



Tom Tang, left, and Ma Chunfu, far left, launched Betelnut in 2005.

PHOTOS: CATHERINE SHU, TAIPEI TIMES, AND COURTESY OF BETELNUT

Betelnut buzz

Betelnut T-shirt brand pays homage to Taiwanese culture with a satirical — but affectionate — twist

BY CATHERINE SHU
STAFF REPORTER

Betelnut (檳榔), a T-shirt brand that pays cheeky homage to Taiwanese culture, was partly inspired by a trip to California.

After co-founder Tom Tang (湯忠謙) graduated from art school, he worked in San Francisco for several months. The graphic designer was impressed by the effort he saw colleagues investing in side projects.

"They spent a lot of time developing their own products and brands. When I got back to Taiwan, I wondered how we could do the same thing, but with a Taiwanese take," says Tang.

"I had to think about what symbolized life in Taiwan. One day I was walking down the street and I thought, 'What do we have a lot of? Betelnut stands!'" he says. "They don't have a positive connotation, but we thought we could give them our own twist and turn it into a T-shirt brand."

Betelnut was launched in 2005 by Tang and Ma Chunfu (馬君輔). Its T-shirts, hats and canvas bags are sold at Betelnut's Ximending store in Red House Theater (西門紅樓).

The brand's first T-shirt was created by Sandy Chen (陳芝螢), Tang's wife, and is still a top seller. It features a squirrel hugging a betelnut to its chest while one huge, dilated pupil stares out.

"She figured everyone thinks of squirrels as searching for acorns, but why not picture one with a betelnut instead?" says Tang.

Other bestsellers include a series called Develop a Good Habit (養成好習慣) by illustrator Kuo Yenting (郭彥庭) of brand Uglyfamily (www.wretch.cc/blog/uglyfamily). Each T-shirt is inspired by cheerful illustrations of students that appeared on Taiwanese elementary school notebooks in the 1980s — only in Kuo's decidedly unwholesome versions, the students are smoking, beating each other up and, yes, chewing betelnut.

"Kids are growing up faster nowadays and these T-shirts address that," says Tang.

"The illustrations are something that is unique to Taiwanese culture and part of our collective memory," adds Ma. "You don't see these illustrations on notebooks any more, but anyone who grew up here still recognizes the style instantly."

Other Betelnut T-shirts go even further in testing the bounds of propriety. A new design that made its debut at Taiwan Designers' Week (台灣設計師週) last month tweaks Hello Kitty's innocent image by showing the iconic cat on her knees in front of Mickey Mouse, whose trademark red shorts are pulled down around his ankles.

"We wanted to show the design to women first and see what they thought," says Ma. "It isn't meant to be misogynistic. For one thing, Hello Kitty doesn't have a mouth, so she can't give blowjobs. And as you can see, she has a giant pair of scissors hidden by her side."

"I think for the most part our female customers have been okay with it, but to be honest, I think some guys have been unsettled by the imagery," says Ma. "Some customers have said we should put this design on underpants instead of T-shirts."

The ill-fated Hello Kitty/Mickey Mouse tryst is part of a series called Unblessed Love (不被祝福的愛) that features popular comic characters and other cultural icons in passionate embraces.

The duos include Doraemon, the blue time-traveling robot cat, and Nobita, his schoolboy buddy; Spiderman and his Uncle Ben; Ken Washio and sidekick Joe Asakura from Japanese manga series *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman*; Batman and Robin; and former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九).

Unblessed Love was inspired by a 2007 *New York Times* article titled "When a Kiss Isn't Just a Kiss" about Alfred Eisenstaedt's famous photograph of a sailor and nurse embracing in Times Square on Aug. 14, 1945 during celebrations to mark the surrender of Japan to the Allies.

Despite the somewhat homoerotic nature of the lip locks and full-body hugs in the Unblessed Love series, their designer says the embraces aren't necessarily meant to be sexual.

"It's just about people who are in extremely intense relationships," says Ma. "For example, Peter Parker was never able to tell his uncle that he was Spiderman before his uncle's murder and it haunted him. I've given the two of them an alternate ending, one where Uncle Ben finds out his nephew's secret before he dies."

"Doraemon has to return to the 22nd century and can't always be with Nobita, but they love each other a lot and there is a lot of longing there," adds Ma. "And A-bian and Ma are seen as polar opposites, but they've complemented each other throughout their political careers. Each wouldn't be who they are without the other."

Betelnut comes out with new styles on a regular basis. Designs riff on different types of artwork, street style and other Taiwanese cultural motifs.

"Our T-shirts aren't just T-shirts. They always have a story behind them or something else that is interesting. It's not just a piece of clothing," says Ma.



STORE NOTES:

BETELNUT (檳榔)

ADDRESS: Red House Theater (西門紅樓), 10 Chengdu Rd, Taipei City (台北市成都路10號)

OPEN: Sundays to Tuesdays from 2pm to 9:30pm, Fridays and Saturdays from 2pm to 10pm

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