

A person is silhouetted against a night cityscape, sitting on the thick trunk of a large tree. The city lights are visible in the background, creating a warm glow. The person is looking out over the city.

WALKING THE SHORES OF IDENTITY

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Left

Douglas Young, co founder of G.O.D

Identity is a shoreline. It's the place where contrasting values and ways of life intersect, clash and co-exist. Waves of the new, the uncertain and the future engulf and recede against the comforts of the past and the traditional.

Douglas Young, founder and creative force behind Hong Kong's iconic lifestyle brand Goods of Desire (G.O.D), has long been fascinated by the shifting sands of Hong Kong's identity.

18 years after handover, Douglas shares his thoughts on Hong Kong's identity within Chinese culture and the global community, and where a walk along its shoreline may lead.

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WHAT QUESTIONS IS HONG KONG ASKING ABOUT ITS IDENTITY?

The younger generation of Hong Kong really wants to find a reason for Hong Kong "to be". [They're asking] "Who are we?"

Asia [wasn't] so prosperous [in the past]. China used to be very backward and Hong Kong has always ruled the roost. Now all these other places seem to be overtaking us. What is our future?

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE HONG KONG FACES WITH REGARDS TO ITS IDENTITY?

This issue of Chinese-ness and Western-ness. [Consider] even the language: should English be the official language? Should it be Chinese? If it's Chinese, should it be Cantonese or should it be Mandarin? You know, these are the cultural dilemmas we're facing.

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?

I think that we should retain our Cantonese dialect.

SO HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING PART OF THE WIDER CHINESE CULTURE?

I feel proud of my Chinese roots, but that doesn't mean I'm not a proud Hongkonger.

If I was an American you could be a proud New Yorker, but you could also be a proud American. I don't see why we have to choose between the two.

As a designer, I sometimes switch from being a Hongkonger to embracing the greater Chinese culture.

[It's important] that we are able to identify as being from Hong Kong specifically because there are other cities in China, like Shanghai, like Beijing [and] other metropolitan areas, that have equal rights to lay claim to the main Chinese [identity].

I think it's important to also maintain a sense of regionalism, because it is the regionalism part that sets us apart from other cities.

WHAT SETS HONG KONG APART FROM THE REST OF CHINA?

Our history is completely different. Hong Kong began as a fishing village. 150 years ago it was colonised by the British and left by the British in 1997. Now we are a semi-autonomous region. That leaves us with a sense of history and a sense of identity that is different from the rest of China.

CULTURALLY, HOW CAN HONG KONG FIT IN WITH THE REST OF CHINA AND MAINTAIN ITS SENSE OF IDENTITY?

Hong Kong is definitely a city within China. I think politically there's no doubt about that. In functional, practical terms, there's no other way we can survive without being a part of China.

Shanghai will probably become the financial hub one day - perhaps in our lifetime - because that is definitely the intention the mainland government has. Beijing is the political hub. It is the Washington D.C. of China.

Hong Kong will have to find a role that doesn't contradict with these two other major cities.

Hong Kong is about culture. We have very strong claims to the title of "cultural hub", because we're so central [geographically in Asia]. We're so international. English is readily spoken, there's a clear rule of law and artistic rights, we have freedom of expression and free flow of media. We're very open [and] we've always been very liberated as a society.



G.O.D. Sai Kung store



Inspired by G.O.D's Yaumatei signature print, this multi-coloured mural is painted outside the wall of G.O.D's Central Hollywood store

The reason I have this particular vision ... for Hong Kong ... [is] I realised there are certain features of Hong Kong which give it advantages over the rest of the world. I think the average Hong Kong person may not see this if [they] have not been elsewhere, or [are] not so [internationally] connected. They may not appreciate our strengths.

OTHER REGIONS IN CHINA ALSO HAVE THEIR OWN CULTURES. HOW WOULD HONG KONG AS A CULTURAL HUB CONTRIBUTE TO GREATER CHINA DIFFERENTLY?

Hong Kong can be a showcase for Chinese culture.

The world is yearning for some sort of update of Chinese culture from this part of the world.

We are laying claim to being so advanced, full of history and now we're apparently the richest nation with the highest GDP in the world, overtaking America. Financially, economically, we seem to have made it.

But culturally ...? What about soft power? What brands have we produced that are world-leading? What movies? What fashion designers? What music? What contemporary literature? What sort of cultural contributions are we making? There aren't any yet and maybe this is the birth of a great nation.

Even if you wind back 100 years when America first took off, soft power came very slowly.

I think the time has come to start building soft power and to launch soft power you need a platform. Hong Kong could be that platform.

HONG KONG IS STILL A FINANCIAL CENTRE. DOES IT WANT TO EMBRACE BEING A "CULTURAL HUB" INSTEAD?

I don't think [so] consciously. It's something that I dream about privately. It's not the official stance

of the government, so I don't think a lot of Hong Kong people would consider it.

HOW DOES HONG KONG FEEL ABOUT CHINESE TRADITIONS AND CULTURE?

I think the East, especially in Hong Kong where we're so used to being a throwaway society, maybe a "nouveau riche" society, we are not so proud of our past.

We tend to reject anything that suggests that we're not modern, or that we come from humble beginnings, and so we are quite keen to adopt things that are brand spanking new, or grand, or modern.

The legacy of Western civilisation is the ability to pass traditions on from generation to generation, with each generation adding a touch of themselves and allowing it to evolve.

In Hong Kong ... we have a lot of traditions, but we never try to ... evolve the traditions along with the evolution of the rest of the world [or our society].

So when it comes to our traditions ... we tend to accept they have to be gaudy, they have to be old, they have to be out of date and they have to be kitsch.

So I think there is no interest in the traditions because we don't have this habit of updating our traditions ... or, if we try to modernise it, it's always done very cheesily.

If the current generation considers that of our traditions, think about the future generations.

They will think [the traditions] are completely irrelevant.

The youngsters of today are concerned with style and being cool. If traditional things are never stylish or cool, they will never use them ... If they stop using them, these things [traditions] will just go, so I'm trying to fight that.

HOW IS STYLE AND TASTE UNIVERSAL?

What I would consider tasteful is something that even from a Western [or international] point of view is [considered] stylish.

It is possible for Eastern traditions to be stylish. Look at the Japanese. [Their sense of aesthetic] is done in a way that to an international [audience] it is acceptable [and appreciated].

I think China needs to be modern and I think Hong Kong needs to be modern, but it doesn't mean being Western.

HOW DO AESTHETICS AFFECT THE PRACTICE OF A TRADITION, KEEPING IT ALIVE?

If the aesthetics [of traditions] are cheesy, people don't want to be associated with it.

It's not just Chinese New Year, which is the biggest of the Chinese festivals. Look at the Autumn Moon festival – the Chinese Halloween. All these traditional festivals are celebrated less, whereas in Hong Kong 10 / 20 years ago nobody would've heard of Halloween. Now it's a big thing. Why? Because people perceive it as trendy, fashionable, cool and it is. The young people love it. Chinese festivals are never cool.

Courage has always been [necessary to] the role of artists and creative people ... because those are the people who actually help society to move on. Without these people, society would be stagnant. It would not evolve. It is up to us creative people to point out what needs modifying what silly taboos need to be broken.



PROSPERITY glass plates

So what we're doing [at G.O.D] is showing people alternatives that they never thought could exist. The influences are from Chinese traditions, but it's done in a way I think that's in keeping with world aesthetics.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON HOW YOUR WORK RELATES TO HONG KONG AND CHINESE IDENTITY?

Part of my work is trying to identify what is Chinese culture, or Hong Kong culture.

Unlike Western culture, there isn't a lot of pre-fabricated material available in the form of books or research. A lot of Hong Kong's traditions are sort of "hand-me-down" [traditions] through oral [history] ... and [have been] thrown away.

[So] actually to distill what is Chinese culture requires a lot of fieldwork, going out and talking to people about their past, maybe collecting some of their artifacts, taking photographs, making recordings and doing our own research.

By contrast, Western designers could probably spend their whole time in the library or on the computer researching what other academics have already done.

In China we're still discovering a lot of things. I think that's very exciting because it's up to the current researchers to define what is "heritage" for future [generations] and what we do will be the primer for future designers.

So I find that very exciting, but actually it's a lot of work because we are pioneering [this]. We actually have to construct paths and roads for future generations.

So my work consists of a lot of research and coming up with new ways to do things that are highly experimental. Then [I have to] actually persuade people to make [the products] for me and persuade customers to buy them too. [laughs]

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WHAT'S BEEN A RISKY AND SURPRISING EXPERIMENT FOR YOU?

Actually, the whole of G.O.D. has been risky and surprising.

I wanted to be more confident as a Hong Kong person, so I've always been interested to explore more of my history, more of my roots, [especially] so that when I have overseas visitors I can explain to them in the same way that my British counterparts [explain their history]. [They] are always so confident about their history. I wanted to feel that, so I'm doing [this] to give myself that sense of confidence.

To find that I can make a business out of it was very surprising, because [this] is a very personal sort of interest.

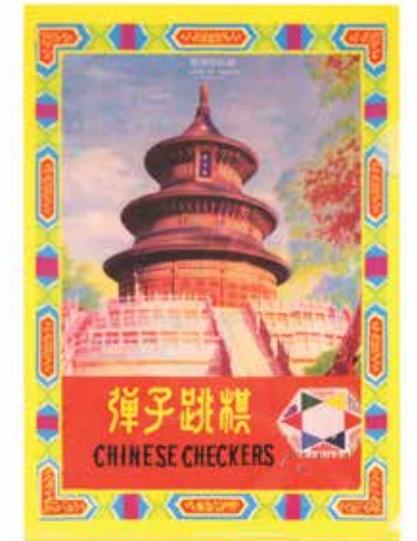
In our local Cantonese dialect our name G.O.D means "to live better", because it phonetically resembles the characters 住好啲 (zhù hǎo di).

[So when we started in 1996], this was already something people found unusual because the name is so colloquially Chinese. I'm not hiding that I'm from Hong Kong. We have a lot of brands from Hong Kong and yet they would have very Western-sounding names, or the aesthetics are very Western.

[Whilst] we go out of our way to tell people, "Hey, we're from Hong Kong!"

Even in the beginning I wasn't sure that was going to work because people kept telling us that Hong Kong people actually don't want Hong Kong stuff. They want something Western, or imported. I think that's a colonial mindset, because during the colonial era we were educated to consider what's local to be inferior ... anything local ... is junk.

So we have that mindset, but actually the fact that we were able to sustain [the business] and survive



Chinese Checkers A4 file folder

despite being so ... Hong Kong is in itself also a surprise.

IN CANTONESE DIALECT, G.O.D (ZHŪ HǎO DÌ) MEANS “LIVE BETTER”. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON WHAT “LIVE BETTER” MEANS?

The meaning is not exactly conveyed in English because ‘zhū hǎo dì’ literally means “live better”, but actually has a sense of aspiration. It’s not just materially to live better, but to improve yourself and that suggests that it’s not about class.

Some of the things we do are ... I wouldn’t say “shocking”, but provocative. We do offend people and we have been arrested for some of our designs. So I guess courage is about carrying on, despite opposition, because you believe in something.

I think human beings are born to live a full life. They’re born to experience and to learn and to not waste time. So in Cantonese ‘zhū hǎo dì’ has those meanings.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE G.O.D (ZHŪ HǎO DÌ) AS A NAME?

I wanted something that was very Cantonese, very Hong Kong. I wanted something that was classless.

The brands that I admire the most, such as Levi’s Jeans, or Mini [the car] are really classless. If you own a Swatch Watch [for example], it’s not because you can’t afford a Rolex. It’s because you believe in the Swatch ethos and it’s the same with Levi’s or Minis. The best brands span social boundaries.

I think also the best brands have to have a sense of their nationality. Take Levi’s. It’s a brand that is quintessentially American and that’s because it was founded in San Francisco. Minis are so British, so what you’re buying is not just a Mini car. You’re also buying that sense of British-ness.

If you were to apply the same logic to a Hong Kong brand, you’ve got to have the sense of classlessness and of Hong Kong-ness.

HOW HAS RUNNING G.O.D PERSONALLY CHANGED YOU?

I’ve become a lot more confident as a Hong Kong person. I remember when I was at boarding school in the U.K. I used to be teased ... I used to be the Chinaman ... [whose culture has] ... nothing original [or has] nothing to match British history and culture ... all that sort of thing. Now I feel like I can hold my head high.

I’m also very grateful for my fans and customers. We’re not a huge company, but we do have a cult following maybe. So ... that’s given me a lot of daily encouragement.

WHAT’S THE MOST SURPRISING THING ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY?

I’m still being surprised by this world [and] surprised by my customers’ decisions. I still find my customers difficult to predict. I find myself quite difficult to predict. I’m somehow seeing this world [like I did] when [it] all started, as though all this experience [I’ve gained over time] doesn’t matter.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A YOUNGER YOU?

I wish I bought property [Laughs]. The rent in Hong Kong is so high. Maybe if I owned my property I wouldn’t have to worry about rent any more.

WHAT DOES COURAGE MEAN TO YOU?

Some of the things we do are ... I wouldn’t say “shocking”, but provocative. We do offend people and we have been arrested for some of our designs. So I guess courage is about carrying on, despite opposition, because you believe in

something.

The other thing about courage is that ... it is absolutely necessary for any person who wants to be in the creative industry.

It's always been [necessary to] the role of artists and creative people ... because those are the people who actually help society to move on. Without these people, society would be stagnant. It would not evolve. It is up to us creative people to point out what needs modifying and what silly taboos need to be broken.

And we break these taboos with our work and because it's a taboo it's shocking or provocative, but if you look back at history the more innovative the more shocking it is at the time. [However], over time it becomes normal. It becomes mainstream. We need to realise that we need to go through that shock. It's impossible to adopt an attitude without some degree of offence. Some people will [always] prefer the status quo. It's inevitable.

WHAT DID YOU HAVE TO GIVE UP?

Um ... I had to give up, possibly, my other hobbies [Laughs]. I feel like I need to be more focused. There are so many avenues in life one could explore, but then again if one has to achieve something one has to put almost all of one's eggs into one basket.

HOW DO YOU HOPE TO INFLUENCE THE FUTURE OF HONG KONG?

I hope to be a patron to future generations of creative people. I think we ALL have that capacity. We can all focus more on local designers, local artists, local brands, local cooks, local music, local everything ... rather than trying to show-off with our foreign made stuff.

I want to promote a sense of supporting ourselves.

We need to be able to support ourselves because nobody else will. I think that's something we want to have in Hong Kong. The sense of ... pride, of being who we are.

ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE?

If you look at a very long-term view, then I am glad I'm in this part of the world because Asia is rising within our lifetimes. •

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Influential political scientist and scholar, Joseph Nye first coined the term “soft power” in the 1980s. According to Nye, a country’s “culture (in places where it is attractive to others)” is one of three elements upon which a country’s soft power rests. The other two elements are “its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority).”

In 2014, China ranked 19 in Monocle Magazine’s “Soft Power” survey. The top three countries were the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom respectively.