



Adding Value

SOCIOLOGIST, CONSERVATIONIST, HUMANITARIAN AND BUSINESSWOMAN, **CLAIRE CHIANG** WEARS MANY HATS. ALEXANDRA KOHUT-COLE TRIES THEM ON FOR SIZE

WHILE BUSINESS WAS not her intended path, Claire Chiang has a track record of seizing commercial opportunities which present themselves.

But decisions made are never simply about money, her rationale being: "I'm convinced that business can shape things while still doing good."

Chiang, founder and managing director of the Banyan Tree Gallery, was formerly teaching sociology and involved in human resources at the Banyan Tree hotels run by her husband, Ho Kwon Ping. The seed of the idea for the gallery was planted when she met a woman who had earlier helped establish Singapore's Women's Charter. Working in northern Thailand fighting women's impoverishment and prostitution, she was encouraging women to become involved in various livelihoods, one of which was craftwork. "This key person, in her 70s, took a bus from northern Thailand to Bangkok to show me two cushions." This encounter changed her life. Banyan Tree hotels having just opened, it was perfect timing for her to incorporate craftwork into the gallery.

As children of the 1960s – the period when Singapore was going through nation building – Chiang and her husband wanted to help develop a better society, as against just doing business. "The value proposition that shaped us forms the ethics of our operation." A committee for Corporate Social Responsibility and a Green Imperative Fund now formed within the Banyan Tree group embrace projects such as protecting endangered species such as turtles.

Chiang's formative years were packed with

ballet classes, piano lessons and school. She subsequently attended France's Sorbonne then a Singapore university. With long dark hair, perfect posture and beautiful skin, she has long championed women's causes. Helping to establish the Association of Women for Action and Research, she worked with the organisation for 14 years. As a wife and mother of three children, she understands the pressures of work and family

on marriages. When grieving for the loss of a miscarried child she became so depressed she embarked on learning sign language as she didn't want to talk. For catharsis, she staffed Samaritan phone lines for four years.

One of the first of two women to join the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Chiang explains, "We realised we must knock down boundaries as the world is moving so fast." Currently chair of the Employer Alliance, Chiang is working to help women continue working by changing employers' mindsets. Flexibility is the key, she says. "The vision is that men and women can work anywhere with technology, deliver with key performance indicators and take care of family."

Finding balance is critical to Chiang, with family weekend time at the movies, playing tennis and swimming. And the family blog together: her 25-year-old son lives in Thailand; a younger son in Singapore; and daughter in London. "If you really want to, there are ways to find time for all the things you wish, however busy you are. We can have it all!"

Success is self-empowerment and self-definition, according to Chiang. "At the end of the day if I have lived productively, that is success. If you possess values driven by consistent views, you will get somewhere." ■

AT A GLANCE

STATUS Married

CHILDHOOD AMBITION

Teacher, nurse, then lawyer

TREASURED POSSESSION

Paraphernalia of sentimental family value

NEXT AMBITION

To live the way I am and to have good health

FAVOURITE BOOK

The Analects by Yu Dan

EARLY MENTOR

Two school teachers, my mother, father and grandfather