

life

D **EVA ON THE MOVE**
Emma Kingston: Evita musical is a test in stamina
D3

CROWD LU
The charmer knows how to work a crowd
D7



Two's Company With Bynd Artisan's James Quan and Winnie Chan

Stationery that binds

Husband-and-wife team says running their business, which customises paper and leather goods, has fortified their marriage



Venessa Lee

Other couples may balk at the idea of working together, but Ms Winnie Chan and Mr James Quan say being business partners has strengthened their marriage.

The co-founders of Bynd Artisan, which customises paper and leather goods, have been married for 21 years.

Ms Chan, who is in her mid-40s,

says their company is their "baby" now that they have "empty nest syndrome" as their children, students Vera, 20, and Josh, 17, are leading busy lives.

"We have been happily married all this while. The business helps our marriage even more," says Mr Quan, 50, chairman of Bynd Artisan.

"It's because we spend more time together," adds Ms Chan, the firm's chief executive officer. "If both of us are not in it, the other half would probably wonder about the amount of time we spend working."

The long hours involved in setting up shop seem to have paid off amply. In barely four years, Bynd Artisan has won high-profile accolades and awards.

Founded in 2014, Bynd Artisan specialises in designing and producing customised notebooks, bespoke gifts, stationery and leather goods.

Prices range from \$35 for an A5-sized notebook to \$1,500 for a nine-piece leather desk set. It is also embarking on a project with the Istana.

The firm collaborates with designers, musicians and other local talent to produce lifestyle items and offers crafting workshops such as mediaeval bookbinding and the making of leather cardholders.

Last year, during his May Day Rally Speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned Bynd Artisan as an example of local firms upgrading and expanding.

Ms Chan is the third-generation scion of her family's bookbinding business, Grandlux, which is more than 70 years old. Founded by her late grandfather and headed by her father, the company made stationery such as address books.

After working at Grandlux for about two decades, Ms Chan set up Bynd Artisan with Mr Quan to modernise the traditional art of bookbinding by focusing on personalised and bespoke items.

When the duo started the firm, they hired five production workers who were to be retrenched when the Grandlux factory in Jurong closed.

The couple rebranded them as

craftsmen because they did not want the employees' bookbinding expertise to go to waste.

Mr Quan says hiring the workers provided the catalyst to launch Bynd Artisan.

Since then, Bynd Artisan – winner of the President's Design Award – Design of the Year 2016 and Best Shopping Experience at the Singapore Tourism Awards 2017 – has been on an expansion blitz.

It has four stores in Singapore and a fifth will open later this year in Ion Orchard, where a pop-up outlet is set to launch next month. There are plans to venture to Shanghai this year.

It may be a fledgling business, but Bynd Artisan has been a dream in the making for decades.

Mr Quan says: "It is a combination of our expertise. We look like a start-up, but we have decades of experience in our respective fields."

"We always wanted to build a brand together."

After studying communications at California State University, Fresno, Mr Quan spent a few years designing websites before working in the corporate gifts sector for 20 years.

Mr Quan says a bulk order for corporate gifts, which are in demand by banks and multinational companies, could ring up a six-figure sum. The company is set to exceed its sales target of \$6 million this year, he adds.

His experience in corporate gifting gels with his wife's 22 years at Grandlux, where she learnt about manufacturing, supply-chain logistics and other aspects of the bookbinding trade.

A fondness for cute Sanrio stationery played a part in their story.

Ms Chan says: "I had a love of stationery from young – My Melody and Little Twin Stars."

She did not use the stationery

produced by the family business because she felt it was "boring with no design focus".

"I wanted to design my own stationery and move into the lifestyle sector," she said.

As a child, though, she found the family business and its world of work trips and trade exhibitions "glamorous".

She aimed to be her father's secretary and, to that end, even mastered shorthand after sitting the Primary School Leaving Examination.

Ms Chan, who has an older sister, joined the family firm as a marketing executive after studying economics at the University of California, Berkeley, and eventually became a director at Grandlux.

Several years ago, she deliberated on the declining bookstore trade and what its future could be. The couple decided to focus on providing a top-notch customer experience and personalised products.

There were a few missteps before they took the plunge in 2014, forming Bynd Artisan with \$300,000 of their own money.

Two years earlier, in 2012, they launched a lookbook with their leather and paper products.

Inspired by British vintage stores, it had names such as The Middleton Collection, a "pseudo-Western" concept, says Mr Quan.

Elaborating on why they did not present themselves as a brand with a local identity at first, he says: "We did not have confidence in the market (to strongly support a local brand) and in ourselves."

But with SG50 – Singapore's Golden Jubilee – being celebrated on a grand scale in 2015, it drummed up support for all things local and the demand for home-grown brands skyrocketed, they say.

PUTTING A MODERN SPIN ON AN OLD-SCHOOL TRADE continued on D2

Mr James Quan and Ms Winnie Chan at Bynd Artisan's outlet in Holland Village.

PHOTOS: LIN ZHAOWEI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES, ESPLANADE – THEATRES ON THE BAY

Putting a modern spin on an old-school trade

FROM D1

To ride on this surge in interest, Ms Chan and Mr Quan have taken steps to make their stores millennial-friendly.

They have senior craftsmen making personalised notebooks in-store to give customers a peek into the backroom of bookbinding.

Ms Chan says: "The older generation think that if the design is nice, you'd better not let people take photos of the products or others will copy it. But in the Instagram age, nothing is private."

She trained staff to welcome customers to take photos at Bynd Artisan stores. The company's 20 full-time and eight part-time staff are a mix of younger and older workers, aged up to 75.

A friend of the couple's, Ms Wy-Lene Yap, 32, says the pair have "managed to modernised an old-school industry" in part due to their close bond and mutual respect, which creates a supportive environment that "allows each of them to take risks".

Ms Yap, founder and managing editor of High Net Worth, a business and luxury lifestyle website, says this risk-taking is seen in Bynd Artisan's unlikely collaborations with partners such as local singer Joel Tan, known as Gentle Bones.

Other collaborators include fashion label Ong Shunmugam and Ms Chan's uncle, Ignatius Chan, founder of Iggy's restaurant.

The couple's daughter, Ms Vera Quan, 20, a business management undergraduate at Singapore Management University, says her parents complement each other well.

"What my mum is lacking in, my dad has, and vice versa. They recognise their own weaknesses as well. They don't let a disagreement stew overnight. They get it settled during the day," says Ms Quan, who has interned at Bynd Artisan.

Her mum is more detail-oriented and her dad has a more macro perspective, she says.



Mr James Quan and Ms Winnie Chan with their children, Vera and Josh, in a recent photo. PHOTO: COURTESY OF WINNIE CHAN

On business trips with her parents, for instance, she has noticed how her mum pays heed to the quality of the paper and leather, with her dad focusing more on the relationship with their supplier.

Ms Quan has expressed interest in joining Bynd Artisan after she graduates, but her parents prefer that she works elsewhere first.

Ms Chan says her learning curve in her family business would have been faster if she were not her father's daughter.

"If you're the boss' daughter, people don't dare to ask you to do this or that."

"We want our children to be recognised for their capabilities

rather than their relationships."

She and her husband have a daily ritual of a whisky nightcap, his on the rocks and hers flavoured or with soda.

Ms Chan says this is their way of winding down after a hard day's work.

It is also a daily opportunity to talk and reconnect.

Ms Chan says: "We don't have to conceal things, whether good or bad, at work. We face things together."

Mr Quan says: "Even if the sky were to fall down, we still have each other."

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James Quan on Winnie Chan

'I can't find a better person to work with than her'

Mr James Quan, 50, says his wife and business partner, Ms Winnie Chan, who is in her mid-40s, is the introvert in their relationship.

"I'm very much the salesperson. She does the administration and the Excel spreadsheets. But when it comes to building the company brand, we're both the spokesmen," says Mr Quan, who is co-founder and chairman of Bynd Artisan.

They agreed that Ms Chan should also front the Bynd Artisan brand because of the heritage associated with Ms Chan's family business, a bookbinding firm founded by her grandfather in the 1940s.

To do so, she has had to conquer

her fear of public speaking.

In talks they give to the business community and other speeches, he speaks first so she feels calmer before it is her turn to speak.

Mr Quan says the division of labour is mutually satisfactory.

"She doesn't want to talk to landlords, for example, while I don't want to read through the fine print of 50 pages of a contract," he says.

"I'm very confident of this arrangement," says Mr Quan, who proposed to Ms Chan three weeks after they were introduced by a mutual friend.

"I can't find a better person to work with than my wife."

Winnie Chan on James Quan

He 'doesn't sweat the small stuff'

Ms Winnie Chan, co-founder and chief executive officer of Bynd Artisan, says her husband James Quan is a gentleman who "doesn't sweat the small stuff".

For example, she says, he prefers listening to Chinese music on the radio, but often lets family members turn the dial to English music stations.

"I know he gives way to me in the small things," says Ms Chan.

"So, when it comes to the big things, I know I'd better listen (if he has a strong view on it)."

While they tend to agree on general store locations, for instance, they might disagree on where their outlet should be

located within the mall.

It helps that he presents his argument with supporting evidence, she says.

For instance, when they were deciding whether to open an outlet in Takashimaya Shopping Centre, Mr Quan showed Ms Chan video footage of the footfall traffic at the location.

She had felt that the space was too small at 100 sq ft, but he convinced her that passers-by walked past the unit in two directions, making it a good location.

They opened an outlet there in July last year. So far, sales have been good.