

Ms Sharon Wong's desire to find the best baby products for her three children led her to found Motherswork, "a one-stop shop for mothers, babies and kids". The first Motherswork store opened in 1998 in Forum Galleria selling fashionable maternity wear – even as Ms Wong was still holding a full-time job. ST PHOTO: FELINE LIM



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‘Motherhood should not hold a woman back’

Sharon Wong on how she built her Motherswork empire while raising three children



Wong Kim Hoh

Deputy Life Editor

Sharon Wong believes that choices and actions can often set off a chain of events which will significantly shape our futures and affect lives besides our own.

One of her biggest life-changing moments took place four decades ago when she was 16. Then a schoolgirl in Malaysia, she was standing outside the gates of Ipoh's Main Convent one day when she realised that she had enjoyed her secondary school life so much she hadn't planned for the future.

"I represented Perak in badminton and I was in the netball team, but I forgot about my studies," she says, adding that her grades were too mediocre to get her admitted into the local universities.

"I also realised that if I didn't do something about it, I would be barefooted, pregnant and stuck in this little town," the now 58-year-old adds, perhaps a tad melodramatically.

The idea of a reset seized her. "I wanted to get out of there, and I knew that if I went overseas, I would stand a chance," she recalls.

Getting to Australia was not easy (more details about that later), but that was where she ended up. She buckled down, studied hard and managed to get into Monash University where she majored in accountancy, and later enjoyed a high-flying career including more than a decade as the globe-trotting tax and treasury director of a multinational.

Serendipity engineered other developments in her life. Her desire to find the best baby

products for her three children led her to found Motherswork, "a one-stop shop for mothers, babies and kids".

There are two Motherswork stores in Singapore and 12 in China, where it is also one of the country's top 50 most influential companies for juvenile products.

The company, she says, is still a work in progress.

"In three to five years, we hope to hit \$100 million in annual revenue," says Ms Wong who has just written a book *Wo(Mum): Living My Life As A Warrior, Woman And Mum*. The proceeds of the book go to Halogen Foundation, a non-profit outfit which works with youths.

She is an interesting interviewee – confident, charismatic and authoritative but also unguarded and unabashed about showing her vulnerability.

"I cry at the drop of a hat, you know," she warns.

The elder of two children grew up in a rubber plantation, about 20km from the mining town of Ipoh. Her father was the plantation's accounts clerk, her mother a housewife.

They lived in a house up on a hill with practically no neighbours. Growing up, her playmates were her brother and some imaginary friends. She didn't have much of a social life after school.

"My brother and I'd get up early in the morning from Monday to Friday, my mother would drive us to school in the city and she would keep herself occupied there before picking us up from school and making the long drive home."

The relatively isolated existence, however, taught her independence and resilience.

"I didn't look for gratification from other people, maybe because it was never there. And if I wanted something, I would find ways to go and get it rather than rely on someone else to put it on a platter," she says.

Her parents sent her to live with an aunt in the city when she started secondary school. She revelled in the newfound freedom and got involved in almost every sport, at the expense of her studies.

Then came the day outside the school gate. As the family was not rich, mustering the courage to ask

her father to send her overseas was not easy. She found an unexpected ally in her late maternal grandmother in what proved to be a life-changing quest.

"I'm the daughter of her youngest daughter. I was surprised I was even in her radar because she had so many grandchildren," Ms Wong says. "She told my father: 'What's the problem? If she wants to go, let her go.'"

"I'll always remember my grandma winking at me and saying: 'What's he going to do if you don't come back? I'll be long dead.'"

Melbourne was formative in more ways than one. She conquered her lack of confidence and learnt to speak up, not just for herself, but also for others.

"It happened in my second year at university. We did a group assignment and there were issues, so the lecturer called us into his room and asked for an explanation," she recalls.

Frustrated that her project mates could not articulate what they wanted to say, she piped up.

"And then everyone was silent. And the professor just said to me: 'Why don't you always speak the way you speak, and write the way you speak because people will listen?'"

Upon graduation in 1986, she started working in the tax department of accounting firm Coopers & Lybrand in Melbourne, followed by a posting to the Singapore office in 1990. She was then barely 27, one of the youngest managers at Coopers, which is now part of PwC.

Barely a year later, she was headhunted to be the regional tax and treasury director by American consumer goods company Sara Lee.

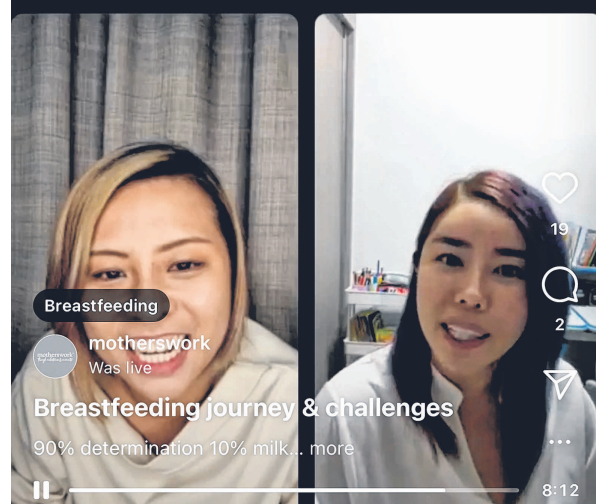
With a laugh, she says she was woefully "under-qualified" for the job. In retrospect, she reckons it saw something in her she didn't know she had.

Despite her reservations, she took up the gauntlet and flourished. Her tax experience stood her in good stead since her new job involved a lot of mergers and acquisitions (M&As).

"When you're given an opportunity, you've got to take it



Above: The opening of Motherswork's store at Beijing Solana mall in 2012. To this day, 10 years after its opening, it is the best performing of her 12 stores in China.



Left: Ms Wong pivoted her Singapore business amid the pandemic, which saw her stocking new product lines by local brands and launching a slew of programmes including Heart To Heart Conversations on Instagram where she discussed motherhood challenges with women entrepreneurs. PHOTOS: SHARON WONG

and run with it. You may not be ready, but if you are willing, then say: 'I want this and I can do this.' You can. I think it's one of the things we women don't do enough of," she says.

In 1993, she married her Australian Chinese husband Ken, who is now a private investor. When he was posted to Hong Kong, her company moved her there too.

The seeds of Motherswork were sown in the former British colony. Pregnant with her first child, she could not find maternity suitable clothes for professionals.

So she opened a small store – "I've always wanted to own a business" – selling fashionable maternity dresses she bought on her working trips to the United States.

It was also her first failure. The store closed months after she returned to Singapore because she was not around to keep an eye on things.

The idea of starting resurfaced when she got pregnant again in Singapore.

"I was wearing all my old maternity clothes. And everyone I met – the bankers, the senior vice-presidents – asked me where I got them so I knew there was a business there."

As she was still working full-time, she opened another side gig in 1998 – the first Motherswork store in Forum Galleria selling fashionable maternity wear.

By the time she was pregnant with her third child two years later, she had a black book of all the products – not just clothes – that she had researched for new mothers.

"Everything from cot to car seat and I thought why wouldn't I share these with all these other mums?" says Ms Wong, who then opened "a one-stop shopping experience for mothers, babies and kids" in Great World City in 2000.

Not long after, her husband told her that her long-held daydream of becoming an expat wife was about to come true. He'd been offered the chief financial officer job at the Nike headquarters in Oregon. The decision to quit her job was not difficult.

"I'd travelled the world and done all the acquisitions that I needed to do. I didn't need to go to Delhi for the 10th time. The job was great, but I was ready to call it a day," she says.

The US was another game changer.

"I'd thought I was Supermum. I had three children, a professional job and ran a side gig; I thought I could do it all," she says of life in Singapore, adding she'd become a tad arrogant.

"After I moved to the US, I realised this was rubbish. There is no help there. Career women there drop their children off to daycare, go to work, pick their kids up, come back and still have to do the laundry, cook and everything in between. I was like, 'Sharon Wong, you know nothing.'"

But like she always has, she stepped up to the plate and became an involved mother.

"I always say the US made me become the mother I want to be."

The Wongs stayed in the US for eight years. While raising her kids, Ms Wong continued to run Motherswork in Singapore remotely. She also took advantage of her time in the US to network with manufacturers of quality products and upped her marketing game by wandering around stores, taking note of the way retailers laid out their stores and made shopping experiential.

When she returned to Singapore, she put all she had imbibed into practice, professionalising and turning Motherswork into a premium mother-and-baby retailer. Sales skyrocketed.

But Sharon harboured dreams of expanding beyond Singapore into Malaysia, Indonesia and China. Attempts to get a foothold in the first two countries failed, but she managed to get into China – where she had done a lot of M&As – although not in quite the way she expected.

Malls in cities like Shanghai and Beijing initially turned up their noses at what they perceived to be a mom-and-pop outfit from Singapore. One day, however, she received a call from the Beijing Solana mall with an offer of space.

There was just one problem. It was not a popular mall. The space she wanted – in the middle of the complex – had been unoccupied since construction.

Everyone she knew advised her against taking the 7,000 sq ft space.

"But when you want something, you just want it. I wanted to expand and this was my only opportunity and this was the only mall so I told myself we have to 'die die' make it work," she says.

She did, thanks to the store's concept, layout and range of international brands. To this day, 10 years after its opening, it is the best performing of her 12 stores in China.

Covid-19, however, put the brakes on her expansion plans in the country. So, she took the time to recalibrate her Singapore operations instead.

"We pivoted the business here to very quickly offer virtual shopping and personal tours for mums because Covid-19 or not, the baby is going to come," she says, adding the company even went into kerbside deliveries during the circuit breaker.

She started stocking new product lines by local brands and launched a slew of programmes including Heart To Heart Conversations on Instagram where she discussed motherhood challenges with women entrepreneurs, and Meet The Makers, which profiles the creators of baby product brands.

Since 2009, her business has been paying it forward through initiatives such as Motherswork Gives Back, and Timothy's Giving Tree, the brainchild of her youngest child.

Ms Wong strongly believes that if babies are raised right, society changes. She sees Motherswork as an enterprise to help women and mothers raise children efficiently and effectively.

Ultimately, she wants to do her part in lifting women and encouraging them to soar.

"I do believe that women can have it all. Maybe not always at the same time – you have to balance and decide what is important at this particular point in time to move forward."

kimhoh@sph.com.sg

SCAN TO WATCH
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