

# How this mum made motherhood work

AND AT THE HEART OF IT, MOTHERSWORK FOUNDER **SHARON WONG** HAS A PASSION TO EMPOWER THE NEXT GENERATION OF WOMEN.

BY **KAREN TEE**



COVER

HIGH JEWELLERY EARRINGS IN WHITE GOLD WITH BLACK SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARLS AND DIAMONDS, AND HIGH JEWELLERY NECKLACE IN WHITE GOLD WITH BLACK SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARL AND DIAMONDS, BOTH FROM **MIKIMOTO**

POLYESTER TOP, FROM **MINJUKIM** AT SOCIETYA; COTTON SKIRT, FROM **MARNI**; SHOES (WORN THROUGHOUT), SHARON'S OWN; BASHFUL TULIP PINK BUNNY FROM **JELLYCAT** AND COLETTE TOY PRAM FROM **MOMIJI**, BOTH AT MOTHERSWORK

**I**t has been an unusually quiet few months for Sharon Wong. Like much of the global population, this dynamic jetsetter, whose business is largely based in China, had her wings clipped because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

So Wong, the founder of Motherswork, a retail chain specialising in products for mothers and babies, decided to use the downtime in Singapore to reconnect with her passion for what she does.

“Since being grounded, I’ve been conducting shop tours for new mothers-to-be in Singapore. Having been so absorbed in growing the China market, I’d forgotten that sharing my experiences is one of the things I love most,” says Wong, 56, who has 12 Motherswork stores in China and two in Singapore.

From the start of her foray into the world of baby products in the mid ’90s, she’s aimed to demystify the bewildering world of gadgets and devices. Think prams, cots, sterilisers, bottles, pumps, stretch mark creams and more. Instead of urging women to load up their carts with all manner of paraphernalia, Wong tells her clients to whittle it down to an initial three main investments — stroller, car seat and cot. Others can come later, if needed at all.

“I was just with a first-time mum and she told me she did not realise it was that simple. Sometimes you just need someone to talk you through it,” says Wong.

It boils down to her mission to make the task of parenting easier.

“By using products that take care of their daily routines, mums can spend more time nurturing and playing with their babies. So, success to me is when first-time mothers walk out of Motherswork feeling a little less overwhelmed.”

With three grown-up children, aged 19, 21 and 24, she speaks from personal experience when she tells of the trials of getting appropriately kitted out for motherhood. The Malaysian-born Wong, who became a Singapore citizen when she turned 50, says the first obstacle she ran into during her first pregnancy was building her maternity wardrobe. Back in 1996, she held a regional tax and treasury role in a multinational company and was horrified at having “to swap Armani suits for Peter Pan collars and printed frocks”.

“I remember thinking, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m supposed to negotiate loans and do acquisitions while wearing these,’” she says with a laugh. Thankfully, during her business travels to the US, she discovered brands that designed business-appropriate maternity clothing that she would not

**“By using products that take care of their daily routines, mums can then spend more time nurturing and playing with their babies.**

**So, success to me is when first-time mothers walk out of Motherswork feeling a little less overwhelmed”**

feel embarrassed to be seen in. Along the way, due to a lack of variety in Singapore, the self-confessed gadget geek also began shopping for the best baby products in countries including Australia, Holland and the US.

By 1998, having received enough enquiries from other mothers about where her clothes and kiddy items came from, she started a maternity store at Forum the Shopping Mall as a hobby. In 2000, she expanded her vision for Motherswork by launching a total shopping experience for mothers, babies and kids at Great World City (GWC).

“I called it a one-stop shop with clothes and gadgets like strollers, car seats and other little things such as forks, spoons and ice cream makers for kids I’d tried and tested,” she recalls. “In between work, I took my kids there to hang out and other mums would come in.”

For the next decade, she kept the shop going even when the family moved to the US when her Australian husband was posted there for work. Only in 2009, upon their return to Singapore, did she seriously consider growing the Motherswork business. Her kids were older by then, which gave her more free time.

First, she redesigned the GWC store to improve customer experience, then gradually opened three more retail stores across the island (the GWC and Tanglin Mall outlets are still open).

With just 35,000 babies born in Singapore annually, Wong

ROYAL OAK SELF-WINDING CHRONOGRAPH IN WHITE GOLD WITH BRILLIANT-CUT DIAMONDS AND BAGEUTTE-CUT EMERALDS, FROM AUDEMARS PIGUET

SILK LINEN COAT, FROM LORO PIANA; BRACELET AND RINGS (WORN THROUGHOUT), SHARON'S OWN



Sharon is determined to help smooth the way for the next generation of female entrepreneurs. “I think we give them integrity by having a presence in brick-and-mortar stores instead of just online. Since then, a lot of them have expanded into department stores and some have learned from us to do retail and launched their own stores”

quickly realised there was a limit to Motherswork’s expansion here. So in 2012, she took the plunge and set up shop in China.

Entering the Chinese market was a decision born out of necessity, Wong admits. She had also approached landlords in neighbouring countries including Malaysia and Indonesia, but only received a callback from Beijing’s Solana mall.

“No one else would give us an opportunity because we were a small enterprise from Singapore,” she recounts.

Detractors told her not to accept the offer because the mall was considered “dead” as tenants were leaving the space. “But it was an opportunity for us to gain a foothold,” she says.

Ever the savvy businesswoman, Wong negotiated for a prime location in the middle of the mall. Motherswork became one of the pioneering multi-label retailers to introduce premium brands such as Bugaboo, Stokke and Babyzen into China.

Seven years and multiple locations later, this award-winning outlet remains her best-performing store, something she never dreamed would happen, she notes with a delighted chuckle. Solana mall, located in Beijing’s embassy district, is now widely regarded as one of the country’s top children’s malls.

“I can’t say that it is just us, but we were one of the originals to put together this kind of shopping experience for parents. Of course, the Chinese are fast to adapt, but everyone has to lift each other up to succeed,” she says.

This ethos of empowering others, especially women, remains a guiding principle in her life. Besides volunteering as a mentor for Crib, a social enterprise for female entrepreneurs, Wong has also set aside retail space in her stores to carry products by up-and-coming Singapore brands. Many of these entrepreneurs, she highlights, are customers who left their full-time jobs after having children and set up businesses on the side.

Her dedication is inspired by the difficulties she faced while trying to grow her business abroad.

“One of the silliest things I heard when I was trying to expand was, I had to show the malls I

could operate outside Singapore. But nobody wanted to give me that first chance,” she says.

Hence, she is determined to help smooth the way for the next generation of female entrepreneurs. “I think we give them integrity by having a presence in brick-and-mortar stores instead of just online. Since then, a lot of them have expanded into department stores and some have learned from us to do retail and launched their own stores,” observes Wong.

Some local brands that got their big break at Motherswork include apparel labels La Petit Society and Maison Q, as well as Hegen, a range of bottles and devices for breastfeeding. Hegen, which launched in China in partnership with Motherswork, has become a global bestseller.

She derives great pride in seeing the community of female founders she has helped nurture continue to pay it forward by supporting each other. “They always come back and say, ‘Thank you for working with us’. Now that they are successful, we lift each other up by collaborating on projects and initiatives,” she says.

Wong is equally passionate about her 140-strong team, which has paid off in terms of staff loyalty. In Singapore, where 85 percent of her team are women, her very first employee has been with the company for 22 years.

Her management teams in China have also been with her from day one. “People told me my biggest challenge in China would be retaining staff as they will jump ship for just 100 yuan, but six, seven years later, they are still with me,” she says.

She recounts an incident when a competitor tried to poach her staff. Her employees later told her they did not even show up for the job interview. She takes this as an affirmation that she is doing something right by her team.

“I tried to find people who feel they can grow together with us. We empower them so it becomes a journey together, like a family.

HIGH JEWELLERY EARRINGS IN WHITE GOLD WITH WHITE SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARLS AND DIAMONDS, AND HIGH JEWELLERY NECKLACE IN WHITE GOLD WITH WHITE SOUTH SEA CULTURED PEARL AND DIAMONDS, BOTH FROM MIKIMOTO

BABY CASHMERE TOP AND BABY CASHMERE SKIRT, BOTH FROM LORO PIANA; IMAGINE DOU PUPPET RABBIT AND VANILLE LAMB DOUDOU PUPPET, BOTH FROM KALOO AT MOTHERSWORK



HIGH JEWELLERY EARRINGS  
IN WHITE GOLD WITH  
WHITE SOUTH SEA  
CULTURED PEARLS  
AND DIAMONDS,  
FROM MIKIMOTO

COTTON-BLEND DRESS,  
FROM MARNI; TRIPP TRAPP  
CHAIR, FROM STOKKE  
AT MOTHERSWORK

“Success is when you  
surround yourself  
with people who will  
walk through the  
fire with you”



They know what we do here is a team effort,” she says.

In January, Motherswork held its annual dinner in China ahead of the extensive Covid-19 lockdowns, where she presented the company's third batch of five-year long service awards to employees. She muses: “We've been very lucky. Success is when you surround yourself with people who will walk through the fire with you.”

For the immediate future, she will focus her efforts on the recovery of her China business post-Covid-19. In the longer run, Wong, who has spent more than two decades building her business, will be looking into legacy planning.

All her children have pulled shifts at her stores during their school holidays, and are familiar with the business and the brands she carries. They can even identify strollers on the streets, she quips. If any of them expresses interest in the business, she trusts that her existing team can whip them into shape, she says.

For now though, they are all pursuing their own career interests, something the dotting mother fully encourages. Her middle daughter, for example, is a budding activist; the law graduate is currently taking a gap year to be a freelance writer.

More important for Wong and her husband is that they uphold the values of paying it forward through their actions. Despite a privileged upbringing, the kids always make time to volunteer for non-profits. Her youngest son has even left an imprint on Motherswork's corporate social responsibility programme.

“When they were little, they would get an obscene amount of presents for Christmas. So one year, we suggested that the children choose three of their favourite gifts and donate the rest to the Salvation Army,” she says.

A few years back, inspired by this childhood memory, Wong's son suggested that Motherswork launch a holiday initiative by getting children at HCSA Community Services, the company's adopted charity, to write down their wishes. These wishes were placed on “giving trees” in Motherswork stores for customers to pick out and fulfil — the rest would be granted by the company.

“Now, the team has started to roll with it and they are very passionate about it. The moment the wishes are up, my kids and my team are there picking out the wishes they want to fulfil,” she says, her eyes lighting up.

Seeing this spark for giving back ignited in her offspring and team has also renewed her zest for giving back. With conviction, she says: “I want to be that woman who is there for other women. I want to be able to provide a springboard to lift them up, whether their journey is into motherhood or entrepreneurship.” **A**

“I want to be that woman who is  
there for other women. I want to be  
able to provide a springboard to  
lift them up, whether their  
journey is into motherhood  
or entrepreneurship”

art direction **Catherine Wong**

photography **TG Gan**

fashion styling **Aaron Kok**

makeup **Amy Chow** using Laura Mercier

hair **Sean Ang** using Keune

fashion assistance **Pricilia Chan**

photography assistance **Samsidi Bin Baderi**