

A small fortune

Childrenswear is booming in Hong Kong as fashion designers and retailers cash in on the global trend, writes **Divia Harilela**

At first glance, Mama Kid appears no different to any other hip concept store in Central, with its funky blue and white logo, designer furnishings, artwork by Tokyo-based Tomio Nagai and mix of dark, edgy clothing and boho prints (think Dries Van Noten). Its clientele, however, isn't the usual mix of tai tais and hipsters. Instead, it caters to their chic offspring, from newborns to six-year-olds.

The boutique is one of many that have opened recently in Hong Kong, as the childrenswear market booms. The Asia-Pacific segment of the market generated revenues of US\$55.3 billion last year, according to marketresearch.com. Since then, luxury brands such as Stella McCartney and Gucci have expanded their range for children, while local boutiques have sprung up hoping to cash in on the trend.

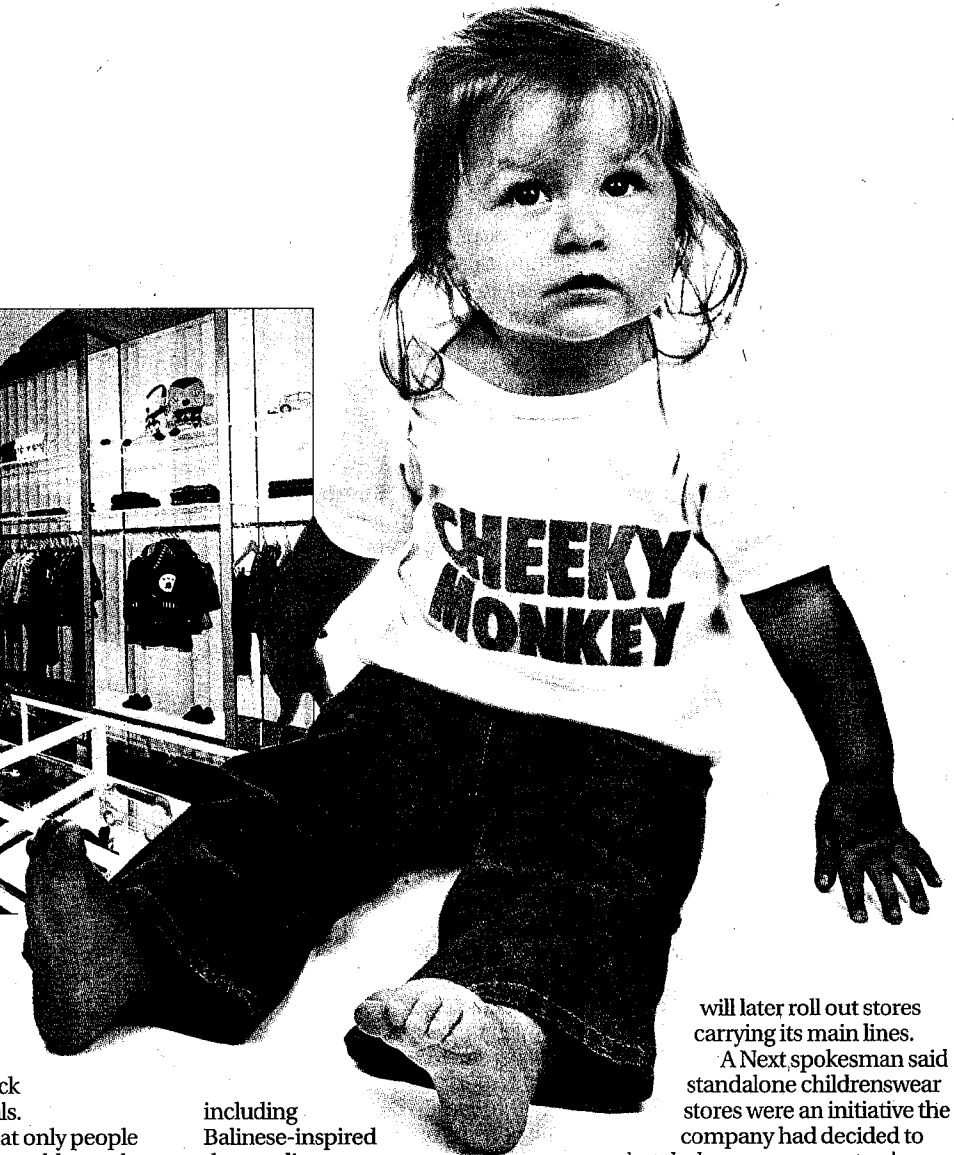
"There has been an explosion of smaller, independent boutiques offering unique items from all over the world. Hong Kong has more options now for children's clothing with a good [range of prices]," says Levina Li Cadman, co-founder of yumymummyasia.com, a website for urban mums.

"Globally, sales of children's clothing are growing year on year, so obviously this will extend to Hong Kong. Parents increasingly see their children as a reflection of themselves, so in a fashion-conscious city like Hong Kong many parents have high disposable incomes and will make sure their kids are dressed well," she says, citing brands such as Bonpoint, A for Apple and Ralph Lauren as her favourites.

That was the reason former marketing executive Valerie Chow founded Mama Kid, a store she describes as a "Joyce [boutique] for children", with cutting-edge labels that encourage parents to dress their



Clockwise from above: Petite Bazaar and Mama Kid boutiques in Central; T-shirt and denims from hiplittlebubba.com; an outfit from Simple Kids, available from Mama Kid



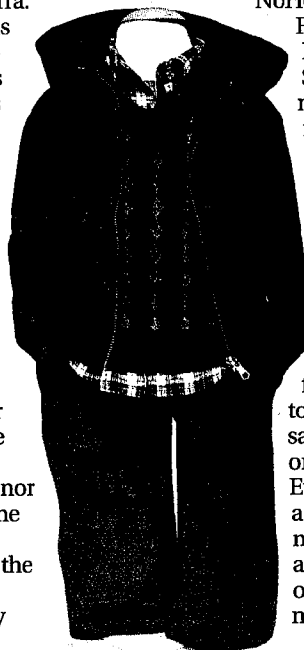
offspring in a more creative way. The store features accessories and fashion from designers across Asia and Europe, including Bang Bang Copenhagen, Dandy Star, Milk on the Rocks, Muchacha, Simple Kids, Undercover and Zorra.

Most of these brands can be compared to edgy designer labels such as Comme des Garçons and Maison Martin Margiela – the only difference is that they cater exclusively to children.

"I felt that there was a lack of choice [in Hong Kong] when it came to designer apparel for children ... We were not interested in anything too 'baby' nor referencing any of the great kids' stores already out there in the market. We wanted something uniquely

ours that could properly house the brands we carry. For me, it's about creativity, quality, integrity and being smartly dressed," Chow says.

Also new on the scene is Petite Bazaar, which is located in the hip "NoHo" area on Gough Street.



Founded by Frenchwoman Narguess Sousi, the shop is modelled on a children's fantasy home and is stocked with chic European labels for newborns and toddlers. The boutique also sells homeware, accessories and educational toys.

"I had my two kids in Hong Kong and have always been very frustrated to not be able to find nice brands with the same quality and originality that you find in Europe. In Europe, there's a huge boom in the kids' market, as lots of people are looking for quality original items. That's what made me decide to open

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my own shop dedicated to all these talented designers," she says.

The store, which houses more than 80 brands, specialises in mid-range labels selected personally by Sousi, including April Showers, classic French brand Troizenfants, Emile et Ida and Numae, which

specialises in cashmere. Sousi also has a blog so customers can check out the latest arrivals.

"It used to be that only people with lots of money would spend on their kids, but now I see that's changing," Sousi says. "As more Chinese people travel, they also discover niche brands that are different and not overpriced. There are also expats like me who know the price of things in Europe and are not ready to pay more than what it really should be. The response so far has been great – anyone who enters the shop is very enthusiastic about everything they see."

Also launched recently is Hip Little Bubba, an online retailer that stocks baby clothes, shoes, hair accessories, baby blankets, vintage fashion and other goodies. The response was so encouraging that owner Nicole Darragh decided to open a showroom in Aberdeen so customers could check out her merchandise in person. Last month she debuted her own line of bright and funky clothes for toddlers,

including Balinese-inspired dresses, linen trousers and shirts, and other cute separates such as harem pants made from organic cotton. Like Sousi, she wanted to keep her range affordable, so prices range from HK\$90 to HK\$650.

"I think there is definitely a lot more mid-range children's clothing available in Hong Kong today than there was 12 months ago," Darragh says. "I believe mums in Hong Kong with similar frustrations to myself have seen the gap in the market and decided to address it. It has been an easy process setting up a company and the support I've received from other small business, particularly other mums, has been a huge help."

It's not just independent retailers that are eyeing the local market. British high street brand Next chose to relaunch its brand in Hong Kong with a childrenswear store in Causeway Bay. If it is successful, it

will later roll out stores carrying its main lines.

A Next spokesman said standalone childrenswear stores were an initiative the company had decided to

undertake because youngsters' clothes had been Next's most profitable area when it previously operated in Hong Kong.

With so much potential, most retailers agree this is just the beginning for children's clothing and fashion in Hong Kong.

"Childrenswear is booming here because it is a growing market all over the world. Even at the peak of the recession, sales of childrenswear were up," says Tarlan Amigh, founder of online store Hocusadabra, which sells unique products for children. She plans to expand into fashion owing to high customer demand.

"It is probably a combination of a few things – celebrities and how they dress their children, and the current wave of older parents with higher disposable incomes who have more to spend on their children," she says.