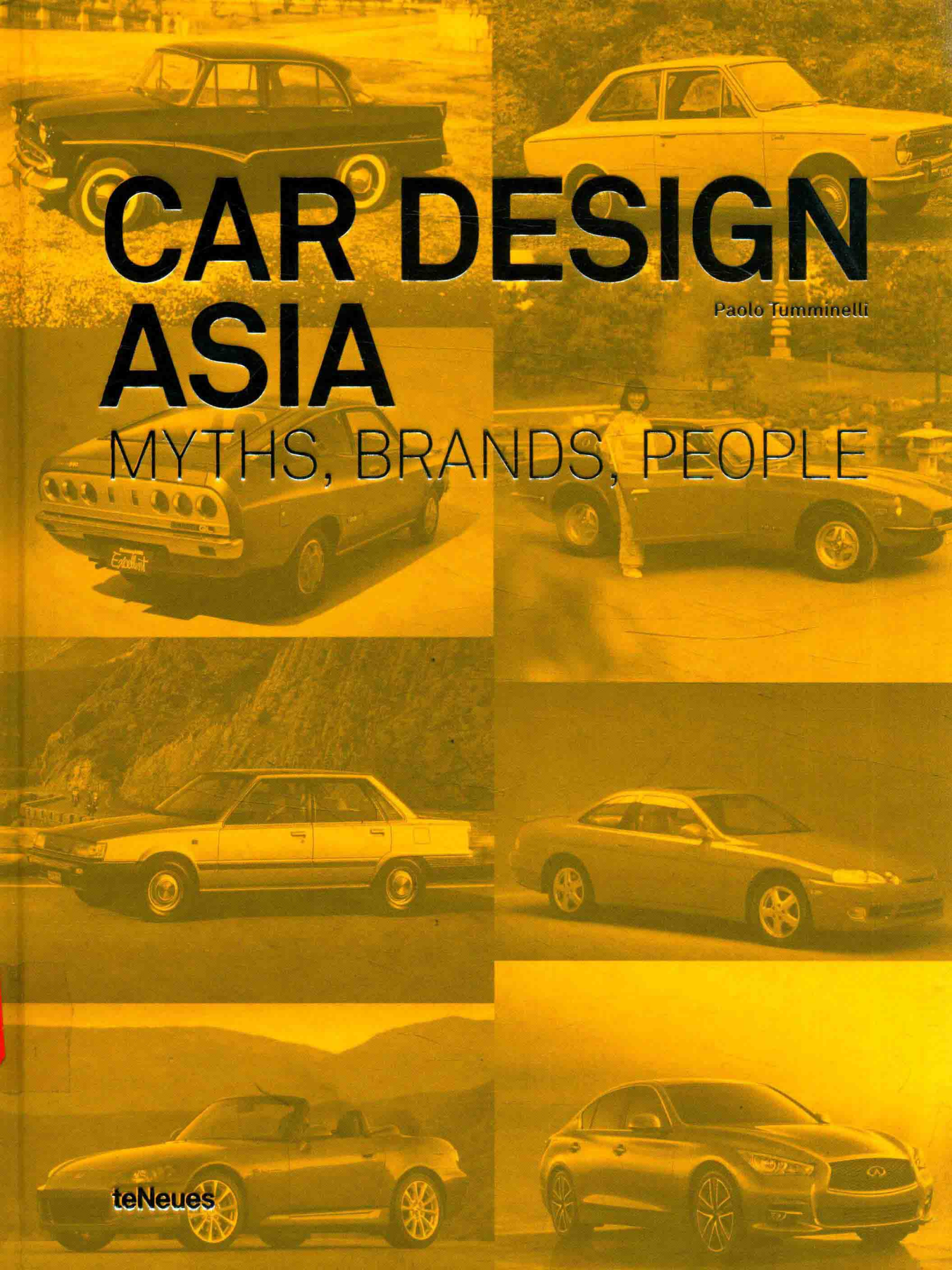

CAR DESIGN ASIA

MYTHS, BRANDS, PEOPLE

Paolo Tumminelli

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START

If a motto were needed for *Car Design Asia*, then "the last ones shall be first" would be a perfect fit. Back in 2010, I started working on a car design trilogy: Europe, America, and—obviously—Japan. Living in Europe, such was our interest in novelty and the undiscovered that the publisher and I agreed to begin with the last. The 3/11 earthquake forced us to change plans, for it simply did not seem appropriate to bother a country deeply affected by such tragic circumstances with enquiries about old cars. But three years later, having completed both *Car Design Europe* and *Car Design America*, the automotive landscape in East Asia had changed substantially. Not only had the leading manufacturers from South Korea—Hyundai and Kia—fully emancipated themselves into global design players, but even China—emerging since 2009 as the world's largest producer of, as well as the largest market for cars—had started declaring its independence from the Western design world. In return, the leading exporters to China, among them all the German premium manufacturers, had obviously begun adapting their design strategies to the needs, wishes, and dreams of their newest and largest clientele. The Japanese reaction to this creative insurgence was quick—even by Japanese standards. All of a sudden, the whole automotive world was transformed. With East Asia now at the focus, the title of this book was accordingly changed from *Japan* to *Asia*. This certainly does not deprive the Japanese automotive industry of its leading position among East Asian competitors, which is not only due to its more substantial history, but also because of its status as a role model for global business. Yet no matter how impressive the numbers may be, as automobile design is a cultural phenomenon, its quality is to be judged aside from quantity.

The West's evaluation of Eastern car design has never been particularly polite—primarily, and most easily explicable, because Japan was last to join this line of business. And because she came along slowly and quietly. The Japanese dared doing this in countries where the automobile had and still has to be, first of all, fast and loud as hell. The Western automotive media, and their most fanatical readers, just did not get the tale of the good, reliable Jap car. Luckily, the larger section of the market—people more interested in mobility than cars—did. Starting in 1980, when Japan became the world's leading car manufacturer, this perception began to change rapidly. Again, the last ones became the first. The 1980s were the heyday of the Japanese automobile, crowned with the success of Honda in Formula 1 and embellished with that charming global fetish known to some simply as Eunos Roadster, and as Mazda Miata or MX-5 to others. This, the world's most successful open sports car, was the kind of "machine that changed the world," as

celebrated by MIT researchers in their groundbreaking book of 1990. Fifteen years later, Japanese born Ken Okuyama became the first ever *gaijin* director within the holiest of all car design temples: Pininfarina of Turin.

While all this was happening, I realized that nobody knew much about Japanese car design—not even myself. In the days before the internet, the market of the rising sun was almost impenetrable to Western eyes. Even now, cultural differences far beyond simple language barriers render the exploration and interpretation of this sheer, gigantic multitude of rapidly changing models a captivating challenge. While the business history of the Japanese car industry has been the object of a great many substantial publications, design development was not—and certainly not from a cultural standpoint. This is mostly because Japanese companies have seldom been celebrating themselves or their designers, with the consequence that most of them remain unknown to this day. And if the Japanese did not bother to redress that, certainly fewer people abroad would. In a way, I felt someone had to try. Specific literature being scarce, I knocked on several doors in Japan, Europe, and the US, asking experienced professionals to share their recollections and opinions with me. Japanese car design is not univocal, but fragmented into Japanese-Asian, Asian-American and Asian-European influences on brands and models. For the sake of showing the most intimate, less well-known part of the story, I tried my best to select and portray the most Eastern Asian of all designs. Compiling this book thus turned out to be a different exercise in contrast to the previous volumes of my *Car Design* trilogy. Browsing the image archives of all the manufacturers has made me aware of another very peculiar quality. Even for contemporary models, the original lifestyle images I prefer to use in my books are underrepresented, compared to the archives of the more brand-conscious Western manufacturers. The high export rates may surely be responsible for such an obvious abundance of plain still life studio photographs. But what is really striking is how most photo shootings underwent an almost pedantic, very Japanese routine. New models have been shot from the same standard perspectives, following the most precise rules, as far as lighting and camera positioning are concerned—and this across all decades and manufacturers. The result of my findings and considerations is a book that is obviously different from the previous two—yet wonderfully so. Whoever you may consider to be "first" or "last," I am sure you will agree that a book such as this was long due.

Paolo Tumminelli

EAST ASIA

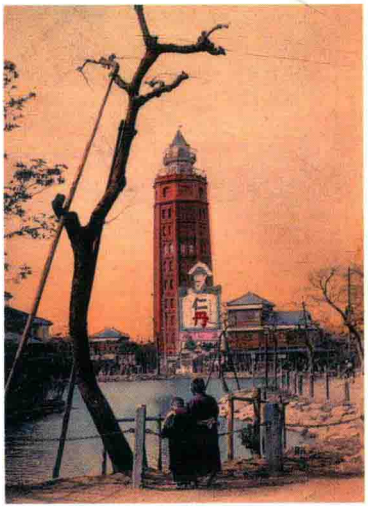
East Asia did not invent the automobile, nor was it particularly fast at developing a car culture of its own. Instead, it made automobility a global issue. One has to wait until 1960 for Japan, 1980 for South Korea and 2000 for China seriously to engage in automobile production. In spite of this late start, by 2012, China ranked first, Japan second, and South Korea fourth among the world's largest manufacturing countries. When dealing with car design from the three largest East Asian manufacturing countries, one big difference needs to be taken note of: while China has been occupied with feeding the hunger of its domestic market, Japan, and later South Korea, had export in mind early on. This is the lesson Japan was taught as early as 1853, when American Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry's steam-powered ships ripped the curtain that had isolated Tokyo from the rest of the world. Albeit with a delay of almost one century, all of a sudden modernity appeared in mysterious Japan, paving the way towards the enlightened Meiji era. In comparison, China had already enjoyed a long tradition of intense, though ambivalent commercial relationships with the West. In the wake of the Opium Wars, in the mid-1850s, China had lost Hong Kong to Queen Victoria and was forced to grant rights to foreign countries, including establishing diplomatic relationships. On the part of Europe and the United States, a much idealized, pristine Chinese aesthetic had set a persistent trend for *chinoiserie*—furniture, handcraft, fashion, and art inspired by the magical and glamorously baroque style of the Qing, China's last imperial dynasty. It was this fascination exerted by China that inspired a company of European gentlemen to arrange the greatest of all motoring events: the 1907 Peking to Paris race. The recollections of reporter, Luigi Barzini, guest in the winning car of Italian Prince, Scipione Borghese, powerfully highlight the chasm between the East and the West: "The existence of a car in Beijing seemed to me even more absurd than that of a sedan chair over London Bridge." At the start of the race, "on the road, kept free by Chinese soldiers, between two wings of mute people, there remained but the five cars, following

Nanpu bridge, Shanghai, 1991

one another at a speed never ever seen, and possibly never to be seen again within the capital of the Celestial Empire." It actually took 75 years before the first mass production car of Western kind would be seen again in China—the 1982 Volkswagen Santana.

MODERN JAPAN

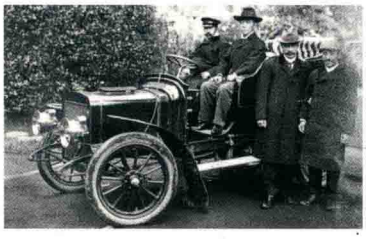
Japan's approach to modernity was a quicker and more pragmatic one. Mutsushito, the Emperor Meiji, sent delegations to explore the world and hired thousands of foreign experts. The value of such cross-cultural transfer is crucial to understanding Japanese car design, as well. Following Western examples, Japan not only revolutionized its industry, but modernized everything from the military to communications, from public education to banking, and, in 1889, adopted a new, German-inspired constitution. In return, the Western world developed a growing interest in all things Japanese—just like *chinoiserie*, *japonaiserie* became another exotic fad. In order to satisfy mundane curiosity, *Harper's* Magazine sent reporter, Lafcadio Hearn, to Japan in 1890. Influenced by a typically romantic, highly idealized view of Asian aesthetics, he found Tokyo already spoiled by Western habits: that same year, both the Imperial Hotel, designed by German architects, Böckmann & Ende, and Ryōunkaku, a skyscraper designed by Scottish engineer, William Burton, had been inaugurated. No matter how far removed modernity had been from the Japanese intellect, and even though the metallic and the mechanical had never been part of the Japanese design DNA: Japan was eager to learn, finally. In 1901, Locomobile of America started to sell cars in Tokyo, and, as late as 1907, the Takuri Type 3 came out. Not surprisingly, the first Japanese car adopted contemporary European style,



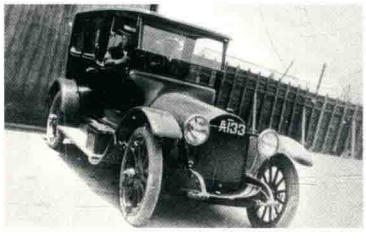
Ryounkaku, Tokyo, 1890

Itala 35/45 HP, Peking, 1907

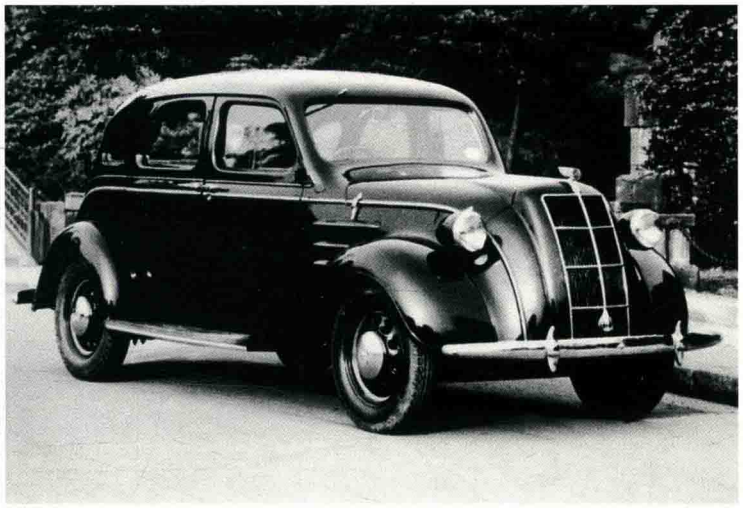
inspired by Darracq. A mere dozen were made. Japan's first mass produced car, the upper class Mitsubishi model A— designed after a Fiat Tipo 3—arrived ten years later and would not do much better: 22 units between 1917 and '21 were a meager yield indeed. During the same period of time, Ford built short of four million, Buick more than half a million cars—and thousands were sold, even of the big Fiat. The car simply was not a priority in a country with no roads and no places to go to. Instead, Japan was busy reinventing itself as a military world power. The resultant Russo-Japanese War led to the annexation of Korea in 1910—a state of affairs that lasted until 1945 and had a direct effect on the late start of the South Korean automotive industry. It was not just in the aftermath of the First World War, but also due to the tragic consequences of the 1923 earthquake—which had turned Ford trucks into a necessity—that the military-run government was convinced of the strategic importance of the automobile. Initially, the market was left to Ford and, later on, General Motors, against which none of the 16 small and constricted domestic manufacturers could compete. Then, in 1931, the Committee for the Establishment of a Domestic Automobile Industry rapidly drew up plans; in 1936, the Automobile Manufacturing Industries Act was passed, and finally, in 1937, protectionist policies chased Ford and GM out of the market. Out of nowhere, and under precise governmental guidance—similar in spirit to the famed MITI—the Japanese automotive industry was born. But as the manufacturers were still torn between the profitable market for military trucks and the unknown prospects of private mobility, there was neither a real business plan for the Japanese automobile, nor were there any traces of a Japanese car design. Once again, the pragmatic learning-from-abroad approach was chosen. The Nissan Motor Company,



Takuri Type 3, 1907



Mitsubishi Model A, 1917



Toyoda AA, 1936

incorporated in 1934, consequently built a small car, based on the British Austin Seven, and a larger one, based on the American Graham-Paige. Following six years of in-house research, Toyoda Automatic Loom Works began to market its AA model in 1936. Although wholly engineered in Japan, its mechanicals reflected Ford and Chevrolet standards, while its advanced body design appeared like a blueprint of the famed Chrysler Airflow. One year later, the Toyota Motor Corporation was founded—just in time to see Japan entering the second Sino-Japanese War, and then the Second World War.

FIRST DRIVES

It was to a country devastated physically, financially and psychologically by the atomic bomb that Emperor Hirohito gave just the right push: science, and not America, had defeated Japan. Hence capital was directed towards research and development. The knock-down approach seemed to be the quickest way towards reactivating automobile production. In the 1950s, Nissan therefore partnered with Austin, Isuzu with Hillman, Shin-Mitsubishi with Willys-Overland and Hino with Renault—now they were all licensed to assemble models identical or similar to their Western counterparts. Here the old myth of Japanese photocopying of Western design was born. And although engineered and designed in Japan, the Toyota SA of 1947 did vaguely resemble the contemporary Volkswagen. As for the Beetle, the public also gave the lovely car a nickname: Toyopet. With the larger Toyopet Crown of 1955, Japanese design evolved dramatically. Although the style was American-inspired—the Studebaker Champion or 1949 Ford coming to mind—the package of this Japanese 'small car' was definitely unique. Despite their chrome

Isuzu Hillman Minx Super de Luxe, 1959

paraphernalia, which lent them the charms of a "baby Cadillac," cars of this era actually display the sturdiness and performance of a truck. Designed to cope with the horrible conditions of domestic country roads and metropolitan meanders, their bodies were built into narrow vertical proportions. This compactness, mirrored by both the Japanese people and localities, became the very first trademark of Japanese car design. The specific quality of classic Japanese car design—always to borrow something from abroad, while at the same time remaining undeniably unique—was already present, but not yet understood. If the Japanese car lacked anything, than it was the immaterial: the intellectual pathos of the European avant-garde, the dramatic thrill of open-road racing, the excessive richness of the American Way of Life.

This austereness was also what led the manufacturers to agree to feudal constraints regarding matters such as body size, engine displacement, maximum horsepower, or top speed—which was limited to 180 kph for all vehicles for a long time. Japan simply regarded the automobile as a beneficial business. All that was needed to do good business were good cars—not the most beautiful, not the fastest, not the finest. Just good ones. And that certainly was something millions of people around the world could be comfortable, if not happy with!

KING MARKET

To the Japanese, the mass market really was king. They were first worldwide to listen to the teachings of the pioneer of quality management, William Edwards Deming, and those of the father of customer satisfaction practice, J.D. "Dave" Power—both Americans, incidentally. This approach reflects the attitude of a people, educated to think

Toyopet Crown, 1955

and act as members of a community, rather than individuals—and military discipline did the rest. Endless variations of seemingly the same midsize sedan, the family car for the uprising *sararīman*, have been made available in order to satisfy just one single, tiny bit of individual desire, yet without ever denying common sense—or taste. The search for impermanence and uniformity has since been driving the development of Japanese car design. Adding to the disorientation is a design dynamic that is exaggerated even by American standards. One reason for this can be found in the flexibility of the Japanese lean production system. Being experts in miniaturization—think bonsai—in packaging—origami—and in assembling—pagoda—the Japanese understood car manufacturing as a fluid process. They became masters of the assemblage of many smaller parts, quickly and economically produced through the use of smaller moulds. Implementing even the smallest design variations, a nightmare for Western manufacturing systems, was easily accepted as being part of the game. A second reason is due to the complex and interlocking network of retail channels, several for each brand, with each of them featuring a unique range of models and badges. Another reason is a morbid legal maneuver called *shaken*. In Japan, the periodical vehicle inspection compulsory for all cars three years and older, is very strict and gradually becoming extremely expensive. Customers have been educated to rather buy a new car than bear this burden. Driving a newer model—typically of the very same make and type as the previous one—became, if not the source of a little pleasure, then at least a way to contribute to and participate in the welfare state. While rejecting the American policy of the model year change, Toyota and Nissan did generally update their designs every four years, often in more substantial fashion than the Americans

Toyota Corolla, 1966

Toyota Corolla ST, 1975

Toyota Corolla Sprinter SE, 1979