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Ang Pow Collecting

When the Cover, not the Content, is the Better Gift

Genevieve V. A. Gee

1E8 Village Grove Condominium
Lorong F, Jalan Stutong, BDC
Kuching 93350, Sarawak, Malaysia

One of the highlights of Chinese New Year celebrations, especially among younger family members, is the red packet (more popularly known as Ang pow) received from elders. For most who receive the packet, the excitement lies on the surprise waiting inside. But to some folks, it's the envelope itself that brings joy and enthusiasm or sometimes dismay when its usage has rendered signs of damage to a potentially valuable addition to an Ang pow collection.

A Brief History

The Chinese tradition of Ang pow giving can be traced as far back as the Han Dynasty (202 BC - 221 AD), when it started as a token gift believed to bless and protect the receiver from evil spirits and illnesses. The token was forged with inscriptions connoting good health, longevity, prosperity and many other well wishes. Over time, the token was replaced by a gift of real coins (made with holes in the past) threaded together with a red string. To the Chinese, red is a colour associated with good fortune and happiness. The red string in the gift is believed to bring good luck to the recipient, and the money is meant to ward off evil spirits. As the practice of money gifting became an integral part of the Chinese culture, it had also gone through changes over the dynasties – from the earlier token form to threaded real coins, coins in red pouches, to coins wrapped in red paper that subsequently became today's red packet. As values of coins and minting process changed with time, and technologies in paper printing advanced, bank notes (usually preferred new and crisp) and red envelopes have become essential in the customary monetary gift giving.

Thanks to new technologies and innovations in paper printing, along with dynamic creativity, every year, we see increasingly better Ang pows from a growing number of companies, institutions and organisations who have taken on the red packet as part of their Chinese New Year promotional programs. Ang pows have become, not only as a tool to promote public awareness on a company, brand or a product line, but also as a business strategy to boost sales through redemption for a minimum purchase, with a few retailers kicking it up a notch by releasing different designs in stages (weekly or biweekly) during the festive season. With a vast assortment of awe-inspiring pieces issued every year, it's a small wonder the Ang pow has become a hot collectible item.

Why Collect Ang Pows?

Here, we take a look at what motivates senior and new collectors in this increasingly gaining popularity hobby.

Never failing to smile at the sight of Ang pows, Kian Beng Koh, who has been in this hobby since 2015, collects them because collecting runs in his family. Prior to his fascination with Ang pows, he used to collect stamps, banknotes and coins, which were family shared interest. It was through knowing that a colleague's wife collected Ang pows that inspired him to take up the hobby.

For Sandra Koh who has been in this hobby for almost 15 years, it is the beauty in Ang pows that captivates her. She is drawn to colourful packets with fancy designs, especially sets that make a nice whole picture when pieced together. Materials used in printing red packets also fascinate her. She has in her collection Ang pows made from a variety of materials, including high quality rubbery or soft feel paper, fabric, leatherette, and real leather.

Popular for her motivating and generous online Ang pow giveaway lucky draws, Katherina Lee collects red packets not just for their designs but also for the quality and texture of the materials used to print them. For her, each and every piece of Ang pow is a work of art. Joining a number of online groups sharing the same interest has been influential to her being active in the hobby.

When she was a kid, Tan Mei Chin's excitement was with the gift she would get inside an Ang pow. The object of excitement however changed in 2003, when she got smitten by a Winnie-the-Pooh- inspired Ang pow she encountered during her freshman year in university. That marked the beginning of her getting hooked into the hobby of collecting Ang pows. Her initial interest on cartoon character-themed Ang pows later broadened to include those issued by banks, insurance agencies, as well as those that bear the Chinese zodiac animals.

For newcomer Goh Sock Keng, she takes delight in the priceless gift that comes with the red coloured packet - the blessings of luck, happiness and prosperity. For her, Ang pows are simply beautiful and colourful. She has eyes for designs that closely identifies with the Chinese New Year, like the Chinese auspicious words and greetings. The fact that some beautiful Ang pows can be obtained free from companies, especially banks; or through company online giveaway contests; as well as through exchange with members from numerous groups on social media, are for her, highly motivating.

A Medley of Sizes

Ang pows are very diverse – they come in different sizes, shapes, colours (despite being referred to as the 'red' packet), designs, motifs, themes, materials and forms. Presented here are a few representatives of the millions of Ang pows that are seen around.

Red packets come in varying sizes, from small to really large ones. A few companies, particularly in the banking, financial and credit services, issue long and short versions of the same design, e.g., Public Bank, UBS, Credit Suisse, etc. It is surprising to know that some companies even follow auspicious measurements in the design of their Ang pows.



A Variety of Shapes

Integrating technology developments in paper printing and cutting to produce Ang pows has yielded exquisitely designed and cut-out pieces, which are so unlike the square and rectangular earlier versions. We now see a great many red packets taking the shapes of items associated with Chinese New Year celebrations. Below are some of the scores of beautifully designed and shaped Ang pows.



Temari-themed, with embroidery details from Hong Kong Times Square, 2021



Temple-inspired, from China Construction Bank, 2021



Colourful Koi Carps, from Harbour City, Hong Kong, 2021



Fortune Cats. from UBS, 2021



Purse-shaped, from KWC, 2019



Chinese Trinket Boxes, from H&L Supermarket, 2021



Lion Dance, from Lego, Mid Valley Megamall, The Mall Mid Valley Southkey and HSBC, 2020



Resembling bubble tea drinks with carrying cases, from HiCaa, 2021

In general, collectors decide on Ang pows to add to their collection based on designs, motifs or themes of interest. Company name or logo and sometimes official mascots or characters are always a requisite in the design of red packets to be given away. Designs can range from simple to elaborate, with Chinese New Year celebrations, culture and nature as the most common themes. Motifs are wide-ranging, from auspicious words and greetings, deities, New Year related items (e.g., lantern, knots, New Year eve's dinner food, firecrackers, cheongsam, etc.), New Year activities (e.g., family reunion, reunion dinner, lion dance, open house, etc.), lunar animals, mythical beasts such as phoenix and dragons, and other nature-inspired subjects such as sceneries, flowers, birds, butterflies, fish and many others. Diversity in designs are illustrated below.

'Advertisement' Ang pows

Reaching the mass public, Ang pows can be potentially useful in promoting awareness on a company, a brand or a product. The following Ang pows illustrate designs where the issuing company takes prominence.



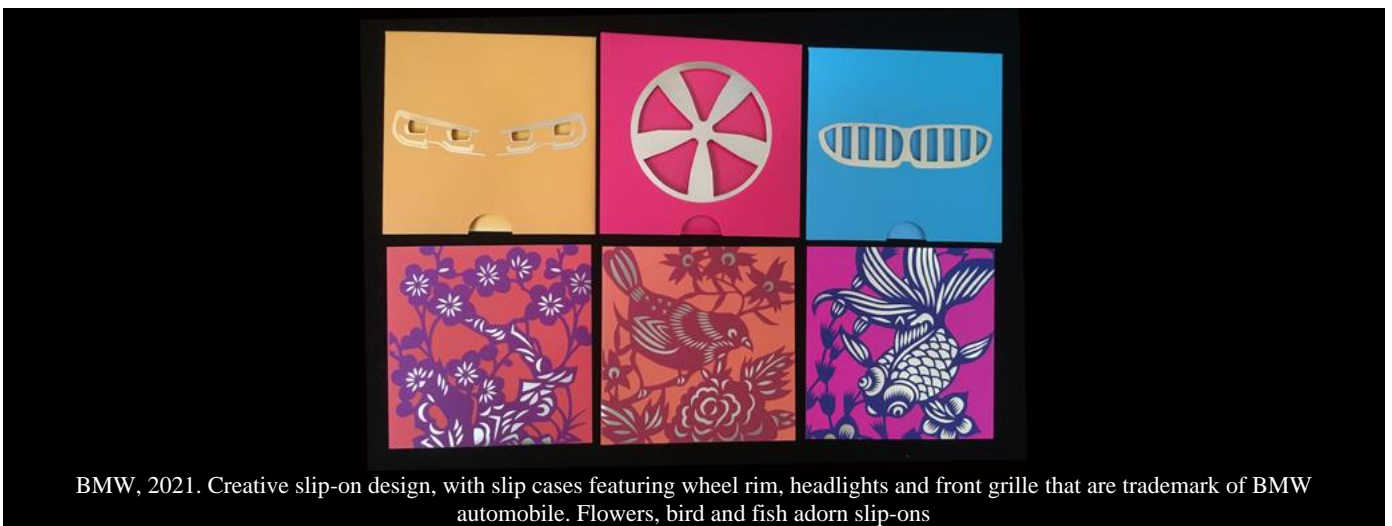
Mercedes Benz, 2021. Company logo centrally placed in the design. It comes with a QR code, which, when scanned, takes one to the company website



Mini Cooper, 2021. Simple designed set with company's iconic small car taking centre stage



Bosch, 2021. Chinese New Year-themed composite pair includes two main products bearing company logo



BMW, 2021. Creative slip-on design, with slip cases featuring wheel rim, headlights and front grille that are trademark of BMW automobile. Flowers, bird and fish adorn slip-ons



DBS and POSB, 2020. Chinese New Year-themed from both DBS owned banks, designed with blooming flowers as background to DBS' boy and girl mascots Xing and Jaan, and POSB's squirrel mascot Smiley. They can be upcycled into an origami lantern by cutting out and following patterns located inside envelopes. Build instructions available on DBS website



ToysRUs, 2020. Toy retail company's Ang pow has golden coins and ingot motifs, and features mascot Geoffrey the Giraffe, with two rats representing 2020's zodiac animals



M&M's, 2020. Chocolate company's characters, Mr. Red (Blustery Schemer) and Mr. Yellow (Dullard) are central in the design of this pair

A Touch of Chinese Culture and Tradition

Chinese auspicious words, greetings and Deities are widely used in Ang pow designs. Examples of such Ang pows are illustrated below.



Sarawak Energy, 2021. The five piece set carry auspicious words and greetings for the new year. Calligraphy is striking in front of subdued illustrations of items symbolic of Spring Festival



LG Brand Shop, 2021. Chūn, Chinese for spring, is focal in this design. Chinese New Year is closely associated with spring, as it starts at its onset, hence its reference as Spring Festival



Premier Tissue, 2021. God of Wealth is a key feature, with the use of flower and golden ingot motifs

Chinese New Year associated activities and objects are popular decorative features in red packets. Festive activities include family get-together, reunion dinner, lion dance performance, open house, etc. Chinese lanterns, knots, New Year Eve's dinner food, firecrackers, cheongsams or cheongsam-clad ladies and other Spring Festival related subjects are also used. Following images show some of such Ang pows.



Big Bath Sdn Bhd, 2021. Family-centred Chinese New Year celebration is a constant feature in this company's designs



H&L Supermarket, 2019. When pieces are joined together, a picture of a happy family reunion dinner emerges



UBS, 2021. Released in short and long versions, these feature a popular Chinese New Year designs - the lion dance



Akisama, 2021. Composite set forming a landscape that sums up Chinese New Year celebrations



CIMB's mass market Ang pow of this year features food typically served during Chinese New Year Eve



Eu Yan Sang, 2021. Chinese knot is the subject of interest in this set issued by the health food chain



AIA, 2021. A pair designed with colourful Chinese firecrackers. At the back of each are ideas on how to repurpose them



AIA MDRT, 2021. Cheongsam-inspired, a thematic favourite among many collectors



I Flower Tea, 2021. This brightly coloured set depicts ladies donning the cheongsam

Zodiac-inspired

Zodiac animals are perhaps the most commonly used motifs in red packet designs. Most companies usually use the zodiac animal of that year but some may also feature all the 12 animals, in either single or up to twelve pieces sets. Following are samples of Ang pows with lunar animal motifs.



CK East Group, 2021. Set of 12 pieces feature all the lunar animals



Oscar Lubricants, 2019. The 12 lunar animals are the stars in these lively coloured pieces from the lubricant company



Bank of China, 2019. Pieced together, this set of four paints a picture of the zodiac animals enjoying a Chinese New Year feast



Pantai Hospital, 2021. A single piece covering the twelve zodiac animals



Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, 2019. A parade of zodiac animals when front and back are placed together



Vivacity Megamall, 2021. The Mall's envelopes feature the year's lunar animal of 2021, the Ox



Mitsubishi, 2021. Pastel coloured packets from the automobile company feature the animal of the year, the Ox



Yitai, 2021. Composite set of six pieces forming a landscape and show the lunar oxen celebrating Chinese New Year

For the Love of Nature

Nature is also a commonly used theme in Ang pow production. Many of such themed Ang pows are adorned with nature landscapes, flowers, birds, butterflies, fish, snails and many other animals.



Akisama, 2021. Cultural landscape is the primary theme in this composite set. Chinese auspicious words, lanterns, firecrackers and the oxen motifs give it a Spring Festival feel



Allianz, 2021. This pair, issued by the insurance company, are a keeper, for their beautiful floral and butterfly motifs



Out of the Ordinary Kinds

Besides the ingenious shapes that modern day Ang pows have taken in, creative forms, new innovations and technologies in printing, and state-of-the-art printing materials are also being adopted to produce them. Creativity has brought about atypical Ang pows (e.g., origami-inspired, folding, with foldable or movable parts, etc.) that we now see around. Red packets with enhanced features are also increasingly issued, like those with embroidered details, embossed part or with varying surface applications (e.g., gold or metallic foil, pearlescent, iridescent, glossy, etc.). Use of specialty papers which include fabric and soft touch coated ones, and other materials are also becoming popular in the production of Ang pows. Below are some red packets with remarkable features.

Origami-inspired

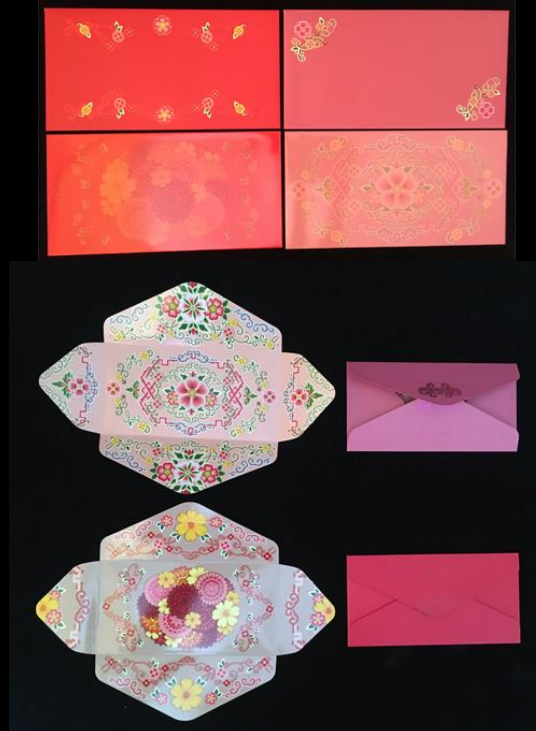


3-in-1with Augmented Reality



Vivacity Megamall, 2019. 'The Three Little Pigs' inspired Ang pows. One can scan the QR Code located at back to access the popular story. Attached with tassels, they are reusable as bookmarks

Fold Me or Move Me



Handelsbanken, 2019. Gumless and foldable, with an interior floral motif, both sides can be used



Lego, 2021. Creative packets from the brick toy company. Red coloured packet with foldable part resembling horns of lunar ox. Yellow one has movable Lego Minifigure cut-out

Fabric, Embroidery and Gold Foil



Columbia Threadneedle Investments, 2021. Embroidered birds, flowers and butterflies are outlined with gold foil and a pair of artistically illustrated oxen, printed on fabric material make this 2021 Ang pow stand out

3D and Shiny



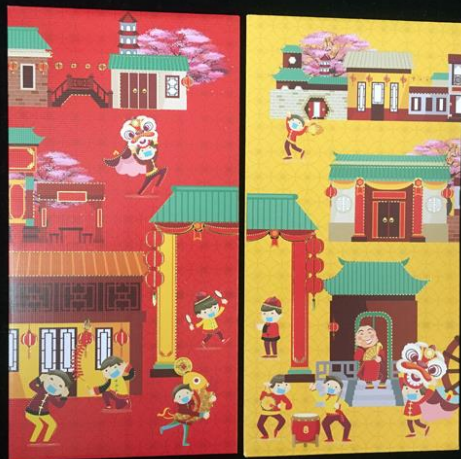
Llummar 2021. These impressive Ang pows are with embossed and gold foil printed fighting fish, creating a 3D effect

Socially Relevant

Noteworthy to include are the following Ang pows which are socially and timely relevant, reminding the public on the safety measures that we all need to observe during this unfortunate Covid-19 pandemic situation.



TMT Thundermatch, 2021. Designed with safety in mind, amidst a wishful happy New Year celebrations. Safety measures against the Covid-19 virus are illustrated



Aeon Mall, 2021. This pair of composite Ang pows show a safe Chinese New Year celebration, with people wearing masks

Collect Them, Love Them

Although some folks may collect just about every Ang pow they come across with, others go for a favoured theme. A collection may be company, brand, design or theme based. There are collectors who keep only Ang pows issued by specific companies or institutions, like banks, financing or investment companies, insurance agencies, automobile companies, shopping malls, F&B companies, restaurants, luxury brand companies, among many others. While others collect only Ang pows that have motifs or themes of interest to them. There are, for instance, collectors specialising on packets printed with Chinese auspicious words or greetings, or lion dance, Chinese lantern, cheongsam or any other items symbolic of the Chinese New Year. There are also some whose collections are motif or subject specific, like collectors who only keep ones with cartoon characters, zodiac animals, flowers, birds, butterflies, and many others that could possibly be featured on Ang pows. Featured below are collectors who were happy to share their themes and the treasured pieces in their collection.

We take a peek at Kian Beng Koh's treasured collection. He is a specialist collector of Ang pows issued by banks, and financial, credit or investment institutions. He holds dear his Credit Suisse and UOB red packet collection, which took time and effort to complete, especially the older issues. Credit Suisse, UOB, CitiBank and Maybank are among banking or financial institutions known to issue variations in terms of differences in the characters inscribed, issuing branch, department or subsidiary printed on them. There are also the kinds of Ang pows given away by companies to their regular customers, VIP and sometimes even VVIP patrons. Completing such varieties in one's collection, surely, can be pretty challenging.

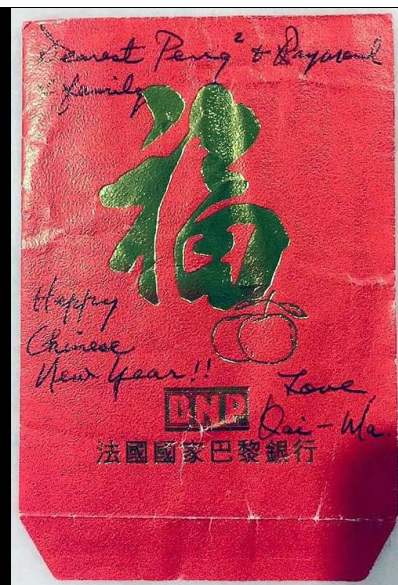


Kian Beng Koh showing his favourite Credit Suisse Ang pow collection. Photo: Kian Beng Koh



Variations in Kian Beng Koh's UOB collection from the year 2013. Photo: Kian Beng Koh

Katherina Lee's collection started with her daughter's interest in Disney Ang pows, some 16 years ago. Constantly adding pieces that she thought were worth keeping, the collection grew, which subsequently she took over when her daughter lost interest. Her collection is currently focused on Ang pows issued by foreign and investment banks, airlines, hotels, luxury cars, selective malls and branded companies. However, she would not hesitate to keep any interesting Ang pows with zodiac animal series, beautiful flowers and depicting happy families. Katherina's Ang pow collection is multinational – she keeps an array of lovely pieces from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Taiwan. Her daughter's earlier Disney Ang pows and the ones with handwritten notes which she received from a late dear relative in Hong Kong, are for her, the most precious in her collection.



Two of Katherina Lee's for keeps - ones that hold happy memories and are irreplaceable. Photo: Katherina Lee

Goh Sock Keng's affair with Ang pows started in 2020, after joining an Ang pow fans club on Facebook. Starting with the giveaways she got from local banks, her collection is now gradually growing. She is especially interested in red packets that feature family reunion, flowers, Chinese zodiac and sets that can be pieced together to complete a bigger picture. The 2019 & 2020 Chinese zodiac series-themed Ang pows from the automobile company, Mitsubishi, are her favourites. She is hoping to be able to complete the said series from the car company.



The Mitsubishi 2019 and 2020 Ang pow sets, featuring the zodiac animals, are Goh Sock Keng's favourite in her growing collection

'Green' and 'Purple' Packets

The Chinese customary gifting of money in packets had been assimilated into the other cultural groups in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Instead of the red packets though, the Muslim Malays hand out 'Green' packets to younger family members or friends visiting during the Hari Raya Aidilfitri celebrations. Green is a colour traditionally associated with Islam. Designs used in 'Green' packets, also known as Raya packets are continuously evolving. Good wishes in the Jawi script, family homecoming ('Balik Kampung'), mosques, the moon, and rice cake wrapped in woven palm leaves ('Ketupat') are among the commonly used designs in the 'Green' packet.

The 'Purple' packet, also known as Deepavali packet, is the Indian ethnic group's adoption of the red packet in Malaysia and Singapore. Deepavali packets are usually issued mostly by companies in the banking, finance and investment services. 'Purple' packets are most commonly designed with the symbolic peacock, the Deepavali clay lamp ('Diya') and the decorative artwork drawn on the floor using rice flour ('Kolam').

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