

+ VILLA DREAMS NEW RESORTS THAT MASTER THE ART OF BAREFOOT LUXURY

SINGAPORE TATLER

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ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS

II8 Revolutionary Road
Business minds Michelle Yong, Yu Yah-Leng and Winnie Chan reveal why and how they went against the grain to strike creative new paths for their companies

Promises and Pledges Industry leaders joined the Asia Tatler

Sustainability Forum for three days of brainstorming, workshops and debate on how to achieve a greener future





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TEAM EFFORT

This month's cover feature personalities tell us about their creative takes on collaboration, community and change

HEN IT COMES TO A SUCCESSFUL photo shoot, a small village's worth of people skilled in the fine art of creating striking images are called upon to spring into action, calibrating everything from the exact angle of winged eyeliner to the intensity of a precisely placed light.

For this month's cover story, we had the pleasure of welcoming Michelle Yong, Winnie Chan and Yu Yah-Leng into this *Singapore Tatler* village, and they made two days of back-to-back shooting a really fun experience for everyone. After all, the three of them are no strangers to the importance of collaboration and community.

For management consultant-turned-business innovator Michelle, who is on the cover, helming the Aurum group—a subsidiary of construction conglomerate Woh Hup—has meant coming up with new concepts to extend the vitality of the core family business. Even as Aurum grows, Michelle says she continues to hold firm to the core values that has guided the 92-year-old Woh Hup, including thinking of growth in terms of three stakeholders: "Ourselves, our team, and our community."

Winnie's customised stationery and leather goods brand Bynd Artisan has cast a modern new light on the traditional art of bookbinding, which is still undertaken by veteran craftsmen in their stores. "Collaboration allows us insights into a designer's mindset and eyes while using our business and manufacturing skill sets to balance the partnership," she says, adding that these projects allow the brand to groom "the next generation in creative thinking and designing".

As for Yah-Leng, the co-founder and creative director of design and branding agency Foreign Policy Design Group, the name of her business says it all. "Great ideas and design solutions come from a diversity of perspectives. It's a philosophy we hold dear at our practice," she tells us. That is why the studio has a policy of having a diverse team, and that ethos feeds into its collective aspiration to be outward-looking. "We are always looking to match and better standards on a global scale rather than just the local scale."



WORK IT This month's cover personality Michelle Yong (above) is feeling breezy with some fanning assistance from the crew; meanwhile, Yu Yah-Leng (below left) and Winnie Chan work the demure charms of these Prada outfits



MARCH 2019

PHOTOGRAPHY
DARREN GABRIEL LEOW,
ASSISTED BY ERIC TAN

FASHION DIRECTION

DESMOND LIM, ASSISTED BY JOEY TAN
HAIR

SEAN ANG, USING KEVIN.MURPHY

MAKE-UP

CHERYL OW/INDIGO ARTISANS, USING LANEIGE AND DELANIE WONG/ INDIGO ARTISANS, USING NARS

OUTFIT

PRADA

JEWELLERY

VAN CLEEF & ARPELS



NORDS AND IMAGES: HONG XINYI



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Revolutionary Road

MICHELLE YONG, YU YAH-LENG and WINNIE CHAN reveal why and how they went against the grain to strike creative new paths for their businesses

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Promises and Pledges

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WINNIE CHAN

THE WRITE NOTE

While most parents remind their children not to overindulge in the world of all things fashionable and covetable, Winnie Chan is the direct opposite. Like many youngsters today, her son Josh likes collecting rare sneakers. But instead of ticking him off, the founder and CEO of Bynd Artisan, which customises paper and leather goods, poses him a question: "In the future, how you do create a huge demand for the next limited-edition sneakers or product?"

Clearly, Winnie's approach to parenting is anything but conventional. But this unorthodox way of tackling issues and challenges in life has been an asset, especially when it comes to her business, which she set up with her husband, James Quan, in 2014.

"We wanted to build a brand of our own instead of being dictated by wholesale and OEM (original equipment manufacturer) customers in my family business," says Winnie, who had previously worked for her family's bookbinding and stationery firm, Grandluxe, for 22 years. The couple first launched Bynd Artisan with an atelier in Boon Lay in 2014, before being invited to set up a corner in Tangs at Tang Plaza later that same year. The business has since flourished to include a flagship atelier in Holland Village, standalone retail stores in shopping malls such as Ion Orchard, Takashimaya and Raffles City, a shop-in-shop outlet in multi-label fashion boutique Pedder on Scotts and a store in a luxury shopping mall in Shanghai.

"What we have done with Bynd Artisan is to apply business innovation to an old-school product and seemingly sunset industry. It resulted in us opening our atelier, an experiential space that differentiates us from other retail offerings and piques one's curiosity to step inside," she says, adding that this different approach has given the group of old but highly experienced craftsmen from her family business a second wind. It has also given Bynd Artisan an edge over other similar brands in the market. "It has allowed us to make use of our craftsmen's existing skill sets on a different platform and essentially reinvent and value-add the good old notebook together with other leather goods."

While its operations have seemingly grown from strength to strength, it has not always been

smooth sailing. Winnie admits that the very first iteration of the brand concept, which took on a Western slant, did not quite resonate with local consumers. "We wanted to give the impression that we were a foreign brand," she explains. "Especially when we grew up thinking that foreign brands are better than local ones." So, the couple went back to the drawing board to develop a concept with "a compelling story" in what we know as the current version of Bynd Artisan.

"Leveraging on our heritage and Asian roots, the brand was able to ride on the growing public interest in local design that gained momentum in the years leading up to Singapore's golden jubilee celebrations," explains Winnie. She adds that the key differentiators for Bynd Artisan include personalisation services and encouraging consumers to customise and monogram on all its products. "These services were all provided in-house and live. Ultimately, they became our unique selling points."

In fact, these have become the brand's calling card, earning top-of-mind recall among consumers, allowing Bynd Artisan to blossom into a strong proposition for shopping mall operators and investors as offers to open overseas outposts start

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pouring in. Winnie and James are not against the idea of overseas expansion but rule out the possibility of running these operations on their own, preferring to work with selected partners who are aligned with them in terms of beliefs and principles.

"We are quite lean, and I believe in being high value-added. That's why the type of people that we hire are very hands-on," she says, adding that her total staff strength stands at 28, including those at the Shanghai outpost, which opened in late 2018. When asked how much research they do before plunging into an overseas collaboration, Winnie explains that the company does not employ a structured process so long as the country in consideration is developed and has denizens who are able to appreciate the finer things in life. Of course, the right business partner matters too.

"We have had quite a few interested parties asking us to partner them in Australia, Indonesia and China. Ultimately, it boils down to synergy and also similar aspirations. It's a balance of remaining artisanal, having a relatively wide appeal and maintaining the brand equity. We started operations in Shanghai because we felt our China partner is aligned with our strategy and we were convinced that they will focus on building our brand for the long run."

Four years on, Bynd Artisan has amassed various accolades such as Design of the Year at the President Design Awards 2016 and Best Shopping Experience at the Singapore Tourism Awards 2017—proof that the business is on the right track. Winnie acknowledges the success and admits that she is "satisfied on all fronts" including its brand equity and annual turnover.

It is still early days, however, to determine if Bynd Artisan has the legs to grow into a legacy business, Winnie believes. But she is glad that her children, Josh and Vera, are keen to join the business. During her university term break, Vera even interned at Bynd Artisan and experienced for herself the pride and joy her parents derive from seeing customers leave the store with a personalised notebook.

In line with her atypical parenting methods, Winnie is ready to take risks if the time comes for the business to grow. With steely determination, she says: "If we have to engage professionals to take us to the next level, we will go that route. The brand must be bigger than one individual." Until that day comes along, Winnie, together with James, will continue nurturing and parenting this child of theirs.

