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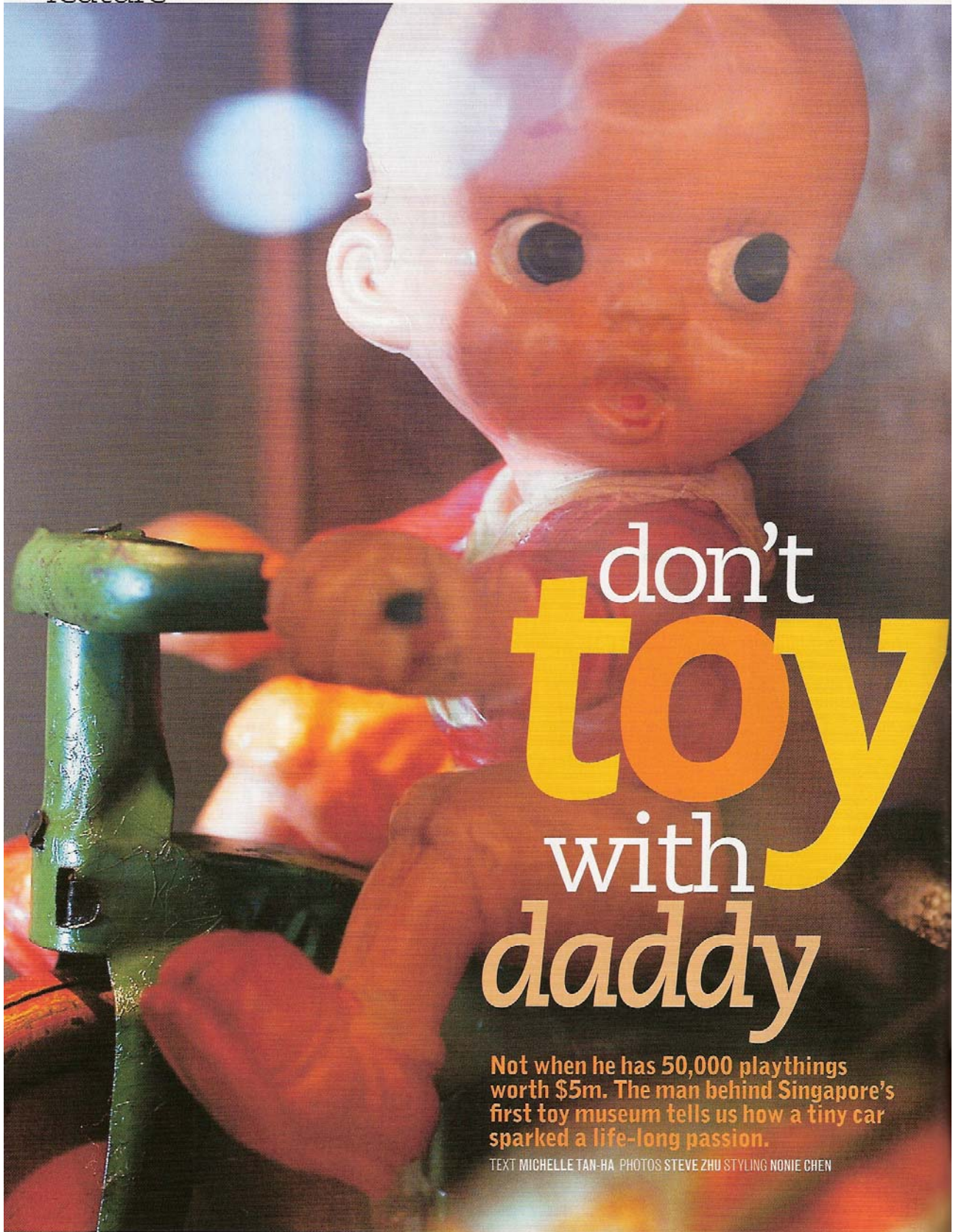
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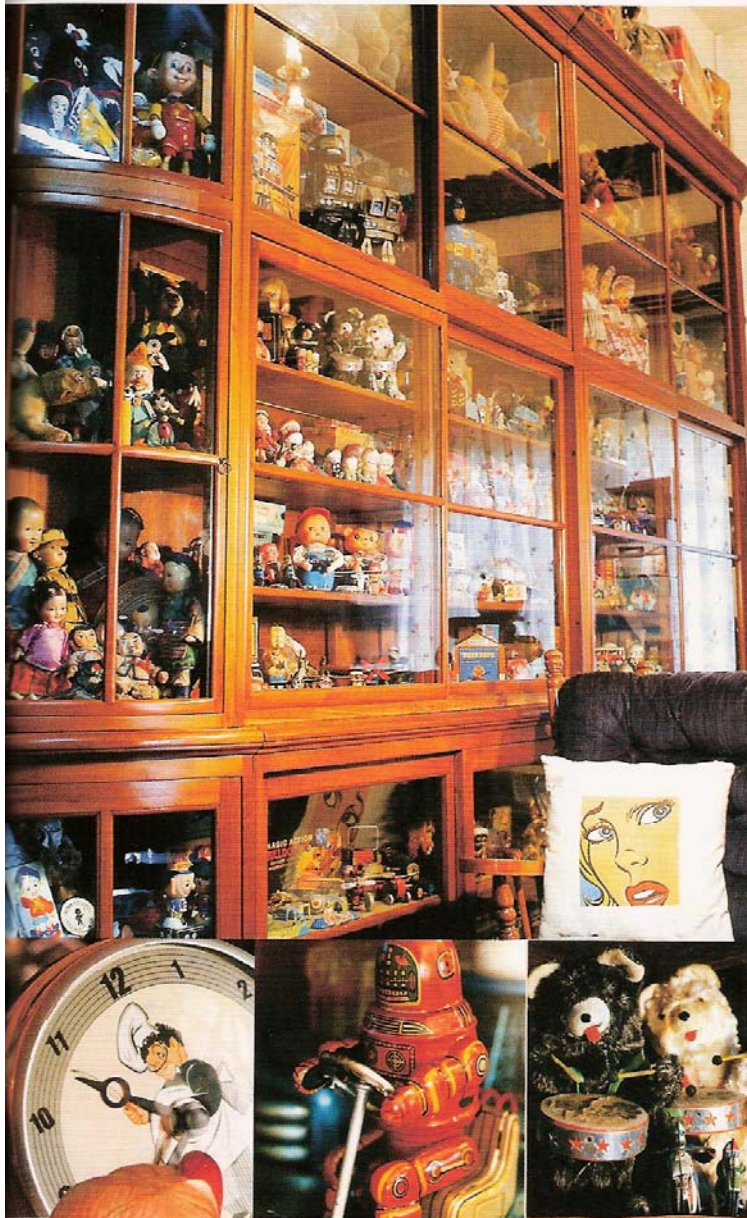
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don't
toy
with
daddy

Not when he has 50,000 playthings worth \$5m. The man behind Singapore's first toy museum tells us how a tiny car sparked a life-long passion.

TEXT MICHELLE TAN-HA PHOTOS STEVE ZHU STYLING NONIE CHEN



Step into Chang Yang Fa's house and you can't help but feel nostalgic. There's a Coca-Cola machine which used to dispense soda in bottles, and a jukebox, too. But "retro" is not the only word to describe the décor. Rather it is his collection of 4,000 toys that transports you into a time wrap.

They're everywhere — mechanical toys smiling at you from the numerous floor-to-ceiling wooden glass cabinets, and antique teddy bears perched on chairs — covering almost every square inch of flat space.

This is only the tip of his toy box — his 46,000 other precious possessions are kept in a warehouse. Some pieces are rotated between home and storage, except for particularly fragile pieces like the Acrobat Toy that lives permanently in his showcase. Soon, part of his titanic collection will be permanently housed in the first purpose-built museum for toys in the world.

So are the best ones kept at home? He laughs, "I have too many toys to have a favourite. Every toy is unique. How I treat my toys is like how I treat my own children; I just love everyone of them."

Love at first Matchbox

At six, he received his first toy — a Matchbox "No.73 Re-fueller" — which ignited his life-long passion. He recalls fondly using his *ang pow* money to buy and collect toys. "During those times, toys were much cheaper. So even with 50 cents, you could buy a toy."

Now 56 and the owner of an engineering consultancy company, Yang Fa sees toys as the embodiments of his twin loves: art and engineering. "For example, from an engineering point, the battery operated toys of the 1960s by the Japanese were very ingenious in their micro-motor design, which extended the range of action beyond just mechanical movement. From the artistic point, the design of the toy also has to be attractive," he says.

For a man who is big enough to share his treasures with the world, Yang Fa is coy when it comes to

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feature

revealing personal details. He welcomes us into his terrace house with open arms, but asks that we concentrate on his collection rather than his family.

He started collecting toys seriously 25 years ago, after he got married. "I think it was my interest in his toys that really encouraged him to collect seriously," says his wife, who feels that it's a healthy hobby. Yang Fa quips that she'll never be a golf widow because his hobby keeps him indoors with the family. In fact, she plays a supporting role, helping him with repairs and maintaining the database.

As his collection grew, so did his interest in setting up a toy museum. What first started as an interest in Western metal plate tin toys expanded to golliwogs and teddy bears; he realised that he had to showcase a collection that would appeal to the public, and not just what he liked. It has taken him more than 25 years to build his collection, which is now valued at over \$5 million.

More than half of his playthings were found in Singapore, in old shops or junk stores around Jalan Kayu, Changi and other areas whose shops serviced British officers during the colonial era. "There was a lot of redevelopment in areas like North Bridge Road, Redhill, Hill Street in the late 1960s and 1970s. So during the course of redevelopment, a lot of shops and homes were resettled. As a result, many toys surfaced," he says.

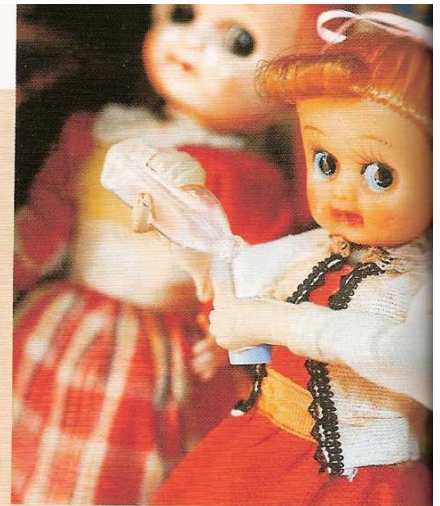
He started early and bought vintage toys cheaply, paying \$15 for an English toy that costs £300 today. "Frankly, I would not be able to afford my own collection today," he says. Many a time, he was also just "plain lucky". Once, he chanced upon a shop in Jurong that was selling old stock of rare Ultraman tanks.

You must have the "gut feel", he says. "To know what is good or not good, comes from years of experience." He digs out a box of embroidered dolls from China which had no value many years ago. He bought them at \$5 per box from the *karang guni* (junk trader) then and they're now worth \$120.

House of toys

Growing up, their three children always knew that daddy's collection was "not a cheap toy they can meddle with", says the missus. But he would still take the time to show them how certain toys worked or what they were about. Now aged between 12 and 22, the kids have their own interests and are too busy with their studies to help with his collection, says Yang Fa.

Just as toys have helped to his family to bond, he hopes the toy museum will help families bridge the generation gap. "A toy is like a snapshot of that time as it reflects the



history of man in that moment," he says, explaining that Japanese airship toys were made in the 1920s, when airships were all the rage then.

Toys also reflect the prevailing prejudices or misconceptions of a certain period, he says. For instance, "Chinese Must-Go", is a cap pistol toy, which shows the Westerner kicking a Chinese man with pig tails. The trigger of the gun is connected to the mouth (the cap) of the Chinese Man. It's a reminder of an era in the late 19th century where the Chinese were looked upon with suspicion.

Generations after they've been cast aside, found and now prized, toys continue to teach valuable lessons about life. And Yang Fa, as a pop culture historian of sorts, knows his mission. "In a subtle way, through toys, you can show the attitudes of people to other people, and be made aware of the responsibility we all have towards others." ■■■



MOMENTS OF MAGIC

Located at 26 Seah Street, the MINT Museum of Toys is likely to open its doors in January 2006. The acronym stands for Moment of Imagination and Nostalgia with Toys, and also describes the pristine state that most of them are in.

Owner Chang Yang Fa says, "MINT appeals to the child in every one of us. For a split moment of nostalgia, to bring you back in time and to bring a smile to your face."

It has taken him 10 years and \$2 million to realise his dream of Singapore's first toy museum. On display will be 10,000 to 20,000 toys made from the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century, from more than 25 countries.

"Before the 1970s, toys reflected the designs and production methods typical of the country of origin, like metal tin plate toys from Germany or plastic toys from Hong Kong. After 1970s, toys became international in nature. For example, toys could be designed in Japan but made in China. So you can get the same Barbie doll anywhere. Toys should be a reflection of that particular country, culture and tradition," he says.

Unlike the toy museums he has visited all over the world, MINT will be housed in a brand new five-storey building with special effects — like visual images projected on the display case, to enhance the whole experience. While the display is static, he plans to have more interactivity, screen films of the workings of toys and include other related material in the future.

Admission fees and opening hours could not be confirmed at press time. There's also a MINT shop and MINT café within the same building.