

Publication: The Sunday Times, Life, p 4-5
Date: 22 February 2015
Headline: Fresh take on old trades



Making Chinese medicine appealing to the young

At one point in his life, 30-year-old Dylan Hu was a high-flying management consultant in a top international consulting firm after graduating in 2009 from the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California.

That jetset lifestyle took a 180-degree turn in 2010 when he joined his family's traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) manufacturing business, Poli Medical.

It was something he had always planned on doing, in contrast to his two older sisters who have no plans to join the business. Mr Hu declined to reveal their professions.

Started by his grandfather as a 300 sq ft medical hall in GeYang in the 1950s, the company was officially registered as Poli Medical by Mr Hu's father, Mr Foo Wen Chuen, in 1971.

Straight from his cushy office job, the bachelor started work at Poli Medical at the bottom. For a year, his role in the company involved sweeping the factory floors, unloading cargo and learning to operate heavy-duty machinery.

"Calling it a culture shock would be an understatement," Mr Hu jokes. "When I joined, my Mandarin was terrible and even basic communication with older staff was difficult. But to be honest, I loved the challenge. I needed to learn the ropes and getting involved from the ground up was the only way."

It took a firm understanding of the company's three brands - Jiyang, the flagship brand of tonics; Golden Sun, the capsule form of TCM products; and Imperial, products for external application - before he was finally allowed to get more involved in the strategic planning of the business.

Still, he was not content with just maintaining the status quo - he was on a quest to banish the stereotypes the younger generation holds of TCM.

"Most people my age shun TCM for being completely unpalatable - in fact most of us just pinch our noses and drink

tonics because our parents tell us," he says. "But because I know how beneficial TCM can be, I made it my goal to change that perception."

It is a vision he achieved in 2011, with a new brand called TruLife - a range of detox products aimed at time-strapped young adults.

Keeping his younger consumers in mind, he started out by improving the taste profile - working with the Food Innovation Resource Centre at Singapore Polytechnic to develop cooking methods that improved the taste, look and smell of the products.

Once he perfected the recipes, he turned his eye to aesthetics - ditching the traditional, old-school look of TCM packaging for sleek bottles, packaged in convenient, ready-to-go sizes. He also kept all instructions and ingredient information in English, making them readily accessible to younger consumers who cannot read Chinese.

And it is evident that Mr Hu's hard work has paid off. TruLife is now stocked at pharmacies such as Guardian and Watsons and, after only four years, contributes to more than a third of Poli Medical's overall revenue.

Company sales have also grown approximately 10 per cent year on year since Mr Hu came on board.

Says his father, Mr Foo, who is chief executive of Poli Medical: "Listening to Dylan's modern ideas helped take the business in a new direction. It's something I wouldn't have been able to do without him on board helping to implement changes."

And it seems like it is a case of like father, like son. When asked about his proudest achievement in the past five years, Mr Hu unwittingly echoes his dad's sentiment.

"I've put systems into place and have seen tangible results because of the changes I've helped implement... that's been the best reward," he says.

"Well, that and the fact that my Mandarin has improved 10-fold - I can now even recite proverbs in Chinese!"



ST PHOTOS: TIFFANY GOH, DANIEL NEO

Fresh take on old trades

Five business heirs share how they are injecting new ideas into old trades

Ankita Varma



New flavours for an old nuts and chips brand

Ms Esther Loo, 33, might be the third-generation scion to home-grown nuts and chips brand Tai Sun, but there was no cushy corner office waiting for her when she graduated from university in 2004.

"I thought I was set on the job front, but to my horror, my mother refused to pay me anything more than \$500 unless I had some real-world experience," the University of Melbourne graduate recalls with a laugh.

Taking her parents' advice, Ms Loo spent seven years honing her skills in advertising and marketing for brands such as L'Oréal before bringing her expertise back to Tai Sun. She joined the business as its marketing manager in 2010.

As the oldest grandchild in the family, she was the first member of the third generation to return to the coop. In doing so, the oldest of three siblings joined her parents, two uncles and aunts and 80-year-old grandmother (who still drives herself to work) to run the company.

It came at an opportune time too, considering the 49-year-old traditional business started by her grandparents was ready for change.

"At the time, blind taste tests were showing that the product was great, but our old-school branding meant the younger generation of consumers just weren't picking up our products," says Ms Loo, who is married to an engineer and has a son who is 3 1/2 years old.

Her family sought her advice to remedy the situation and to her surprise, they were open to her idea for a radical revamp.

Recalls her mother, Mrs Sandy Lim, 58, who is director at Tai Sun: "We knew something needed to be done and we needed someone to spearhead it. Thankfully, Esther helped articulate the new direction we should take."

Her first order of business? Repositioning the products and cleaning up everything from logos to packaging to give the company a fresher look and feel.

The family kept the Tai Sun brand for its traditional roasted nuts and Nature's Wonders for the premium nuts and dried fruits range, but introduced a new brand, Treatz, for its potato chips, and a new product line of gluten- and trans-fat-free cassava chips called UCA, aimed at the health-conscious younger consumer.

"That way, each of our product segments was differentiated and had a niche," Ms Loo says.

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Putting artistry back into bookbinding

Some children shun their family business or become reluctant successors.

Not Ms Winnie Chan. In fact, her childhood dream was to join her family's bookbinding business, Grandlux.

"Growing up, my ambition was to be my dad's secretary," Ms Chan, who is in her 40s, tells SundayLife with a laugh. Her father, Mr Percy Chan, 68, is chairman of Grandlux.

Her dream even had an impact on her education. Her computing science project for the A levels was based on a study of Grandlux's payroll system and she opted to read economics at the University of California as it seemed most practical for when she returned to the company.

Her elder sister is a piano teacher and is not involved in the business.

Grandlux is a traditional bookbinding business started in 1945 by her grandfather in a small shophouse at Mohamed Sultan Road.

Over the past 70 years, the business has grown from a tiny outfit producing hand-sewn paper stationery to a company that has five brands and exports goods for companies in more than 30 countries worldwide.

Still, despite her bushy-tailed enthusiasm, the journey to become general manager was not a bed of roses for Ms Chan, who joined as a sales executive in 1994.

Married and a mother of two, Ms Chan recalls an instance when, as a newbie, she decided to take orders for notebooks from individual insurance agents, only to realise the packing staff at the warehouse were not willing to pack an order that totalled only 500 pieces.

"They were used to full container loads of export shipments and weren't willing to help

mepack and deliver such a small order. Being a traditional business, there was a lot of resistance to change, so I was left to do everything myself," she says.

Still, it was experiences such as that which taught her resilience - a trait that stood her in good stead when she founded the company's newest brand, Bynd Artisan, last year.

Offering personalised notebooks and stationery, the brand reflects Ms Chan's fight to take what is thought to be a sunset industry such as bookbinding into the 21st century - all the while keeping true to its essence of craftsmanship.

"Bynd Artisan is my way to provide our younger customers with a tactile experience of choosing and making their own notebooks - something I want to preserve even as we enter a digital world," Ms Chan says.

It also gave her an opportunity to retain the craftsman to multitask as artisans, some of whom have worked at the company for more than 40 years.

The retail concept can now be found at Tangs Orchard as well as at the flagship atelier at under its belt and manufactures paper and leather goods for companies in more than 30 countries worldwide.

So promising is the take-up that the company is in talks to franchise the brand internationally, to places such as Thailand, the Philippines, Australia and Dubai.

Says Ms Chan of the past 21 years she has spent working at the family business: "I've been lucky that my dad has been incredibly open-minded and supportive of my initiatives to take the company forward."

Knowing that it's proud of what I've achieved with Bynd Artisan is what makes me happy - it's my own proudest achievement in the past two decades."

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Rebranding furniture firm to preserve dad's legacy

Mr Morgan Yeo's takeover of his family-owned furniture business, JB&F Industries, happened under a dark cloud.

The Singapore Management University business graduate had been working in property development for only slightly over a year when his father, Mr Roger Yeo, was diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer in February last year, forcing him to take over the reins earlier than expected.

"It came as a shock to the whole family," says the 27-year-old bachelor, who quit his job to help with the business while his dad went for treatment. Mr Yeo died in August last year, aged 64.



"The stakes are different with a family business. For us, it's not just about making money, it's also about preserving my dad's legacy."

MR MORGAN YEO (left), whose father died in August last year

father. "He was incredibly proud that the whole family had come on board to build the brand together," says Mr Yeo. "I think it meant a lot to him that we were keeping the business going."

Since starting Roger&Sons, Mr Yeo has moved the business from the original location in Sungei Kadut to an open-concept 3,000 sq ft workspace in Woodlands, which also features a showroom.

"I want customers to be able to feel the materials and see the options of finishes that are available to them."

"They can also see the carpenters at work and watch their furniture being built - it's all part of the experience," Mr Yeo says proudly.

The company's social media profile also plays strongly on the heritage and craftsmanship of the carpentry, summed up by the snazzy new company catchphrase: "We don't cut corners, we make them."

Asked about how he feels about taking over the family business, Mr Yeo chokes up slightly before saying: "My father may have died last year, but I feel blessed that he left me something like this. The stakes are different with a family business. For us, it's not just about making money - it's also about preserving my dad's legacy."

It's great that we can advise them on everything from materials to finishes for their custom design projects," Mr Yeo says.

He also pushed for the company to have a presence on social media, so the younger generation can see and appreciate the gritty side of things.

The brothers rolled out the company's new branding, website and social media sites last August, but not before they shared the vision for the company with their

Mrs Maisy Yeo, and younger brothers, Lincoln, 24, and Ryan, 20, before collectively agreeing that the business should be rebranded.

It was after these discussions that Roger&Sons was born - paying homage to their dad and offering customised carpentry work.

"By rebranding, we were able to do more than just build basic shelves and desks. Clients these days are well-read and

Taking shoe business into digital age

Managing director of family-owned shoe brand Heatwave, Ms Elizabeth Tan, might just be 30, but do not dismiss her as an entitled heir.

The brand was started by her father, Mr Tan Guan Huat, 61, in 2001 as his first retail venture, following 16 years in the business of designing and manufacturing shoes for companies such as Tangs Studio.

But despite growing up around shoes, Ms Tan, a National University of Singapore history graduate, initially did not intend to join the business.

"I'd seen the long hours that my dad put in to build the brand and was quite hesitant to do the same," says Ms Tan, who is married and has a three-year-old daughter. "I didn't think the entrepreneur's life was for me."

But the myriad part-time jobs she held to fund her university education - from an events business to selling credit card plans - inadvertently sparked her own interest in entrepreneurship.

She put that business savvy to good use when she decided to join the family business at age 23, almost immediately spotting a big problem in the traditionally run company.

"Because my dad's expertise was not in branding, we were selling too many different types of shoes without a niche that our younger consumer could zoom in on," Ms Tan says.

To rectify the situation, she spent two years streamlining the product categories to focus more on their best-selling pumps and worked on improving the sole and inner lining for their shoes.

She also worked on branding - changing the logo, store layouts and locations to target the 21st-century executive woman.

Her efforts culminated in 2009 with a new store at Wisma Atria, featuring the brand's new and improved shoes and a clean layout that showcased its pumps. But Ms Tan was already looking beyond Singapore's shores.

"As a small business, we were facing high rents, labour shortages and competition for good location spaces in Singapore. To keep the business going, I knew we needed to go international."

That is something she did over the next six years - successfully franchising the brand in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and Qatar. She is also in Saudi Arabia and the Philippines.

It has not always been easy. Ms Tan cites finding out that their Taiwan franchisee was copying their designs and selling them under another brand as a big lesson.

"It taught me that expanding the brand shouldn't come at the cost of good partnerships and protecting the company's intellectual property rights," she says.

She pushed for the firm to increase its social media presence and started Heatwave's online retail store - something she cites as one of her proudest achievements.

"Because our brand has been built by word of mouth, the online movement has let us interact closely with this mini tribe of loyal customers."

MS ELIZABETH TAN (left), who cites shoe business Heatwave's online retail store as one of her proudest achievements



word of mouth, the online movement has let us interact closely with this mini tribe of loyal customers," she says.

Her 27-year-old brother handles the e-commerce for the company.

Ms Tan's forward-thinking does not just stop there. She has also used her global presence to give back to the community - working with her franchise partners to do everything from feeding street kids in Indonesia to launching a free health clinic in Myanmar.

"Building a company with a strong social conscience was important to me, as it is to many of our young, 21st-century consumers," Ms Tan says. "The business is my platform to give back."

It seems even her more traditional father has come on board with the changes she has championed.

"When asked about his daughter's contributions over the past seven years, Mr Tan says proudly: "We have to appeal to the younger generation to keep the brand relevant and fresh. Thanks to Elizabeth's contributions, I feel that we have a brighter future."

MS ELIZABETH TAN (left), who cites shoe business Heatwave's online retail store as one of her proudest achievements