

Be Your Own Boss

by Nia Tam and Beverly Yau

While thousands of graduates fill in countless job application forms and ponder their futures every year, other young people are not thinking about finding their dream job but about setting up their own business. Becoming an entrepreneur may be the realisation of a childhood dream or simply the result of a random opportunity. Here, *Varsity* talks to three young entrepreneurs, who share the struggles and joys of being their own boss.

"I have dreamt about being an entrepreneur since I was a form three student," says Eva Chiu Man-wah, the founder and managing director of Etin Hong Kong Limited, a company that designs and manufactures promotional umbrellas.

Now in her early thirties, Chiu was inspired by the female characters in the financial novels of local writer Leung Fung-ye.

"All the heroines in Leung's stories are young, good-looking, talented and most importantly, have their own business," she adds.

Given her clear sense of purpose, Chiu began preparing herself early. She realised she would need to know how to read a company financial report, so she chose accounting as an elective subject in form four.

After leaving school, Chiu got a job as an accounting clerk for an international company while studying for an accounting degree from The Open University of Hong Kong. At the company, she climbed up the ladder to Accounting Manager, and then worked in various positions in merchandising, retailing, marketing and management.

"I worked as an employee to learn the skills that every position needs. Earning money was just the second most important thing," she says of her 10 years as an employee.

Chiu says those years as an employee were a great help to her when it came to starting and running her own business. She says her management style, which emphasises team work, care for colleagues and effective communication, includes factors missing in her experience in that international company.

Chiu's first attempt at striking out on her own was a gift shop. It was while running the shop that she discovered there was a "concealed but profitable market" in promotional umbrellas, printed with the logos of companies and organisations or promoting their products.

So she drew up a proposal for a company to produce promotional umbrellas and submitted it to a competition called Youth Business Hong Kong organised by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

Her idea of a physically attractive and practical promotion product won her a loan of \$90,000 and advice from professionals. It gave her just the support she needed to start what is now Etin Hong Kong Limited.

Although her family saw her as an independent and capable young woman, Chiu faced strong opposition

when she revealed her business plan. Her worried mother told her that she would have a stable income and a future without too many difficulties as an employee.

There were times her mother must have felt vindicated. Chiu recalls the days when she had to constantly commute between Hong Kong and the mainland and work for almost the whole day without any rest. Her weight dropped drastically as a result.

Chiu says she had to sacrifice time with her friends and family, but she would not have done it any other way.



Chiu and her promotional umbrellas.

"Any regrets? No, I don't have any. I chose my own path and it is worthwhile," she says.

Neither did she give up when confronted with her biggest challenge and disappointment to date. Not long after the global economic meltdown in





2008, Chiu's good friend and business partner suddenly left Etin and started a rival company, poaching some of the best customers.



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"Etin is like my baby. I have a responsibility and a sense of mission to protect it," says Chiu. Telling herself not to disappoint those who had supported her for so long, she managed to achieve a 150 per cent growth of business in the past year. "My business became even more prosperous after the break up," she says.

The company is now five-years-old and has been awarded the HSBC Living Business Excellence Award – an award recognising corporate responsibility – for three consecutive years. Chiu has reached one of her targets, to be able to buy her own office, but she says she will keep advancing herself and her business through life-long learning. "The hard work is worth it," she says.

Just a year after he graduated from the University of Hong Kong, Calvin Sun Siu-wah had already established a tutorial centre under his own name. He has, he says, fulfilled his childhood dream of being a teacher.

Sun, who graduated with a degree in Business Administration and Law from The University of Hong Kong, found it hard to choose between Law and teaching. He has a genuine interest in both. But he finally made a decision using the economic concept of "opportunity cost" – if he chose law, he would find it much harder to give it up and become a teacher later.

Impressed by his Biology tutor Simon Chiang, who is a famous private tutor in Hong Kong, Sun learnt that effective presentation and clear explanation of the syllabus could benefit students directly. Based on his own experience of tutoring his younger schoolmates when he was still in secondary school, Sun says he developed a teaching method that enables students to learn faster.

In his final two years at university, Sun worked as a part time English tutor in a small-scale education centre. In appreciation of his outstanding teaching, his boss offered to sell him one of the branches of the centre in 2004. Though he was not expecting this sudden offer, Sun agreed without hesitation and turned it into his own business.



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Sun talks about his aspiration as a tutor.

He managed to raise \$200,000 from his own savings and loans from family and friends. In the first year, he did not make any net profit because he had to deal with administrative work and human resources, which were new to him. But after only a year, the operations became smoother and more stable.

As he has become better known in the industry, Sun has attracted several invitations from big chain tutorial centres to join them with offers of deals up to several million dollars. But he has turned them all down. "There are a lot of limits of being an employee. I cannot do what I want because I would have to consider the company's policy," says Sun.

Sun says that joining somebody else's company would mean he might have to deviate from his own ideas about teaching.

"I would not be allowed to be as close to my students as I am now," he says.

Another reason he cites for choosing self-employment is that he wants to avoid what he calls the "meaningless" competition between tutors in the same company.

Nobody knows better than him what his strengths and desires are, he says. And with five education centres bearing his name at the age of 31, he seems to know how to use those strengths to achieve his desires.



While Eva Chiu and Calvin Sun had clear ideas about what they wanted to be, Tang Wai-ling has become an entrepreneur almost by accident. Tang has been working as an engineer since she completed her degree in Civil Engineering in the United Kingdom. But she is also the creative director of Déjà vu Creation, a social enterprise that uses abandoned banners to make handbags.

"If it was not for Sue inviting me to start a business together, I would never have thought about starting my own business," she says recalling an ordinary day in March this year, when her friend called and asked her to be a partner.

It was Tang's friend Sue Wong Ming-wai who developed the idea of "up-cycling" unwanted materials. They do not call their business "recycling" because that might indicate they were making new banners from old banners. Instead, they create one of a kind handbags and accessories. Their up-cycling concept brought the partners the Best Social Mission Award in the Hong Kong Social Enterprise Challenge held by The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"Being an engineer is boring," says Tang.

"I don't want to do the same job until I am 50 or 60 years old. That is why I looked for a new job."

Meanwhile, she recognises the comfort of being employed. "The tasks I have to do and the things I get from the job are predictable and stable," she says.

The business had yet to make any profit eight months after it was started but Tang is in no hurry yet. For now, she is enjoying the fun of designing unique products. Being directly responsible for sales brings her a new source of satisfaction, which she



Courtesy of Déjà vu Creation

Prototypes of ecobags.



Courtesy of Déjà vu Creation

Products made from abandoned banners.

rarely feels as an engineer working for somebody else.

"Indeed, right now is a turning point in my life," says Tang.

She now spends her weekends on the social business while maintaining her full-time engineering job. She plans to be a full-time entrepreneur in one or two years. 



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