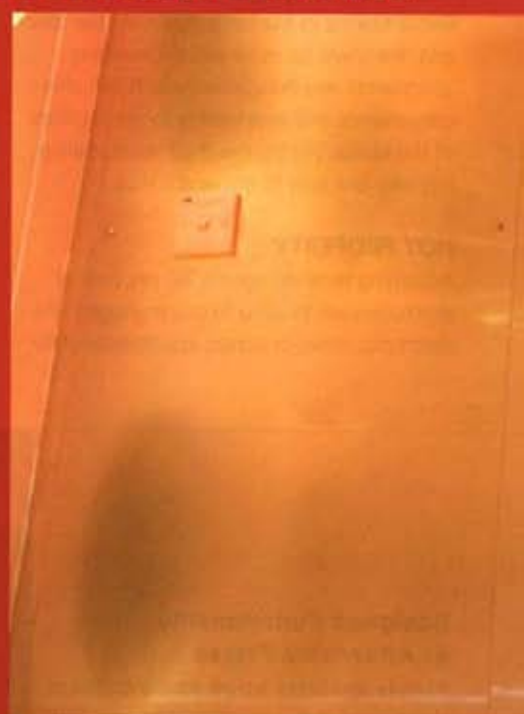


Trendspotter

How did a hairdresser turn into Singapore's most celebrated businesswoman? Deanna Ng pays a visit to Elim Chew, founder of youth wear chain 77th Street in Singapore and China.



Elim Chew, 38, is a household name in Singapore. You might think that it is no big feat – but hers is the unlikely success story.

To hear her discuss the complex business structure of 77th Street, you wonder which university she got her MBA from. But the truth is, Elim left school when she was 16 years old.

"No MBA," she chuckles. "Just a PHD: Passion, Hunger and Drive."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

This spunky lady started out as a hairdresser in her family-owned salon called Elim Emanuel Hair Salon in 1987. All her life, Elim's dream had been to create a store for young people, selling cutting-edge T-shirts and accessories.

Her innate ability to spot and set trends was already evident from her hairdressing skills – she was one of the first people in Singapore to wear a head full of purple locks back when coloured hair was unheard of!

How 77th Street got started was fortuitous – just like the way it has grown. "I did a job which I didn't realise was a paying job," says Elim. "For the launch of an electronic product, I handled the styling – from hair to clothes and everything – and they paid me SGD15,000! I used that to start up 77th Street." And she got her first retail space on the fifth floor of Far East Plaza – just a modest 180 square feet.

"I had chosen the number '7' because it represents perfection and completion," she says. "God created the world in seven days too."

And truly, 77th Street became fruitful and multiplied. Cool rules in this company.

Today, it is well-established as the market leader in Singapore's streetwear scene with its trendy and distinctive range of apparel. The store offers clothing, shoes and accessories sourced from all over the world – and only the hippest items make it to its shelves.

Considering this is Elim's first foray into the volatile retail industry where few cross the five-year mark, much less the 17-year mark, hers is an unmeasured success – from that first tiny shop to 13 sparkling, crowded shops not only across Singapore, but also in China, a full shopping mall in Beijing and another under construction in Shanghai. For a 38-year-old, that's a pretty amazing record!



TRAVEL WITH GUSTO!

When Elin and her sister Sulim started 77th Street, they used to bunk in the cheapest hotels and navigate cities on their own to sniff out the latest trends. "Independent travel builds character, and I think more young people should do it. With low-fare airlines like Tiger Airways and with the world's focus on Asia, there's never been a better time to explore Asia, so you can grow a wealth of experience and expand your mind for greater things," she says.

CHINA CALLS

China is one market the whole world has set its sights on, with the promise of billions of customers. Elin is one of few who has taken the bold step to expand into China, and not in a small way either. Last year, she set up 77th Street Plaza, an underground shopping mall located in Beijing's Xidan Cultural Central. The underground complex is modelled after the spirit of London's Camden Lock Market and Japan's Harajuku District – "packed with small creative retailers" – and boasts of many firsts.

"It's the first DJ console that showcases international DJs, and the first laser and light shows within a shopping city," describes the entrepreneur with a curious lack of pride. "It's the first to have the biggest skating rink in

Beijing. Weekend activities such as rappers, breakdancers, and street dance are held to attract the Chinese crowd. It's a place full of youthful energy. Besides the anchor 77th Street shop, a variety of stores throughout the plaza retail international youth brands." She even had the hip Taiwanese band Energy perform at the mall's opening.

Their next stop is Songjiang, Shanghai in 2006 with a mall consisting 84,000 square metres of shops, out of which 77th Street will occupy 70,000 square metres.

Both complexes in Beijing and Shanghai have one thing in common – they are located in the heart of the local youth area. In fact, by year end, a Songjiang University Town will be completed, catering to over 100,000 students.

THE WORLD'S HER OYSTER

It's not just China that's polishing up the future for 77th Street. With her sister Sulim, Elin has also set up Kingdom Investment Consultant, a property and investment arm for 77th Street's international operations which include the construction of the malls as well as property developments and general trading.

Today, Kingdom is a subsidiary of 77 Group Corporation, which has businesses and interests worldwide, particularly in the fast growing economies such as China.

For the small island-country-city-state of Singapore, this is one of very few times when a local small-medium enterprise has managed to catapult itself into the international arena, making Elin Chew a household name.



HEADS UP FOR REJECKS

Rejecks.com is a project started with good friend Nickson Fong, principal animator for movies like *The Matrix* and *Toy Story*. Elim has been collecting rejects (that Nickson chucks into his bin) for his upcoming animated movie *Kungfu Gecko*. She has been turning these "rejects" into T-shirts, complete with details on when it was created, and why and when it was rejected.

When the movie launches in 2008, these would have potential value. They are currently sold at SGD35 at 77th Street (Marine Parade, Singapore). "It's the philosophy of someone's rejects being someone else's treasure," explains Elim. "It's the same as people - we may be rejects in society now, but we may also become someone's treasure, or wealth, in the future."

Elim's belief is that her success comes from "living God's purpose and calling to reach out to a generation of youth out there."

A STAR WARS FAN

Step into the 77th Street office, and you'll be greeted by a pool table and a vibrant palette of colours across the wall. White doors bear colourful clear plastic windows in the middle. An inflated R2D2 (good for chilling Pepsi cans) stands in one corner. In another corner, a Yoda figurine poses next to ET.

Evidently, Elim loves *Star Wars*. Her home looks like a movie-set, with tens of thousands of dollars' worth of paraphernalia, including a life-size Jar Jar Binks.

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

A laminated newspaper cutting titled "Bill Gate's Wife Gives Away \$40 Billion" sits on her desk. "So shiok right? To be able to give away money," she muses. "I can't wait to do that if I ever have that much to give away."

Elim is as widely recognised for her social consciousness as she is for her sharp business acumen. She is an advocate for young people and entrepreneurship.

She also sits on more than 20 Singapore committees, spearheading creative projects for business owners, the intellectually disabled and disenfranchised youth who need a chance for a future.

With an old friend, she set up The Young Entrepreneur Mastery (TYEM), which offers youth courses to improve themselves. So strong is Elim's belief in Born & Made (Born in Passion, Made for Greatness) that she admits feeling good when teens voluntarily sign up for the TYEM courses.

STREETWISE

With the genuine concern that Elim shows for the youth, it's no surprise why the customers stay loyal to 77th Street. It's not just fashion they're buying - it's an entire lifestyle that belongs to a brand with a soul. **Tiger Tales**



WHAT'S HOT IN 2006

The youth and streetwear fashion guru predicts that 2006 is a year to accessorise, accessorise, accessorise!

"Mix and match different things to come up with your own look. There won't be a particular brand that dominates the look. Streetwear is about daring to step out to be who you really are, stand up for yourself and bring out your personality."

"Fusion comes from confusion - East meeting West in your own style will be really big. It's the attitude you carry that brings out the best in you."

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