

THE GAME CHANGERS

# CHARMAIN KWEE: STEERING A CAR EMPIRE AT 27

Her innovative leadership and strategic acumen are propelling her father's company, Eurokars, into a new era of automotive excellence. BY HELMI YUSOF

**SHE STARTED DRIVING AT 13.** When her parents were not home, Charmain Kwee would hop into one of the family's cars and drive around the compound. She avoided going onto the public roads - she knew that would be breaking the law. But for short and safe drives, there were plenty of cars in the garage to choose from: a Porsche, Range Rover, Mini, Mazda and Saab, among others.

Her father, Karsono Kwee, had channelled his childhood passion for cars into building Eurokars, the biggest privately owned auto dealership in Singapore, focusing on luxury brands such as Porsche, Rolls-Royce, BMW, Mini, Pagani and McLaren. The fleet at home was as diverse as the brands he carried in his showrooms.

"Once, I reversed one of the cars into this rocky feature of the house. And the rock chipped the back bumper of the car. Fortunately, no one found out about it - until, well, maybe today," she recounts with a laugh.

Yet, despite growing up around cars, Kwee was dead-set on not following in her father's footsteps. Inspired by her mother's commitment to community service, she wanted to forge her own path as a lawyer who could help the less privileged fight for their rights. When she graduated from Singapore Management University's Yong Pung How School of Law, she found herself naturally drawn to cases involving marginalised individuals and communities. She wanted to use her skills to amplify their voices and struggles.

Although that gave her a strong sense of achievement, something happened in the early 2020s that changed her mind: Eurokars was working on a joint venture with Porsche, the details of which were bogging the senior Kwee down. The younger Kwee couldn't bear to see her father "unhappy", so she decided to help the team with the legal agreements. She was soon roped in to handle another massive deal involving BMW, and from there, her "love for the car industry grew".

In January 2022, Kwee accepted a position as executive director of the company her father founded in 1985 - launching her, now aged 27, into a major leadership role. In Singapore, Eurokars represents Rolls-Royce, Mini, Mazda, McLaren, MG, Pagani, BMW and Porsche. In Indonesia, it represents Porsche, Rolls-Royce, BMW and BMW M, Mazda, Maserati, Ferrari, Pagani, Bentley, Mini, as well as two more soon-to-be-revealed brands. The group also owns a Mazda dealership in Perth, Australia, and operates Rolls-Royce dealerships in China's Nanning, Shanghai Pudong and Shenzhen.

The company runs approximately two dozen showrooms in four countries, sells about 15,000 cars a year, and employs more than 1,700 people.

When Kwee thinks of the mini empire she's helping to run, she feels somewhat daunted by the magnitude of it all. "But I don't think it's a bad thing to find it daunting or challenging, because that means that I'm not comfortable yet," she says.

"Progress arises from an uncomfortable environment, in the sense that when you get too comfortable, that means you're not changing, you're slacking and not growing. So I think it's good I'm still feeling this way... But comparing myself now to about a year or two years ago, I think I've grown a lot in terms of understanding the business."

## YOUTHFUL IDEAS

If anything, her youthful ideas are actually helping propel Eurokars into a new era of the automotive industry. She works hard at understanding the nitty-gritty of the company's operations, something her complex legal training has prepared her for. But apart from that, there's also her realisation that Gen Z - of which she is a

part - wants a life that looks quite different from that of their parents.

"My parents' generation wants to own things. They have an ownership mindset. But if you see the rest of my peers, priorities have shifted. Nowadays, people prioritise experiences over possessions. So they would prefer renting a house and saving their money for trips and experiences. They want to be asset-light.

"That trend is reflected in the growing number of car-sharing companies. And, in light of that, Eurokars is ramping up its car leasing services, with personalised short-term car rentals and long-term plans for car leasing. We're trying to expand our entire ecosystem so we can cater to every single person's needs."

Elsewhere, her youthful sensibility is also changing the way Eurokars is marketing its products and services, with more digital and social media strategies aimed at reaching younger audiences. By leveraging her understanding of 20-something preferences, she's steering Eurokars towards a future where connectivity and accessibility - with a dose of cheekiness - are paramount.

For evidence, steer yourself over to the Eurokars Leasing Instagram account, which is populated with seemingly candid images of young people picnicking, shopping or simply having a good time.

All these moves feel like icing on the cake for the company, which has gone from strength to strength since its founding. In 2023, it opened a new S\$106 million eight-storey flagship Eurokars Centre at 11 Kung Chong Road, serving as the group's headquarters for the region. Within the

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building is Asia-Pacific's largest Rolls-Royce showroom, as well as the first BMW Eurokars Experience Centre in Singapore.

There are also dedicated workshops for supercar brands Pagani and McLaren, and servicing facilities for BMW and Rolls-Royce, alongside Eurokars' large management offices.

Yet, beneath the shiny new veneer, Kwee admits there are many things in the company that are still run according to her father's old-fashioned way of doing things, particularly when it comes to managing people. She says: "My father's leadership style is deeply rooted in his passion for cars. He is a walking encyclopaedia of car industry knowledge.

"In contrast, I'm new to this world and I'm still navigating a myriad of challenges... My natural instinct is to understand the underlying logic of things. If something does not make sense to me, I instantly question and challenge it. But my dad would go: 'It's okay... sometimes, it's okay to just leave things as they are.'"

It took a colleague to remind Kwee of

why she joined her father's company in the first place - because he's her father and she loves him very much. Since then, she's learnt to negotiate better with him, and back away from an issue if he feels very strongly about it.

"At the end of the day, we both want the same things for our customers: to create a seamless and unparalleled experience when they come to us."

She adds: "The automotive industry is extremely dynamic and fast-moving, akin to the fashion industry - although most people don't know this. The car brands understand that different people have different needs at different junctures of their lives, so they're always evolving their products to meet that."

There is one subject, however, where Kwee is holding her ground. Like many Asian parents, hers want her to get married before she turns 30. But Kwee says: "I want to embrace the responsibility of running the family business. While I'm open to what the future holds for me in other aspects of life, I'm happy to let things unfold naturally. But my focus now is solely on the business."



JACKET, TROUSERS, BOOTS & SUNG BAG: HIGH JEWELLERY; EARRINGS & RING: LOUIS VUITTON. LOCATION: LOUIS VUITTON APARTMENT, NEE ANN QTY.