer but it is true! There is no easy way to become a successful designer. If you were an artist, you are expressing yourself and it would be ok to shut yourself off. But if you are a designer, you are communicating with many people. You have to consider what you want to express, and whether people will understand or like it. Once you launch your product in the market, you are supposed to think over many aspects. All of these will lead to a series of problems which you need to solve. If you do not have enough passion, it is really a no easy way to go.

WE FOUND THAT MANY DESIGNERS ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT THEIR WORK, BUT SOME OF THEM ARE MERELY CONSIDERED AS CRAFTSMEN. WHEN THEY WANT TO STEP FURTHER AND ESTABLISH THEIR OWN BRAND TO GAIN MORE RECOGNITIONS, WHAT SHOULD THEY DO?

(Pondering) Actually design is similar to other professions. You need to have your uniqueness. Either you are fashion designer, product designer, graphic designer or interior designer, ask yourself what the value and characteristic of your design are? Did you dedicate yourself to your works? If you think your works best represent your talent, how to present it and let other people remember, in other words, how to market it. Think about where the demand is. Some products might be easy to be accepted, some might take a comparatively long time to find specific target consumers.

What is brand? I think we have to figure this out first; brand is not the ultimate goal. You tell me what is brand. Are we going to finish 99 projects to build a brand, or are we committed ourselves to a career, and later it becomes our brand? This two sequences will make a huge difference.
DO YOU BELIEVE THE LATTER ONE OFTEN MAKES DESIGNERS MORE PASSIONATE AND DEDICATED?

Where did those Time-honoured brands come from? I always believe that every product starts from a basic concept. Take a knife for example, a knife maker might simply want to create the best knife and he makes a living on it. Gradually his products are well-known for their quality and reasonable prices, then his name becomes a promise to his products. A brand does not come out from thin air. Now we see that many businessmen put the cart before the horse.

DO YOU THINK THAT’S WHY MANY DESIGNERS FAILED TO BUILD A WELL-ESTABLISHED BRAND?

There are many reasons and this is one of them. Some designers lack perseverance, some lack talent, while some have both but did not have the chance. I said passion is an essential element because you are facing problems all the time and you might not solve all of them. A famous Chinese saying is that a general builds his success on ten thousand bleaching bones; you have to understand that those glamorous brands were survived from a fierce competition. This might lead to another question, many designers might be confident with their works, but after being turned down for many times, this definitely will weaken their resolve. (Some may sacrifice their original idea.)

They will never forget! I know what you want to ask! Will those designers surrender to reality? I think this depends on designers, some of them, either fashion designer, furniture designer or shoe designer, can alter or improve their idea and continue to express themselves. I would say this is positive and this is not failure. Whether you will get recognised or not, you have the right to stick to your idea, but no order does not mean your product or your design is not good.

AS A FOUNDER OF A SELECT SHOP, MANY DESIGNERS WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOUR CONSIDERATION IS WHEN YOU MAKE YOUR CHOICE.

Balance sensibility and rationality. As a select shop owner, trends, my favourite price and market demand are all I need to think over. If you want to become a good buyer, you have to balance your personal preference with object factors. Like a housewife, she has to use limited budget to create a marvellous feast, not only taste good but is sufficient for everybody. She needs to know what her family like and what her guests like. A buyer is the same, he/she has to think over and over again. It would never be as simple as buying a Christmas gift for your friends.

Now we have dozens of brands, those were selected from hundreds. A mature designer should understand that a buyer did not choose your products because he/she have a comprehensive consideration. Don’t be frustrated. On the other hand, designers need to know this environment. Of course big order would be a reward to them, but no order does not mean your product or your design is not good.

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT MAKING YOUR OWN PRODUCT FROM SCRATCH? WHAT’S YOUR BLUEPRINT FOR TINA’S CHOICE?

I did not design a product, but I mainly do the editing, how to match different elements. Such as my bracelet named Roman Holiday successfully released in the market. In 2015 I will launch my new products all designed by ourselves. I hope in the future whenever people mention Tina’s Choice, they will connect it with uniqueness, good looking but not expensive. Many people praised my styling, but I hope my product could convey my idea. People do not need to invite me to a lot of places; when they see my selection and product, they will understand my concept behind design.
With the passion and love for handcraft crochet, several young people gathered together to realise a family dream by crocheting their own brand. When creative director Rose stood in front of us, we were surprised by the determination revealed from her gentle voice; when Manager Peter answered our question calmly but firmly, we learned the brand’s continuous growth. From these two main founders of Ibility, let’s find out how they turned their dream into reality.
ABILITY IS PROUD OF ITS HAND CRAFTED CROCHET. WE ALL KNOW THAT HANDCRAFT IS REALLY TIME-CONSUMING AND HIGH-COST, WHY DO YOU ATTACH SO MUCH IMPORTANCE ON THIS?

Peter: That’s part of the reason why we establish this brand. Actually Rose is deeply influenced by her mother and great-grandfather, who were very passionate about crochet and handcraft. Her mother sacrificed her design career to this family. So Rose inherits this love for crochet and hope to incorporate different techniques of crochets to our fashion design. Crochet is our brand DNA. Our name derived from three words: possibility, ability and sensibility. We hope it is the same with the future of crochet, it could mix various elements and bring new possibilities.

Rose: We want to promote this handicraft art and culture, and hope it won’t be lost. I think it is our responsibility to advocate the importance of handicrafts, sure this will also elevate our brand value. This is very common in handmade bags and watches.

HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET MARKET? IS IT A GOOD STRATEGY TO DEVELOP A MULTIPLE PRODUCTION LINE FROM BABY TO WOMAN CLOTHING FOR A NEW BRAND?

Peter: Considering our production cost, our target consumers are middle class who appreciate hand crafted crochet and green fashion. We hope to preserve these handcraft skills and at the same time bring our great design. We chose to develop a rich fashion collection mainly because this will contribute to our development. If we focus on baby collection, the market share will definitely shrink. But woman’s clothing will help us expand the market.

Rose: Also we noticed that now many young mothers are very fashionable. They would love their baby to have a similar style with them.

ROSE, NOW YOU ARE BOTH THE CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND BRAND FOUNDER, HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE TWO DIFFERENT ROLES?

Rose: I am very happy to have our own brand. Of course now we have much more problems and difficulties than ever before. I have to always put the production cost in mind, trying to apply crochet in various fabrics in order to avoid monotony. We need to enrich our collection to make sure they will reach those young customers. I would say to stay fashionable and keep our brand features are very important.
HAVE YOU EVER MET ANY DIFFICULTY? HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT GIVING UP?

Peter: We had been through a difficult time, facing problems both in marketing and production. After all our brand is only 2 years old. It is too hard for us to find the right workers at the beginning. We hope our company has a responsibility to this society, so you will find that most of our employees came from mainland (who need a job to make a living) or some middle-aged women, we hope to offer a job to them. Meanwhile we provide opportunities to those potential young designers who have their dreams. So we have a good team, all of us are passionate about our work.

Rose: Never give up. A good team is essential. We are so lucky to have them and our partner together with us to face all troubles. We are all dedicated to this brand, so never give up.

COULD YOU GIVE A PIECE OF ADVICE FOR THOSE YOUNG DESIGNERS WHO HAVE THEIR OWN DREAMS?

Peter: Broaden your horizon and persevere to the end. It is necessary to observe the world around you. Now many designers have brilliant ideas and concepts, but sometimes they are too isolated. It seems all design comes from computers.

Rose: I am obsessed with crochet and I often go to different places and expose myself to exhibition, emerging myself to different culture and history. I also study how many techniques and skills of crochet in the world. Now my employees and I often discuss new skills, we even invent new crochet hook.

WHAT’S YOUR BLUEPRINT FOR ABILITY?

Hope we could have our flagship shops in Beijing and Shanghai. We are now already on the way.
MIXING UP TRADITION WITH INNOVATION

Polly Ho / Andy Wong
Design Consultant / Chief Designer & Director

Having engaged in the design industry for more than decades, these two well experienced designers, gregarious and outgoing Polly together with steady and wise Andy, founded a sustainable fashion brand Loom Loop.
WHERE DOES YOUR NAME LOOM LOOP COME FROM?

We had a brainstorm and have our English name first. We wanted to start from the basic elements and loom refers to the machine which produces cloth. Every piece of cloth was woven together those loops. Also this name represents us, the two founders. We also considered the graphic design, which perfectly matches each other. So we chose Loom Loop. The Chinese name, both two words have the same pronunciation. The first “Lu” means normal and busyness, while the second “Lu” means wealth. We hope our design could bring people rich and wealth, and our busy work and effort could bring us back and honour.

MANY OF YOUR CLOTHES ARE MADE OF 100% SILK, WILL THIS CONSTRAIN YOUR DESIGN CONCEPT? HOW TO EXPRESS YOUR BRAND CHARACTERISTICS BESIDES MATERIAL?

As each kind of material has its own strength, we often develop our idea after we receive a piece of cloth. Maybe some of our materials are not suitable for exaggerated design, but we have to keep our style. We want our collections easy to match, comfortable to wear and timeless. We have three main features. Firstly, 100% original. Each of our collections has a theme and all patterns are designed by ourselves. Secondly, we want to combine Chinese culture with western culture, because both of us were born in HK and had studied and worked in the UK. Thirdly we have a concern about sustainable fashion. We will choose suppliers who use eco-friendly printing and organic cotton. At the same time, we also dedicate to recycle those leftover clothes.
NOW AS A DESIGNER AND FOUNDER OF LOOM LOOP, WHAT IS THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE COMPARING WITH YOUR PREVIOUS WORK?

I think the attitude and mentality have changed a lot. Now I have to think about many things. In my previous job maybe I need to satisfy my boss and customers’ needs, but now I have more freedom to express my idea. I do not want to pay too much attention on making money. Creating something you like and others appreciate, that makes me happy. I know it is really hard, but I do enjoy my work now.

FOR THOSE DESIGNERS WHO HAVE THEIR OWN DREAMS, DO YOU HAVE ANY PIECE OF ADVICE?

Every entrepreneur might have their own way to start up his business. We started our brand after we know the PMQ programme and opened our first shop. When we do not have enough employees, this shop along has driven us crazy. We may not have time to do the promotion and marketing. I would advise some designers do not hurry up to open a shop or work studio, because this will take a lot of your money and time. Your marketing and new collection developing might lag behind.

WHAT’S YOUR BLUEPRINT FOR LOOM LOOP?

Every designer want to have their own brand. Polly and I hope this brand will be our lifelong career, and gradually makes an impact on people. As for the market, it is not limited to HK. We will enter Mainland firstly, and step by step to Milan, London and Paris.
BRANDING HONG KONG CULTURE

Andrew Au yeung
Founder and Director

He went abroad at the age of 15, but later chose to come back to Hong Kong after his whole family immigrated to Canada. He majored in Journalism, but has been working in advertising agency for decades. With the passion for Hong Kong culture, now he has a new title—the founder of gift & premium shop Mall 852. His name is Andrew, who will introduce us how to build a brand from local cultural heritage.
YOU MAJORED IN JOURNALISM, WHY DO YOU CHANGE YOUR CAREER TO DESIGN INDUSTRY?

Qualification is not a must for a designer. Creation starts with the concept behind it. When I worked in my first advertising agency, I had a lot of chances to take part in every process and learned a lot from there. In advertising agencies, there are two important roles, copywriter and art director, and I prefer the former. I often shared my ideas with different art directors and received their responses; this is a good way to enrich my knowledge. Gradually I went toward my own understanding of design. For me, my work is to know each designer's strength and inspire them to realise my concept.

WHY DO YOU ESTABLISH THIS BRAND AT THE BEGINNING? AFTER SEVERAL YEARS' DEVELOPMENT, IS THERE ANY CHANGE IN YOUR BUSINESS POLICY?

We hope to advocate the history and culture of HK, but this is not necessarily limited to history book or documentary film. It could be a product or a T-shirt. So we develop our products from unique HK culture. There is no big change in business policy. Every brand has its core value and its DNA. We have a meeting annually in which we look over all our works to see whether we deviate from our original path.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BEING AN EMPLOYEE AND A LEADER OF YOUR OWN COMPANY?

We tend to think the grass is greener on the other side. If I had been in my previous work, I might have a comparatively wealthy living. But you also have problems, such as cut down by the boss. Especially when you hold a high position, you have to deal with too much bureaucracy. That’s not what I like. I think you have to know yourself very well. Some people have the ability, but they might be good employees instead of leaders, because they do not have perseverance facing difficulties. When you become a leader of your company, you have to take care of too many things and be prepared for any problem and go ahead. I would say it is important to know what type of person you are.

COULD YOU GIVE US A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF YOUR TEAM AND YOUR MANAGEMENT?

We have a full-time designer and partners. Now we collaborate with many designers to develop new products. You know every designer has a different style from each other and this helps us to enrich our collection. My job is to find designers who can help us to finish our work. Besides I also cooperate with other agencies, helping them to design and launch new products. This also supports our own design business.