

*"I've brought a #barbie fashionista with me to #srilanka. And since my resources are limited, I will spend the rest of this business trip making tissue paper dresses."*



As one of the world's largest Barbie collectors, Jian Yang always brings a doll with him on his travels. But something happened in Sri Lanka in May 2017 – he made his first doll dress out of toilet paper. He has not stopped since, and every night at every hotel he stayed in, a paper couture creation would be made.

"Each dress was carefully photographed, and immortalised on Instagram via the hashtag #havetissuewilltravel. And because there was usually only one doll with me on an average four-day trip, the couture confection would literally get flushed down the toilet to make way for the next."

Since then, Jian, as well as #havetissuewilltravel, has been to over 20 cities in 11 countries. In two short years, his stunning handiworks have been discovered, and extensively featured in publications from *Vogue* to BuzzFeed, and in blogs, broadsheets and tabloids. They've been discussed in countries around the world and images of them continue to circulate the Internet appealing to parents, children, collectors and fashionistas alike.

This delightful book is a visual celebration of Jian's fabulous tissue paper dresses – sustainable fashion that is not only intricate but biodegradable. Just as how they are one-of-a-kind creations, this book is truly a special collector's edition.

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# INTRODUCTION



Preview only

It was my fourth trip to Sri Lanka. This time on business.

Little did I know that this would be a secondment which would change my life's trajectory.

Had I been to Sri Lanka before this? Yes. Absolutely yes. It's a beautiful country, brimming with history, culture and mystique.

Sri Lanka was initially a vague concept in my mind before I made my maiden trip there. I knew I wanted to see some hotels by one architect – Geoffrey Bawa. He's the guy that made Tropical Modernism a thing. So the first trips to Sri Lanka were essentially architectural study tours. Which sounds like a really boring thing, but I've always liked to find the interesting in the boring.



For the 15 days of this business trip, I dutifully went in to the office, and did what I needed to do. At night, I headed back to Mount Lavinia Hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Colombo.

Situated in a far corner of Colombo, this magnificent hotel was perched on a cliff and boasted panoramic views of the Sri Lankan sea. And while a regular business traveller would tend to stay in a city hotel, I came back to the Mount Lavinia Hotel because of its colonial, almost haunted quality, augmented by a charming story of a gypsy (Lavinia, obviously), who fell in love with a British Governor who lived in this magnificent mansion between 1805 and 1811. A secret lover, Lavinia would enter the house at night through a secret passageway. While I try most of the time to maintain the composure of a serious business traveller, the

idea of secret passageways and illicit love affairs made the little boy in me smile.

When I'm away on trips, I tend to first find a toy store. People want to see the sights; taste the food, but I like toys. I've always liked toys. In Sri Lanka, however, it felt like the cosmic forces of the world were hiding all the good toys from me. Everything that caught my eye was either inflatable or felt like it was emitting toxic plastic fumes. This was my fourth trip to Sri Lanka so I was ready. I had a Barbie Fashionista with me.

Here's where I make the confession. In 2013, worldwide media outed me as the "largest male collector of Barbie dolls in the world". I always thought that made me sound fat, but I digress. I've had dolls for as long as I can remember. In 1984, I had my first one, and looking back, I still don't see what the 80s had against a 5-year-old boy playing with a plastic blonde girl in turquoise leotards. It's not like she was my only toy. In a five-year-old's mind, this blonde girl played well on the floor of a Singaporean bungalow, along with G.I. Joe, He-Man, Centurions, Thundercats, Transformers and Star Wars. I was a child. She was a toy. It (still) makes perfect sense.

Fast forward 34 years. I'm now the business lead in an international advertising agency. I'm a little more confident, possibly more wise. I now buy dolls from stores without saying they're for my sister. If the storekeepers ask if the dolls I'm buying are for my daughter, I look them square in the eye and say, "they're for me". I love the uncomfortable split second that follows. I live for those moments. I usually calmly pick up the shopping bag from the counter, and strut away in the manliest way possible.



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### Back to Sri Lanka.

Business trip.

I had a doll with me.

Mount Lavinia Hotel is a holidaymaker's dream because it's so far removed from civilisation. Night after lonely night, I started questioning if I could swallow another room-service cheeseburger. Singaporeans are generally known for their love of food. I'm not that Singaporean. I'm not adventurous. I don't eat anything I can't pronounce. I don't try new food while travelling. Because I've had my fair share of understanding the consequences of a toilet that's not within pouncing radius.

So, perched over a three-hour old room-service cheeseburger, clutching said doll while watching what every travelling businessman watches on TV (Powerpuff Girls reruns), I started playing with my napkin from my tray. It wasn't a conscious thing. It's just one of those weird things you do where you subconsciously feel the grain of a paper napkin, and tear it. A straight tear down the middle of a napkin. Best feeling in the world. Like tearing a perfect perforation; like popping bubble wrap. Like drawing a perfect circle.

I licked my finger and did a dramatic napkin roll. Ooo look, I almost said out loud. A rosette.

Looking around the colonial room, I thought, this would have been the perfect holiday in the 80s. A Dynasty-worthy suite. Hardwood floors. A TV without a remote control. I crossed the room to the bathroom, where I had a roll of tape in my toiletries case. There's always a roll of tape in there. Frequent travellers know that little bottles of everything can explode in planes. There was also a little scissors for my nose

hair. It's a single nose hair. (Us Asians don't actually sprout a lot of nose hair). But a scissors is always handy just in case.

I cut a piece of tape and taped the paper rosette to Barbie's shoulder.

This 80s dream holiday needs a dream dress, I thought, as I unhinged the toilet roll from the brass holder, and unrolled it on the bed. Sheet after sheet, little perforated squares of toilet paper were draped and taped onto my 12 inch muse. She was the perfect model. She didn't protest. She didn't move. Nothing on her jiggled. Tape stuck like a dream to her plastic skin.

Despite now being a Barbie collector for a very long time and owning doll-sized masterpieces from the houses of Dior, Versace, Escada et. al, it may surprise you that I never had (nor have) any fashion background. I personally live in basic Muji Oxford shirts and tapered jeans. I don't watch catwalk shows, and can't tell Donatella (Versace) from Donatello (The Ninja Turtle). But with some clever Instagram filters, my first fashion shoot became a hit on my page. 200 Likes at the time was considered social media gold.



That was May 24, 2017. My post read: "I've brought a #barbiefashionista with me to #srilanka. And since my resources are limited, I will spend the rest of this business trip making tissue paper dresses."

And I did.



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I didn't stop. From then on, every night at every hotel I've stayed in, a toilet paper couture creation would be made. They ranged from kitsch to couture, from tasteful to terrible.

But each of them was carefully photographed, and immortalised on Instagram via the hashtag #havetissuewilltravel. And because there was usually only one doll with me on an average four-day trip, the couture confection would literally get flushed down the toilet to make way for the next.

Wasteful? Some think so. Some think I could become a rich man by selling the dresses on eBay. Others are concerned about the wasting of good resources and the future of our forests. Others wonder why these don't live on as permanent fixtures in my collection. Many have suggested a museum. But my rational mind asks "who would visit a toilet paper exhibition?"

These questions remain unanswered. But I can tell you that #havetissuewilltravel has now been to over 20 cities in 11 countries. In two short years, the dresses have been featured in publications from VOGUE to BuzzFeed, from blogs to broadsheets. They've been discussed in countries I've never heard of, and images of them continue to circulate the internet. I've been asked about exhibitions, partnerships, commissions.

People have been supportive and encouraging, and it's interesting how the general keyboard-warrior abuse of a boy that collect dolls has turned into talk of craft, intricacy, attention to detail and creativity.

Getting internet-famous in an era that creates channels for talkback is something that not even the strongest person

can claim to be prepared for. Some days I read comments on YouTube, and find myself yelling "I did nothing to you!" into the iPad. Accusations of everything from homosexuality to cross dressing, dolly fetishes, to childhood abuse run rampant. Some people too freely slap the Crazy Rich Asian label on me, while others wonder out loud whether "he is going to die a virgin".

The pleasant turn of events was that plastic dolls wrapped in toilet paper had unexpectedly made the world a more encouraging and accepting place – one where the light of positivity only begets another light; where one candle lights another. These are no longer dolls. They're symbols of hope for every boy who's been bullied. For every artist that was told he couldn't make it. For every person that was ever told he was not good enough.



"Wait. The dresses get thrown away?" you ask.

There's no way to make this philosophical, so I'll call a spade a spade.

They're toilet paper.

But that said, my decision to dispose of each of them is grounded in what my Sri Lankan friend, mentor and tour guide (also the person who paid for that business trip in 2017) told me.

As we were driving down the streets of Colombo, I noticed traditional Sri Lankan lanterns, or Kudus, hanging from the rafters of street-side shops. These Kudus were sometimes brand spanking new, and sometimes tattered

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from age or weathering. Regardless of their condition, they were hung proudly, blowing in the wind. I asked why the owners didn't just replace the old ones with new ones.

"In Sri Lanka," Keith said, "the goal is not to behold something. All mental and physical events come into being, then dissolve. But during their time on earth, they, like the humble Kudu, serve all with a concerted enthusiasm to spread light."

That's the philosophy behind each and every #havetissuewilltravel doll.

She was made. She spread her light. She made way for a new one.

With this belief firmly planted in my head, I learnt to create without the need to possess, which I feel is a powerful lesson in life. For their time on earth, the creations are appreciated whether in person by me and occasionally housekeeping staff, or on Instagram where their images permanently reside.

Interestingly, from that point on, travel also became a journey of tissue couture.

Every trip has been marked by signature tissue dresses for that single travelling Barbie. Dresses that tell of my reading of the place I'm at. They are a different kind of souvenir; a different kind of travel journal. These particular travel journals, though, I am happy to share with anyone who would come on the journey with me.

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RI LANKA

The place it all began. Part business, part leisure. Totally transforming.

Creativity can come from the most unexpected sources. Everything I saw in Sri Lanka inspired me creatively. I started sketching again. I started breathing again. Not that I had ever stopped breathing, mind you. It's just that adulting had become hectic. In chasing our ambitions, we sometimes lose sight of the more important things in life. Sometimes we lose sight of our families or our loved ones. Sometimes we lose sight of ourselves.

Not to sound dramatic, but Sri Lanka's pace, sights, and what can best be described as generosity put me back in touch with why I love(d) dolls in the first place. "Collector" is a term so laden with baggage, that sometimes you cave in to the pressure the label bestows upon you. Had I started leaving more dolls in boxes because internet conversations tell you they'd be worth more? Probably. Had I stopped "playing" because other collectors would judge you for "resetting the factory curl" of Barbie's hair? Likely.

I'm very sure that the concept of the fashion doll was developed and refined to enhance a child's play experience. Dress her and undress her. Marry her and unmarry her. Give her silly little outfits you make from socks and handkerchiefs. The doll world is an unjudging world, and our plastic princess is going to grin through it regardless of the life you, the 5-year-old child, make for her.

Sri Lanka's laid-back vibe, even on this business trip, reconnected me not with dolls. But with play. And for that, I remain humbled and grateful.

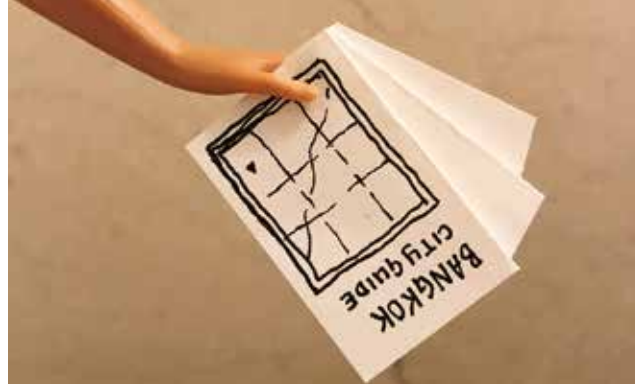




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## EKANBARU, INDONESIA



Part of my work includes creating film and television assets for corporate clients. And while that can sometimes be boring, the places it takes me to continue to inspire this hobby.

Pekanbaru had a distinct 80s vibe to it. I'm a child of the 80s, and there's an overwhelming sense of nostalgia when I walk past vintage shop grilles, or tread on vintage shophouse tiles. Pekanbaru is a land that fashion forgot. Where men wore shorts to 5-star restaurants, and knock-off Birkins would often be accompanied by a plastic bag of street-side market food. It was a far cry from the luxuries you witnessed in Jakarta, but was a charming place to experience.

As I nibbled on my A&W waffle, a taste I had forgotten since A&W left Singapore, I dreamt up a whole series of 80s-inspired dresses. Ruffles and rosettes would reign supreme in this collection, along with dramatic shapes around shoulders and hips.

Strains of Debbie Gibson and Rick Astley would play in my head, as would the dings *The Wheel of Fortune* letter blocks made as they lit up. And the result? This 80s collection which would never give you up, nor let you down.



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## About the Author

**Jian Yang** currently works as the Communications Strategy Director of an international communications agency. Outside of work, Jian lives on Instagram @jjanyang1979, where he is lovingly dubbed the Toy Boy of the internet.

Jian has made headlines as the world's largest male Barbie doll collector. His love for dolls started when he was a teen journalist for a Singaporean tabloid in 1997. Today, his extensive collection has earned him a place in the *Asia Book of Records* for the largest Barbie collection in Asia.

Recently, he was thrust back into the limelight when the fashion press picked up on his #havetissuewilltravel hashtag which essentially showcases on social media doll fashion made out of hotel-room toilet paper. The creations serve both as a fashion journal for his 12-inch muse, as well as a travel journal for Jian.

Each fashion is made, photographed, shared online and then flushed down the toilet to make way for new creations the next day. The Flushable Fashions in this book no longer exist but Jian is committed to creating more as he continues to globetrot. This is his first book, which he hopes will help the world rediscover the power of play.

