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## RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

## This CEO's not standing still on stationery

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Bynd Artisan

The interior of one of Bynd Artisan's four outlets in Singapore.

Tucked in the heart of [Singapore's](#) Holland Village, Bynd Artisan stands as a contrast to the "smart nation" image the city-state is trying to build. The store's concept? Fully customizable paper notebooks that are hand-bound by craftsmen (and women) in the store.

The brand is the brainchild of Winnie Chan, heir to Singapore-grown printing and bookbinding company Grandluxe, and her husband, James Quan.

The store in Holland Village is their fourth outlet since the company was set up in 2014. The shelves are filled with a wide selection of papers, covers and twin-wires. At the center of the store is an island, much like a craftsman's corner, where the notebooks are put together in about 10 minutes. On selected days, the store holds bookbinding classes conducted by a 71-year-old expert in the craft.

Starting at a time when bookstores across the country were shutting down, Chan, who is CEO and founder of Bynd Artisan, wanted her concept to stand out.

"We tried to be very English, in the way we named our collections. We did not want to be seen as Asian," Chan told CNBC.

However, the idea backfired and the company faced difficulties getting retail space.



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So, at the suggestion of renowned New York-based photographer John Clang, Bynd Artisan rebranded to promote its Asian roots and heritage, which include decorating their outlets with old photographs, newspaper cuttings and pages taken from old order books that belonged to her grandfather.

It was the just another step in Chan's learning curve.



Not every young, well-educated upstart, armed with an economics degree from the University of California, Berkeley, would willingly join a family business in an analog industry that many warn is on its last leg.

Different surveys have shown succession planning remains an issue for many family businesses when it comes to convincing the next generation heirs to give up other lucrative job opportunities to take over the helms.

But Annie Koh, a professor of finance at the Singapore Management University, told CNBC there needs to be a nuanced approach to such surveys.

"When you take fresh graduates, you cannot blame them. Because most of them would say it's my first job, why should I go back to the family firm first?," said Koh.

Koh added heirs from previous generations had limited career choices. "It had been instilled in them very early whatever talent you have, whatever investments we made in you, it's at the sacrifice of many other people. So you owe it to the family to return home to work for the family."

For Chan, however, the decision to start her career in the family business came naturally. "I have played in the company since I was young."

From skipping classes to attend exhibitions in Paris, London and Frankfurt, to devoting a computing project in school to build an automated payroll system for the family business, her ties to the family business started off on solid grounds. Chan joined Grandlux, the former parent company of Bynd Artisan, in 1994 as a third-generation employee.



Bynd Artisan

"My title was sales executive, but nobody really told me what to do because I was the boss's daughter," she said. She is currently a director

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at Grandluxe.

Not wanting to bank on her inherent privilege to climb the corporate ladder, Chan began to carve her niche within the company by undertaking small projects on her own within the business.

Chan belongs to a generation of entrepreneurs in Singapore that HSBC



Entrepreneur



"Entrepreneurs here are retaining connections to the family business," said Sandeep Sharma, head of HSBC Private Bank in Southeast Asia, in a report. "This means they are either starting out on their own using family resources or continuing the family business and placing their own mark on it by introducing new innovations."

Grandluxe started off as a small bindery workshop on Singapore's historic Mohamed Sultan road, founded by her grandfather, Chan Koon Song, in 1942.

"He started a small outfit and my grandmother was hand-sewing exercise books," said Chan. "That was pre-war in Singapore, so he only registered the company in 1945, after the war." Singapore was under Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945.

## Timeless skill takes on a modern touch

Her grandfather's death handed the helms of the company to her father, Percy Chan, who grew the business by investing in machinery and exploring overseas markets, particularly in the Middle East. If Chan's grandfather laid the groundwork for Grandluxe, and her father who built the pillars, it was Chan who designed the interior and added the finishing touches to the business, turning it from a back-end business-to-business supplier of notebooks and other office paper products to a household brand.

"I felt the design element was missing in our business because we were making very functional products, such as boring, blue accounts books," said Chan. "It had a very utilitarian look and it was not attractive in terms of the range of colors and designs."

The lack of sophistication in the notebooks had cornered Grandluxe into a market where they sold mostly to wholesalers and retailers, which Chan said, was very "cut-throat," lacked customer loyalty and made it difficult to build a recognizable brand.

Koh explained to CNBC that for business heirs such as Chan, today's disruptive environment means they have the pressure to constantly innovate to keep the business afloat. "What has traditionally worked for a lot of the family firms ... are not a given anymore."

Currently, 70 percent of Grandluxe's business is still in the business-to-business space, selling to wholesalers, retailers, distributors and corporations. The remaining 30 percent are Grandluxe's own branded products including Monologue, which started in 2007 and markets itself as a cheaper competitor to Moleskine.

## Family, and government, support helps

Under Chan, the company ventured into selling directly to customers through Bynd Artisan, where she retained full control. As of May 1, 2016,

Chan said Bynd Artisan was an independent company, owned exclusively by her and her husband. For the future, she is betting on people's desire to still write in notebooks to grow the business globally.

Her father, Percy, who is managing director and chairman of Grandluxe, has always been supportive of her projects, even the ones he knew might not succeed, Chan said.



BYND ARTISAN



government." Chan approached SPRING Singapore, which helps local enterprises grow their business, and received some funding to foot the consultancy bill to create the branding for Bynd Artisan - she did not specify the amount, but said it was about 70 percent of the total bill.

So what did he think of his daughter's latest venture?

"I overheard him telling a banker, well the government is supporting her so it must be good ... I don't want to meddle too much."

In an era when people prefer to customize their smartphones with snazzy covers and apps, it remains to be seen if Chan can bring back the old world charm of writing on pen and paper in made to order notebooks.

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