

Transfixed by Transformers

Fans of the alien robot franchise spend years and hundreds of thousands of dollars collecting figurines

Benson Ang



With last Thursday's opening of the Transformers: Age of Extinction movie comes a new wave of Transformers frenzy. But the franchise has long had its ardent fans here, who spend years – and hundreds of thousands of dollars – collecting Transformers figurines.

Most are men in their 30s who grew up watching the animated television series in the 1980s.

Mr Marcus Goh, 32, is one of them. The marketing communications manager is believed to have one of the largest Transformers toy collections in Singapore, with more than 1,600 figurines.

Two years ago, he provided 400 of the 1,000 figurines at an exhibition tracing the history of Transformers toys at Resorts World Sentosa.

In his five-room flat in the eastern part of Singapore, where he lives with two other family members, these toys fill 16 shelves in the living room and his bedroom.

Mr Goh, who attended a four-day Transformers convention in the city of Pasadena in California last week, declines to reveal how much he has spent on his hobby. But he thinks it is enough to buy a small car.

However, the bachelor would rather have the toys any day.

"They make me happy. I collect not to compete, but for my own amusement," he says. "Although Transformers are essentially alien robots, they have human-like characteristics and are very relatable."

The Transformers franchise was started in 1984 by two toy companies – Takara Tomy in Japan and Hasbro in the United States.

It features mainly two battling factions of transforming robots – the heroic Autobots and the evil Decepticons.

Mr Goh started collecting Transformers toys at age 19, during his army days.

In 2009, he bought his most expensive toy – a Victory Saber released in 1989 – for \$1,200 from another collector here.

"It's worth the money. Victory Saber is an Autobot that is considered to be the greatest swordsman in the universe.

"He is noble, strong and willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good."

His dad, retiree Goh Heng Siang, 63, says of his son's hobby: "Whenever visitors come to our flat, they always say there are more toys here than in a toy shop."

"I'm fine with it. The toys are my son's passion and I'm glad he gets enjoyment out of them."

Not every collector displays his prized



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RETIREE GOH HENG SIANG on his son Marcus Goh (left), 32, who has more than 1,600 Transformers figurines



Luxury watch salesman Don Tan, 32, who has 400 figurines, started collecting them at age 16.

toys, though.

Mr Don Tan, 32, a luxury watch salesman, keeps most of his 400 figurines in boxes in a five-room flat in Holland Village, where he lives with his mother.

His bedroom has thick curtains to block out sunlight – to prevent the colours of the boxes from fading.

Says Mr Tan, who is single: "For me, reading the text and admiring the artwork on the box is part of the whole toy experience."

He started collecting the robots, mainly vintage models released from 1984 to 1991, at age 16.

Back then, he also worked as a petrol kiosk attendant so he could afford the toys.

He estimates that he has spent \$200,000 on his whole collection.

"I didn't get many toys as a child. So once I could afford them, I started buying them," he says.

His mother, retiree Joy Tan, 60, says: "Collecting toys is a better habit than smoking, drinking or partying. I don't mind it as long as he keeps his collection tidy."

Another collector Yew Wei Chong, 35, has spent \$35,000 on his 437 figurines.

"The toys hold a lot of nostalgic feelings for me," says the fashion buyer in a department store. "In the 1980s, I'd rush home after school every day to record each

episode of the cartoon series."

Transformers toys are distributed here by toy company Hasbro Singapore.

The current line, featuring characters from the latest Transformers movie, was launched last month and is being sold at Toys 'R' Us and major department stores.

Prices range from \$6.90 to \$159.90, but sales figures are not available.

Older models can be found online or at speciality stores such as Robo Robo in Coleman Street and The Falcon's Hangar in Waterloo Street.

For example, a 60cm-tall Metroplex figurine, released last year, is selling at The Falcon's Hangar for \$280.

Last month, about 1,000 fans here attended the launch of the latest line of toys at the Toys 'R' Us store in Forum The Shopping Mall.

Some fans, such as Mr Charles Tan, 35, queued as early as seven hours before the event to get their hands on the new figurines.

The marketing consultant bought at least one each of more than 30 new figurines at the launch, spending more than \$1,000.

He says: "I want to create a diorama in my house showing the movie's final battle scene, which was so thrilling."

"That's why I need all the figurines."

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Malaysia Cha Bor gets love song in reply

Bryna Singh



She's a "Malaysian woman", he's a "Singaporean guy" – and, make no mistake, they're both not Korean. A tri-culture mash-up has been playing out, of late, online, in song.

Last month, Malaysian teenager Joyce Chu's song Malaysia Cha Bor hit YouTube, its title cheekily using the Hokkien term for "woman" to strike a humorous note while staking out the boundaries of South-east Asian identity.

Composed by Malaysian singer-songwriter Namewee, the song has the fair, doe-eyed and long-haired lass from Johor Baru singing about how she is often mistaken for a Korean girl.

"I come from JB, a place near Singapore I am a Malaysia cha bor (girl)," sings the 17-year-old while strumming the ukulele with a winsome smile. "I know kimchi tastes delicious, but I prefer having chendol and keropok."

The ditty soon went viral and has garnered more than five million views to date. The parodies that quickly sprung up included a Mat Salleh (Malay colloquialism for "Caucasian") version, a duet between a Malaysian and his expatriate counterpart on their respective girl-pulling woes; and a Singapore Cha Bor version, in which a young girl pleads not to be mistaken for a Japanese as she is "from the Lion City".

But, out of all these parodies, a Singapore Da Por's love song in reply to Chu's Malaysia Cha Bor has been pulling the most eyeballs.

YouTube user "Singapore da por" (da



PHOTOS: YOUTUBE



por is guy in Hokkien) sings in his parody, uploaded three weeks ago, that he "follows" Chu on Facebook and would love to profess his affection for her.

His rendition has since received more than 300,000 views, with encouraging comments from viewers who say they found the lyrics "sweet" and "creative".

Asked if he is smitten with Chu, Singapore da por – whose real name is Gary Chun – says his cover was done "just for fun".

"I feel that most Singaporean guys would wish to express their love for her, so I put that kind of feeling into the cover,"

Original and parody lyrics

MALAYSIA CHA BOR (GIRL)

Please stop saying Annyeong Annyeong Haseyo (hello in Korean)
I come from JB, a place near Singapore
I am a Malaysia cha bor
I know kimchi tastes delicious, but I prefer having chendol and keropok (crackers)
Thank you for "following" me every day and every night, although I know you are actually criticising me day and night, saying that my face, nose, chin, eyes and dimples are all fake, including my ears

SINGAPORE DA POR (BOY)

I want to say Annyeong Annyeong Haseyo
I come from SG, also known as Singapore
I am a Singapore da por
I want to ask you when you are coming to Singapore, I will take you out and have keropok with you
Thank you for accompanying me every day and every night, and I want to tell you every day about your face, nose, chin, eyes and dimples, I like them all, be they real or fake

Still, if he had a chance to meet Chu, what would he say to her?

"I really don't know. I would probably greet her jokingly with the opening line from her song: 'I feel like saying Annyeong Annyeong Haseyo (hello in Korean)'," he says with a laugh.

In the Malaysia Cha Bor video, Chu sweetly breathes lines such as: "I only know English, Mandarin and Malay, so please stop saying I'm from Korea."

She also takes digs at South Korea's plastic-surgery culture: "Thank you for 'following' me every day and every night, although I know you are actually criticising me, saying that my face, nose, chin, eyes and dimples are all fake, including my ears."

"I'm not singing this song to criticise (South Korean culture) or humiliate (South Koreans)," Chu said in another YouTube video uploaded a week after the hit song was posted and went viral.

"It's just my story. People always misunderstand that I'm a Korean. Maybe it's because of my dressing and make-up."

She was unable to respond to Sunday-Life's queries by press time.

Lycrist ShiLi Yap, 27, who is part of local pop-jazz singing duo ShiLi & Adi, says the song went viral because it is catchy and Chu is "visually appealing".

Namewee also successfully managed to draw in a large audience through the song lyrics, she adds.

"Korean culture was referenced in the song, which would appeal to a huge audience of K-pop lovers. At the same time, he blended K-pop with local flavour so the whole song was culturally relevant," says Yap.

While the song has attracted many positive comments, there have also been a fair number of brickbats.

Some YouTube viewers felt she was "acting cute", while others blasted the song lyrics.

Others such as Goodh Lee posted that Chu is "just another singer singing a song to put herself in controversy to get attention. Maybe this chick is implying that she's naturally good-looking while Korean girls are pretty because they have plastic surgery".

Singer-songwriter Namewee joined in the online fray to say: "If you think the lyrics suck, at least the music sounds nice mah. If you think the music sucks, at least Joyce is cute mah."

Malaysian girls should not feel that they are not as "pretty" as Korean girls, says Chu.

"That's totally untrue. You can also do it. Malaysia cha bor boleh," she adds, using the upbeat term for "can do" in Malay.