

letter from the editor

The six gorgeous models featured in this month's fashion shoot were – not only a joy to work with but – a very real reminder of how utterly exciting Christmas can be for anyone who believes in Santa. There was lots of talk about what to ask for for Christmas and palpable anticipation as to whether or not Santa would deem them good or bad.



As a parent of two sprightly little people I understand implicitly the link between "boredom" and behaviour. To help you avoid any mention of the B word this festive season we have dedicated much column space to how to entertain your kids over the coming months – Freya Simpson Giles has a swag of suggestions in her article on page 34; our recipe page has some great ideas for cookie decorating parties and our regular What's On section is jam packed!

For many readers staying in Hong Kong over the Christmas period, family will be flying in from all over the globe. Which begs the question, "What do you do if the cousins don't get along?" Our Christmas Spirit article on page 26 tackles this issue and is full of useful advice on how to create a fairy tale Christmas everyone will enjoy.

It's a reasonable assumption that not everyone gets as excited over Christmas stationery as I do – but if you do like your gifts to look super stylish then check out this month's shopping page. We have uncovered some of the cutest gift tags in town. If you are stuck for gift ideas we also have some great suggestions, on page 54, for truly unique Hong Kong presents.

This month we also introduce a new series of articles on everyday experts – mums whose business inspiration has been their children. Our first featured mums, Lauren Cooper and Crystal Kwok, have designed and produced the Culture Cubs DVD – a fabulous product to help children learn Mandarin.

The *Playtimes* team had a lot of fun bringing you this issue. With almost every story filled with ideas on how to make the festive season fun it was hard not to. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we did bringing it together!

Sarah

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everyday experts



Welcome to the first
in a series of articles
about Mums whose
business inspiration
is motherhood.

Mandarin Made Fun

Playtimes exclusive: How two Hong Kong mums
turned their frustration into a product that can
help children, everywhere, become bilingual!

When Lauren Cooper first arrived in Hong Kong five years ago she – and her family – embraced the opportunity to learn about a new culture. Part of that enthusiasm was for the chance for her kids to learn a new language.

“My children were both learning Mandarin at school and I wanted to be able reinforce what they were learning in the home environment,” she said.

“I tried turning Disney DVD movies and cable TV onto the Mandarin speaking channels – but after talking to the kids’ Mandarin teachers I soon learned that the movies and TV would be full of expressions too difficult for beginners – and lots of slang.”

A chance meeting with Crystal Kwok – who was also lamenting the strict school-room format of many of the extra curricular Mandarin schools in Hong Kong – and the idea of a fun Mandarin learning aid was hatched.

Two years – and a lot of hard work – later and the mums’ first “Culture Cubs” DVD is about to be launched.



Produced entirely in Hong Kong, the 30 minute show follows the adventures of Huckleberry, an American teddy bear, and Xiao Long, a Chinese Kung Fu panda, as they play together in a bilingual world.

While both Lauren and Crystal have a film and television background (Lauren as a television producer in America and Crystal as a filmmaker, actress and talk show host in Hong Kong),

According to Crystal and Lauren the DVD was produced on a tiny budget only possible because of the many favours they received from people and local businesses who believed in their project.

they agree that the overriding inspiration for the program came from their children – they have five between them.

“Our experience as mothers was fundamental to the whole process,” said Crystal.

“We wanted the show to be fun for kids. Children learn so much better when they are enjoying themselves. That said, it was really important that the show also be a credible education tool as well.”

The mums engaged a native Mandarin speaking education consultant to advise on, and check, the Mandarin components of the DVD.

“We had to re-shoot a couple of scenes because one of our non-native Mandarin speakers didn’t get the tones a hundred per cent correct,” said Crystal. “It was a hassle at the time to redo it – but a meticulous attention to tone was important to ensuring that viewers learn how to pronounce properly.”

Evidence that the DVD was produced by mums is also obvious from the DVD soundtrack – no irritating Teletubbie-like whining at all. The mums employed Hong Kong pop star Joyce Lee to write and perform some of the songs used in the DVD.

As well as featuring scenes performed by local, international Hong Kong children the DVD also features animation, dance, art, word games and kung fu. The theme of the first DVD is “Time to Eat” however the mums envisage that it will be the first in a series of quarterly releases, which feature the Culture Cubs in a range of everyday activities.

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on a tiny budget only possible because of the many favours they received from people and local businesses who believed in their project.

“We had a tiny budget compared to most films or television shows, so we were constantly looking for the most cost effective way to operate. Once people found out that this was not a big commercial project and that we were truly trying to fill a gap in the market for a fun language-learning tool – and that kids would be the main beneficiaries – then people went out of their way to help us.”

The Culture Cubs DVD comes with flashcards which can be used for playing Snap, but that also have the additional benefit of helping children recognize words in both Mandarin and English. It also includes a cute clip-on-bear, Mandarin tattoos and stickers featuring the animated characters.

The DVD has undergone extensive market testing with possibly the mums’ toughest target market – their own five children. Thankfully the DVD got a resounding stamp of approval.

Although, according to Lauren, after two years of watching the first episode come to life their kids are, understandably, desperate for the next installment!

Culture Cubs is available at Toys Club, and the Borrett Road Market from December. **DI**

