

SETTING THE STYLE:

How car designers stay on the cutting edge

By Tim Healy

KOBAYASHI SHINICHI KNOWS ALL about the interplay of substance and form. He is a "fifth rank" in the martial art of kendo, a Japanese battle of swords that is at turns furious and stately. The training serves Kobayashi well in his job as head of an elite team of designers at Mitsubishi Motors, Japan's No. 3 automaker. "When I design a car, there are several factors," he says. "Not only must it be comfortable and safe, it must reflect the owner's personality."

With their latest product, the Pajero Mini, Kobayashi and Mitsubishi may have approached that ideal. More than 100,000 Pajero Minis have been sold since the model was introduced in December 1994. That is nearly three times what the company predicted. Designing cars, says Kobayashi, is satisfying but rigorous, given the sometimes-competing demands of engineers and customers. Accommodating both meant it took no less than three years to come up with the Pajero Mini design, even though it sprang from the success of the full-sized Pajero.

Kobayashi, 51, might be described as the model car designer. His infectious laugh ripples through the section at Mitsubishi that houses his 12-person group. He pursues life with the vigor of someone many years younger, playing baseball, badminton and golf. On weekends, he volunteers as a children's kendo instructor. But, no matter what he's doing, his mind is alert to his surroundings. What do people wear? How do they enjoy themselves? What colors do they like? He realizes that unless he understands people and their tastes, he won't be able to pursue his personal philosophy of what an automobile should be -- "a partner in daily life."

In much the same way, 29-year-old Chelsia Lau scrutinizes the character of objects large and small. The Ford Motor Co. designer is apt to be inspired by the sweeping curve of a bridge or the intricate play of sunlight off a ring's gemstone. "But I also must always keep in touch with the trends, because I must speak the language of current lifestyles," she says.

Lau is part of a Michigan-based Ford design group that spends as much time thinking about future lifestyles as present ones. She works for a kind of design boutique, hoping to generate the shape of things to come. "Some ideas in the advanced studio might not become reality for five or 10 years," she says. "But they'll have some influence on future design. There may be something we can borrow years from now."

Though Lau may spend her days contemplating the future, her interest in design harks back to when she was a youngster growing up in Hong Kong. Her favorite subject was art -- but not conventional art. For her, working in just two dimensions was limiting. "I liked to build models," she says. That's when Lau entered the third dimension.

After graduating from a Hong Kong technical institute with a diploma in design, she created tableware and porcelain figurines for a German company. It was a good challenge, but not good enough. So, in 1989, she went back to school -- this time in the U.S. In her second year, she became hooked on designing cars. Soon she was up to her elbows in modeling clay, transforming her own sketches of vehicles into three-dimensional miniatures.

Today, Lau is attempting to apply what she learned growing up in Asia to designing cars for different cultures. She believes there's not much basic difference between what East and West

look for in cars, though spending power counts a lot. "Some parts of Asia, like Japan and South Korea, are more mature. People there are looking for performance and styling," she says. Lau believes a future motorist in less developed economies such as China and India will expect three specific things from a car: "Affordability, durability and functionality."

Lim Kok Wing, chairman of the Designers Guild Malaysia, sees a more distinctively Asian sensibility when it comes to cars. He envisions a Malaysian look. "Can we design a uniquely Malaysian auto?" he asks. "That's the wrong question. Can we afford not to? That should be the focus."

Yahaya Ahmad, the Malay tycoon who controls Proton, Malaysia's successful national automobile maker, says the company is now working on a design that will carry through an entire family of automobiles with the Proton badge on the front. "Malaysians do have a flair for automobile design," he says. "They just need to be encouraged." Perhaps they should try baseball. Or kendo.

-- Reported by Steven Poh / Kuala Lumpur, Jim Erickson / Seattle and Suvendrini Kakuchi / Tokyo