

doyennes of style

L'Officiel salutes the women who have helped shape Singapore's fashion retail fabric. By Baey Shi Chen



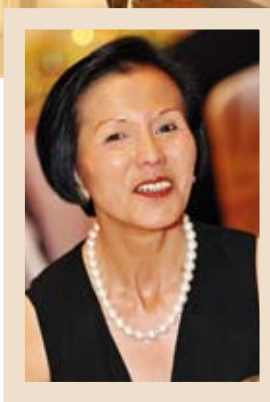
Designers create trends and looks that the masses want to emulate. Just as powerful are the retailers who interpret the local fashion climate and introduce labels to suit the consumer base. And Singapore, which came in eighth among a recent Global Fashion Capitals 2011 list (compiled by Global Language Monitor), is blessed with a small coterie of women that play a significant role in shaping how we perceive and experience luxury.

HER LOVE FOR LABELS

Foremost among them is Christina Ong, the woman behind formidable fashion empire Club 21, set up in 1972. One of the pioneers in building the foundations of luxury fashion here, Ong has brought in the world's biggest brands to Singapore. Today, Club 21 operates over 30 franchises here with others in the region, such as Marc Jacobs, Balenciaga, Issey Miyake and Dries Van Noten amongst numerous others. Ong also holds the vertical licences for A|X Armani Exchange, ck Calvin Klein and DKNY JEANS. Did we mention that Ong has a controlling stake in British It brand Mulberry too?

On top of that, Ong, together with her husband, Malaysian property tycoon Ong Beng Seng, is a luxury hotelier to boot. Other than the Four Seasons and Hilton hotels in Singapore, the couple runs the Halkin in London's Belgravia, The Metropolitan in Mayfair and the Shambhala Retreat on Parrot Cay in the Turks and Caicos, to name a few. They also own the Singapore Grand Prix and Ferrari dealership. Their impressive portfolio of ventures has netted them US\$1.9 billion (\$2.29 billion), and they were recently ranked seventh on *Forbes'* list of the 40 Richest in Singapore

Ong's influence is also reflected in the works of the world's most powerful designers. Good friend Donna Karan credits her love for the East and its influence on her design aesthetic to the fashion mogul. "The thing about Chris is she brings the East to the



(FROM TOP)
CK CALVIN KLEIN
AUTUMN/WINTER
2011, DKNY AUTUMN/
WINTER 2011, CLUB 21
AT FOUR SEASONS,
CHRISTINA ONG

West, and the West to the East. That's pretty global," she once said.

Renowned local fashion stylist, Lionnel Lim, who met Ong in the late Eighties, also has nothing but praise for the fiercely private lady. "Mrs Ong always comes across as elegant, reserved, and very gracious," he recalls. "She is always immaculately dressed and groomed, and wears very little makeup. Her style is always classic, never ostentatious, and she has an air of subtle authority."

Lim reckons that by setting up Club 21, Ong has set the bar for global style in Singapore. "Her stable of luxury labels, boutiques, resorts, hotels and wellness retreats say so much about her – they reflect class, quality and discreet luxury. And given that she is so well travelled, the little details that she notices translates into styles that women here will soon come to embrace personally."

THE MORE, THE MERRIER

Tina Tan-Leo and Tan Beng Yan are two other local retail icons who have changed the luxury fashion game here. Tan-Leo launched Versace's second store outside Italy here in 1979 and would continue to develop and grow the brand for 20 years. She also opened multi-label luxury fashion store The Link in 1982, catering to well-heeled ladies scouting for high quality womenswear. Similar multi-brand concept stores for home (The Link Home), bridal (The Link Wedding) and bags (The Link Bag Bar) were launched over the years, alongside brands like Vera Wang and Etro. Additionally, she founded local label alldressedup in 2005, which is one of Singapore's most successful to date, well loved by the likes of Cheryl Cole and Zhang Ziyi. It currently shows at the bi-annual New York and Paris Fashion Weeks and is sold both here and overseas.

"Singapore has changed a lot in that people are investing more in food, wellness, travel and fashion," says Tan-Leo, who is married to Lionel Leo, chief executive officer of The Link Group. "We now have a market that understands that fashion is important, although they still may not pay for it. Most people are still very brand conscious, but I feel ultimately that it's a matter of education – to show that a quality garment can enhance your life and is also a sign of respect for others. I think we just need a little more time."

Tan also feels that Singapore has come a long way since she opened multi-label



(FROM TOP) THE LINK HOME, TINA TAN-LEO, ALLDRESSEDUP AUTUMN/WINTER 2011

boutique TYAN in 1986, five months after the birth of her third child. "The local fashion scene was very limited, and it was the birth period of fashion in Singapore," recalls the mother-of-four, who is married to Tan Eng Soon, the head of Tan Chong International, a motor vehicle distribution company.

Today, TYAN carries international labels such as Sonia Rykiel, Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gaultier. Explaining her rationale for setting up the store, Tan says: "There were simply no outlets for up-and-coming brands, and I felt that the industry could do with a place that offered quality products at more realistic prices." Tan, a former buyer for local department store Metro and a product manager for Dior, also opened Betty Barclay, Paule Ka and Vivienne Tam's standalone stores here. Describing how she keeps on top of things, she says: "One needs to be constantly in touch with the changes in the fashion world and upcoming trends."

MOVING WITH THE TIMES

For Tan-Leo, three decades in a notoriously tough business have taught her a thing or two on how to thrive in it. And when it comes to



distribution, knowing the product and how relevant it is to the market are key. “You have to know what your audience is looking for and whether the product is desired and relevant,” she explains. “You want to engage both the young and old, and you have to keep your eyes and ears open to figure out how you reach out to them in different forms and ways, even while you are working out how to renew the brand to keep it fresh.”

The advent of the Internet has also influenced how Tan-Leo has gone about her business. “When I started, there was no such thing as the Internet, but now, there’s a potential for viral reach. So in order to tap a global audience that is shopping on the web all the time for almost all their needs, you need to have interesting content that is enticing and up-to-date. And most importantly, you have to have a point of view.”

Tan also witnessed the considerable effect of the Internet on her business: “With younger brands like Samantha Thavasa, social media has become an effective channel for us to reach out to our customers and target consumers.” She also feels that the advent of the Internet has had a democratising effect on fashion. “Anyone and everyone is able to look into or even participate in the world of

fashion. What was previously exclusive to the elite has now become available to everyone who loves fashion, and I think this has allowed for different tastes and preferences to make it through the design channels.”

All this dynamism has translated into an immensely exciting and rewarding experience. For Tan-Leo, one of the greatest pay-offs is seeing the brands that she works with become very successful in their own right, although nothing beats producing a brand of one’s own and seeing it go international. “Carrying other people’s labels is an investment, but creating something of your own from infancy into one that is marketed, distributed and well received is a real achievement.”

Tan-Leo also plays mentor to fledgling designers. “We give them the opportunity to create with us at alldressedup. They also get to experience what it’s like on the sales floor at The Link by getting to know what customers want and learning more about visual merchandising and sales.”

And from their vantage points as veterans of the local fashion industry, both women feel that the local fashion industry is definitely on the up. Says Tan: “The economic growth in both Asia and Singapore has definitely propelled its growth, both for retailers and

local designers. The government has also created good policies to make Singapore a shopping paradise, as well as created the tools and resources to groom the next generation of fashion industry players. I hope that our local designers get more opportunities to exhibit their work on a global platform, as it will really strengthen Singapore’s image as a fashion destination.”

Tan-Leo says: “Being involved with both Asian and European businesses, I feel that our local labels are quite ready to go international – I think we are getting there, with so many labels that are very interesting and talented, such as Nicholas, Wykidd, and Vice and Vanity.”

KEEPING THE DREAM

So what advice would these doyennes dispense to the younger generation of aspiring retailer-cum-tastemakers? “Your concept has to stay relevant – how you market yourself is very important,” says Tan-Leo firmly.

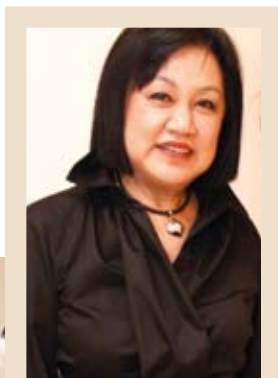
Tan offers: “Be more adventurous and don’t limit yourself to the norm. In terms of running a business, it’s important to be diligent, cost-conscious and most of all, persevering.”

With such a high benchmark set, it’s no wonder the younger generation of fashion retailers is taking notes.

Lim Li Hsien, Chief Marketing Officer of The Society of Black Sheep, says: “Their endurance in the fashion business is no small achievement. They’ve grown their fashion empires and developed international brands. Their impeccable sense of style makes it look effortless, but I don’t think just anyone could have done what they have done. I think it’s especially awesome that they are Singaporean and did what they have done in an insanely competitive arena.”

And despite all they have achieved, there aren’t any retirement plans just yet. Tan relishes the excitement of experiencing new aspects of fashion – whether it’s meeting young designers, finding the perfect outfit for the occasion or discovering promising new labels for TYAN. In the works is a possible Vivienne Westwood flagship. “I would like to open one in Singapore next year,” says Tan, who is a massive fan. “It would really allow us to expand the collection and grow the following here in Singapore,” she says.

Tan-Leo, meanwhile, is embarking on new ventures in China, Thailand, Taiwan and the Middle-East. She says: “I’m not jaded, I still have energy, and I like a challenge.”



(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) PAULE KA AUTUMN/WINTER 2011, TAN BENG YAN, TYAN BOUTIQUE, LEOPARD PRINT GLOVES BY PAULE KA



THE NEW GUARD

A new generation of brand curators are rising up to the fore with fresh and edgy fashion offerings.



Who: ANN KOSITCHOTITANA
What: Front Row
Modus Operandi: To offer unique pieces that you can't get anywhere else, as well as to offer as much insight on the brands and products the store carries. Front Row has organically grown into a little group consisting of a wholesale agency (Front Row Studio), an online sales platform (sKreen www.skreenstudio.com) and retail shops - it owns and operates APC's first standalone store in Asia, as well, and has just opened one for Bangkok label FLYNOW.
Brands Carried: Cosmic Wonder Light Source, Ayame, Heavy Machine, Dr Martens, Christophe Lemaire, Utt'er and United Bamboo
Pipeline: Any opportunities that fit Kositchotitana's three criteria - whether she loves it, if she is able to create a new business model out of it or improve it, and whether she has the resources and experience to execute the concept/project well.
Soundbyte: "For us, dressing has always been about the individual. Our customers are creative in the ways they express themselves through dressing - they have their own personal styles and they pick pieces from Front Row that fit them. We never try to remake a person's image. Instead, we try to fit into their current lifestyle and dress sense."

Front Row is at 02-09 Raffles Hotel Arcade, 6224-5501



Who: PHOEBE LEONG
What: TriBeCa
Modus Operandi: To provide a unique shopping experience in Singapore by introducing the latest and most sought-after brands every season.
Brands Carried: Marchesa, Jitrois, Azzaro, Balmain, Roland Mouret
Pipeline: To grow TriBeCa into a home-grown name synonymous with the latest, most coveted labels and looks, a mecca for all fashionistas - local or foreign - to flock to.
Soundbyte: "I admire any entrepreneur who is willing to take a risk to bring in something different, unique, exciting and not compromise on her vision."

TriBeCa is at 02-05-08 Mandarin Gallery, 6733-2620

Who: JASMINE TUAN
What: Blackmarket
Modus Operandi: To support independent designers not only in Singapore, but around the world.
Brands Carried: Al & Alicia, Tangle, WanderWonder, young&restless, &Larry, Birds & Co, Ling Wu, Mystic Vintage, Phünk Studio, Shito, The Armory, The Little Dröm Store, Ksubi, Nixon, Waiting For The Sun, Frü Frü & TigerLily
Pipeline: Tuan and business partner Quincy Teofisto hope to start a lifestyle brand from Blackmarket, create a line of scents and start a production factory for independent designers or start a consultancy for creatives.
Soundbyte: "I hope that we stop taking references from established labels and start developing our own, especially when we have such a unique mix of culture and race. We should leverage on it and churn out something extraordinary!"

Blackmarket is at 19 Jalan Pisang, 6296-8512; Blackmarket no 2 is at 02-10 Orchard Central, 6634-5201



Who: TRACY PHILLIPS
What: A Curious Teepee
Modus Operandi: A one-stop store-cum-cafe offering the best in independent Singapore products, and an injection of culture, coffee and fashion.

Brands Carried: A Peace Treaty, Stolen Girlfriends Club, Uniform Wares, Miller Goodman, Design House Stockholm
Pipeline: Collaborating on an in-house collection for the store across product and fashion and getting the online store and blog up and running.

Soundbyte: "I enjoy the immediacy in which fashion colours and gives insight into the world we live in and that every day there's an opportunity for fun self-expression, just by getting dressed."

A Curious Teepee is at 02-24 *SCAPE, 6820-1680

Who: LIM LI HSIEN
What: The Society of Black Sheep
Modus Operandi: To inspire and provide wearable options for the confident individual by offering emerging labels that combine quality and timelessness with a little edge, and to work with designers to help them put function to form.
Brands Carried: Injury, Lungta de Fancy, Handwritten, Kaal E Suktae, Atalanta Weller, Yumumu, Carrie K, Atsuko Yamamoto
Pipeline: To grow the business so that we can reach out to more individuals who'd like to be seen and not 'herd'.
Soundbyte: "Singaporeans could stand to be less cost-oriented. There is a national tendency to want everything for a discount. How do we expect our designers to carry on being creative if they are squeezed for every last cent of profit? Sometimes, it's OK to pay more because it's local."

The Society of Black Sheep is at B1-64 The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands, 6688-7223

