



Craze with figs, not with bricks

by Lina Leung

Miniature characters in the LEGO brick series may outplay the classic toy bricks with their distinctive smiling faces and yellow skin, and have won the hearts of many Hong Kongers who make the tiny figures part of their lives.

A fleet of 10,000

Local mini-figure collector, Kenny Sze Shing-koi is a LEGO minifigure lover who has collected up to 10,000

with more than 1,600 different characters.

“When I see so many minifigures, I think ‘wow!’ I feel very happy,” said the 32-year-old collector.

His devotion started in 2002 after noticing the World Cup promotional LEGO minifigures put out by the Coca-Cola Company. Of all the toys, Mr Sze described minifigures as “especially cute.”

“Once you look at them, you fall in love with them,” he said.

Mr Sze has lost count of the money he has spent on minifigures. “I don’t know how much I have spent on them. I dare not think about it!” he said. “If you ask me whether I think it is worth it, the answer is ‘yes!’”

When Mr Sze first started his hobby, he had to buy the figures online little by little from auction sites such as Yahoo! Hong Kong and eBay because no individual minifigures were for sale in Hong Kong, which made it difficult to collect the figures. He said he had

to spend more time in waiting and searching for them and it took him longer to gather different figures.

However, after he first discovered an online LEGO marketplace, Mr Sze hit a personal spending record of HK\$20,000 in just one month. “It was like finding a treasure chest!” he said.

From toys to movies

His huge collection includes the popular Star Wars series. Unlike many collectors who are long-time Star Wars fans, Mr Sze said he had no idea who the characters were at first.

“For the sake of including the Star Wars series into my minifigure collection, I borrowed all the Star Wars movies from DVD rental shops. If you have some minifigures characters, you want to know more about them,” he recalled how the toys have brought him an intimate knowledge of pop culture.

Mr Sze also founded a collectors’ website: *Minifigs.net*, in which he

hopes to link mini-figure enthusiasts in Hong Kong.

Through this website, he has made friends with other collectors from Hong Kong and overseas. “If it wasn’t because of *Minifigs.net*, I would not know other collectors, and I would be just collecting the toys on my own,” said Mr Sze.

“Having this organisation where we can enjoy our hobby with a group of friends gives me a sense of satisfaction. We have also built a reputation and gained recognition, so whenever collectors talk about LEGO toys, they would think of *Minifigs.net*,” added Mr Sze.

The website, established in 2002, started as a personal web page where Mr Sze posted photos of his collection. It became a registered organisation in 2005, now with forums, regular gatherings and more than 6,000 members. It holds two to three gatherings a year with more than 200 members attending.



Kenny Sze Shing-koi and part of his 10,000-men assemblage. The collection has been displayed in various exhibitions.



Wedding souvenirs of Kenny Sze Shing-koi: minifigs brought into his wedding.



Kenny Sze Shing-koi set up a web site to unite enthusiasts. The site now has more than 6,000 members.

The organisation has raised more than HK\$48,000 in a charity sale for the victims in the Sichuan earthquake. A member of *Minifigs.net* with terminal cancer donated all his collection for the sale held on June 14 last year, according to Mr Sze.

“Apart from having fun, we hope that our gatherings can be more meaningful,” said Mr Sze. “After the Charity Sale for the Sichuan earthquake, we wanted to take one step further. We now have stall games in each gathering to raise funds for Oxfam.”

Where to buy

Mr Sze now collects LEGO sets, instead of just minifigures. “The figures themselves already cost so much, so I’d rather pay for a complete set,” said the collector.

Mr Sze has also switched from purchasing online to local shops although discounts are smaller. “I feel it is reasonable. We can get 50 percent off online, but just by paying a little more, I need not wait for so long for a new set,” he added.

However, Ethan Leung Chi-wai, another collector, prefers purchasing minifigures online. “Imported minifigures are much more expensive,” he said. “Also, it’s more difficult to find ‘antiques’ (old models) in Hong Kong.”

“The financial tsunami has been favourable to us. Overseas purchases are cheaper now. So we would buy more as collectors in the United States and Europe are more willing to sell,” he added.

Childhood ties

Mr Leung resumed his childhood hobby of collecting minifigures three years ago after visiting the website, *Minifigs.net*. “I found out that many people would collect LEGO toys and realised they were not only for kids, adults can play too.”

The 26-year-old collector said he has an emotional bound with these

toys. “It started with a Castle series set that I wanted when I was a kid. Being the largest set, it cost around HK\$500, which was very expensive at that time,” he said.

“My mom said I could have the Castle series if I became top three in class. I studied day and night and I finally made it to the top three. That’s why minifigures from that Castle series are my favourite,” said Mr Leung.

His family has been supportive of his hobby. “I told them I buy minifigures not only for collecting, but also for sale,” he said. “I have realised that merely buying them would make an enormous long-term expense, so I started selling them.”

For example, Mr Leung would buy ten minifigures of a character he wanted instead of buying just one, so that he could get a better bargain and can then sell the rest. “That cut down the expense of collecting,” he said.

As an administrator of the Castle series forum at *Minifigs.net*, Mr Leung has made friends with those who share the same passion, and these friends remain his close friends.

One of these friends is Antony Tam Yok-loong, another fan of LEGO and committee member of *Minifigs.net*.

Mr Tam, 28, also has a childhood connection with LEGO toys. “There’s an emotional tie for me because there weren’t many chances to buy or play with LEGO when I was a kid. So when I grew up, I started to collect them as compensation,” he said.

Mr Tam, who started collecting around eight years ago, suggested amateur collectors to start with a particular series, taking their own budget into consideration.

“When they have bought something they don’t like, they can take what they want from the set and sell off the rest at consignment shops where rental is reasonable,” he added.

He also suggested that collectors can buy minifigures at reduced prices

at consignment shops. “It’s point in Yau Ma Tei is a good place. There are many LEGO shops, so collectors can compare prices,” said Mr Tam.

“There’s an emotional tie for me because there weren’t many chances to buy or play with LEGO when I was a kid.”

Do-it-yourself

When he cannot find what he wants, Mr Tam will turn to do-it-yourself (DIY) minifigures. He said he first learned about it at Brickmania.com when he was a secondary school student, where a fan posted his DIY creations.

Since LEGO has not launched any military series, the military fanatic has been making his own minifigures using self-made stickers and material from online shops.

“Custom-made minifigures are more professionally made overseas,” he said. According to Mr Tam, there are a lot of professional sellers overseas. These sellers or shops are able to invest more in painting tools and spend more time decorating the figures. Mr Tam said painted surface of minifigures bought from overseas are much smoother.

But stickers have their advantages, according to Mr Tam. Stickers are cheaper and removable whenever necessary. When collectors want to sell their minifigures, they can simply tear the stickers off.

John Ho, who started collecting minifigures less than a year ago, prefers to be loyal to the original LEGO minifigures instead. “I try my best to keep them intact but to do different things with the variety of original material available,” said the collector.

Mr Ho, a Creative Media student at the City University, creates his own new characters by combining heads, bodies and accessories from different series. “For example, heads from the Batman series have a large variety of expressions, so they are pretty useful,” he said.

Size matters

There are different ways to create one’s own LEGO character. Koo Mei-yee collects jumbo LEGO figures which are 45 centimetres in height, because she finds the jumbo size more distinctive than the ordinary ones. “I believe there is less than 10 people who collect jumbo LEGO figures in Hong Kong so I think they are more valuable,” said Ms Koo.

Ms Koo’s collection mainly came from exclusive shop displays, and she said collecting the giant version of the figures costs a lot more than the mini version. She spent nearly HK\$70,000 in the first year of which she took up this hobby.

Ms Koo was unwilling to disclose the total expenditure on collecting Jumbo LEGO figures over the years, but said what she has spent could nearly pay the down payment for a flat. “I think that it surely can pay the down payment for an apartment worth HK\$1 million,” Ms Koo said.

“Also, I find minifigures very easy to lose. I always lose the minifigures which I got as souvenirs from our gatherings (organised by *Minifigs.net*). No matter how, I won’t lose these (jumbo) ones,” Ms Koo added.

Ms Koo has created her own characters by sewing wedding clothes for a couple figure of 45-centimetre tall.

“Whenever I come to the thought of marriage, I would think about how I could make the wedding special,” she said. “I found that apart from pasting stickers, there were other things that could also be done to decorate my LEGO figures.”



John Ho (left), Ethan Leung Chi-wai (middle) and Antony Tam Yok-loong talk about their experiences as collectors.



Ethan Leung Chi-wai’s creation: A Greek Olympic Torch lighter outside the Parthenon.



Stickers to dress up the Greek torch lighter.



Jumbo figures function as shop displays. When a jumbo figure stands upright, its height measures 45 centimetres.



Various characters created by Ethan Leung Chi-wai: he gives them new looks by designing stickers on the chest and combining body parts from different characters.



Courtesy of Ethan Leung Chi-wai



COURTESY OF ETHAN LEUNG CHI-WAI

CHARLOTTE WAT

EDITH WU

“The minifigures are personages which make role-playing possible.”



Yvonne Lam Wing-ki, Product Manager of LEGO Hong Kong Ltd. says minifigures allows players to take up imaginative roles.



Minifigure of Darth Vader, a character from the Star Wars movie series by George Lucas.



EDITH WU

COURTESY OF LEGO HONG KONG LTD.

COURTESY OF ETHAN LEUNG CHIT-WAI

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Mainly buying from the auction site Yahoo! Japan auctions, she has collected 48 different characters so far.

“In Hong Kong, not many people own so many characters, let alone girls. Few girls play with LEGO. That’s why a lot of people notice me at *Minifigs.net*,” said the site’s committee member.

“Whenever I browse the site, people would know who I am because I collect that (jumbo figures). It is like a trait of mine”, she added.

Toy that communicates

With the growing popularity of LEGO minifigures, the LEGO Group has increased the variety and amount of characters in LEGO sets of some series by borrowing characters from pop culture. For example, Darth Vader from the Star Wars movie and Harry Potter from J.K. Rowling’s novels are some of the best-selling characters of the toy brand.

Product Manager of LEGO Hong Kong Ltd. Yvonne Lam Wing-ki, however, said the company currently has no plans to release toy sets composed of solely minifigures.

“The minifigures are personages which make role-playing possible in a scene built of bricks. It makes communication easier when the children are playing with the toys, said Ms Lam. “But the bricks still remain the company’s focus.”

“Throughout the years, LEGO’s concept and focus have always been construction with bricks to develop creativity and imagination,” said Ms Lam.

“Minifigures are value-adding elements They are just iconic products which enrich LEGO toy sets,” Ms Lam added. 

Scenes 1 & 2: A man being captured and cooked alive by cannibals. Some collectors create scenes with custom-made minifigures as they add new elements to stories.

Fun Facts about minifigures

- In 1974, LEGO introduced the a family of figures built from a combination of classic bricks and figure parts .
- In 1975 the figure had moulded arms and legs.
- The first minifigure series appeared in 1978 – including a police officer, a petrol man, a street worker and a fireman. The first female minifigure, a nurse, arrived two months later.
- The iconic yellow skin tone and happy facial expression in the classic minifigure was designed to reflect the non-specific and transcendental quality of children’s imagination.
- The body of a minifigure is as tall as three LEGO bricks stacked on top of one another and the head is one LEGO brick high, making it 1½ inches tall.
- The average minifigure – with no hair or accessories – weighs 1/10 of an ounce.
- In 1989, minifigures began to change their facial expressions. They were able to be good or bad.
- In 2002, minifigures were able to have different heights when shorter legs were introduced. They were first used in the Yoda minifigure of the Star Wars series.
- 3.9 minifigures are sold per second, making over 122 million per year.

(Source: LEGO Hong Kong Ltd.)