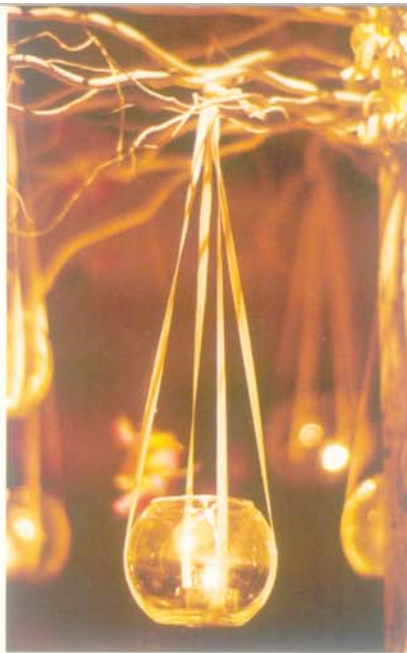




HANNAH'S GIFT

TO HER BRIDES, HANNAH CHONG IS LIKE THE FAIRY GODMOTHER WHO SWOOSHES A WAND AROUND TO CREATE THE MOST MAGICAL WEDDING OUT OF THIN AIR. TO THE REST OF THE WORLD, HANNAH IS A YOUNG, MOST ENERGETIC, CREATIVE AND VISIONARY ENTREPRENEUR THAT SINGAPORE WEDDING INDUSTRY HAS SEEN YET. RUCHIRA BOSE ROY SPEAKS TO THE WEDDING PLANNER





Heaven's Gift, Hannah's four year old wedding planning company, has truly been a gift to her as well as to the countless Singapore brides who have been her clients. "We never targeted the mainstream," says Hannah when asked how she first started. Hannah was working as an accounts director with an aircraft company, when she announced to her boss that she wanted to quit. "My boss thought I was going to join the competition. When I said I was leaving to become a wedding planner, he was shocked," she narrates. And even though Hannah's boss had reservations whether she would be successful in her venture, to encourage her, he gave her three months pay to kick start the company. "I spent the first six months of being a wedding planner totally stressed and worried about breaking even. I used to be a very 'profit-and-loss' sort of person, so for six months I didn't get any sleep," says Hannah. She would go from one month to the next worried about future business. Eventually, one day, Hannah told herself, that the true meaning of 'Heaven's Gift' was that the company was a gift to her -- one that she should enjoy rather than worry about. Since then, Hannah's never had to really be anxious. "It was one of the first things I learnt: To let go; to enjoy it and let God work his way."

Clients have poured in so much so that she's one of the busiest wedding planners in the city today. This despite all the conservative and negative advice she got when she first started, "When I began, I was told I couldn't be successful, that it would take three years to break even, that I should hire my own people, protect my contacts and resources so no one can compete with me, to not share too much and be wary and guarded," says Hannah.

But Hannah Chong was far from doing any of those things. With a strong grounding in corporate life, Hannah believed in sharing as much as you can, trusting talent and not micro-managing. "I learnt to bring in talent and trust talent. I can't stop people from copying my ideas, neither can I stop people from learning from me and then going and starting their own business. I came into this field to make it a business that I enjoy. I don't want to worry about people eating into the market share. And really, I can't be a wedding planner to everyone. There are different people with varying tastes, so there's enough room for a variety of wedding planners to co-exist," says Hannah.

"As an entrepreneur, you have to let go as well as set the benchmark where you want to be," she adds. At a recent wedding she





organised in Japan, Hannah learnt something else. "I became a wedding planner because it's such a meaningful and humbling job. But I saw even greater humility this time in Japan. It was a real learning experience. They take such pride in service and they are so humble about it," says Hannah.

Hannah Chong specialises in intimate weddings that are highly personalised and reflect the bride and groom's personalities. "I always tell my clients, of course the wedding will reflect a part of me because I'm so involved, but in the end it should be mostly about you. If it doesn't, it would mean I've failed my job," says Hannah firmly.

Hannah takes the example of a wedding she is planning for a client this December. "The bride is a teacher and she's really shy. She told me she's crazy about Hello Kitty, but thought that for the wedding it might be funny to have Hello Kitty incorporated," she says. "But I explained to her that her wedding should reflect her true personality and a Hello Kitty theme need not be 'weird', we can make it sweet and memorable," she explains. Hannah has now sourced some delicate and beautifully made porcelain bowls from a company in Japan that specialises in Hello Kitty merchandise; the bowls will carry Belgian chocolates with raspberries

and will be placed at the tables for guests. For centrepieces, Hannah's planned floral arrangements that will be interspersed with sweets like marshmallows.

At yet another wedding recently, Hannah's clients were both diving and underwater photography enthusiasts. "The wedding was going to be held at Chijmes and we said, instead of the traditional colonial style, why not do something different," narrates Hannah. She planned the entire concept as if the wedding were underwater. Pictures taken by the couple were converted to large screens that formed the backdrop to the wedding; architectural and other forms of lighting were used to create a blue wave effect on the ceiling of the chapel. Little colourful fish playing around among hydrangeas and white pebbles in large clear bowls became the centrepiece for every table; and there were dolphin-shaped bubble bottles for guests to blow bubbles as the couple marched out. Sometimes, an idea is specially requested for by the couple, as it was for an upcoming wedding Hannah is planning, where everything is themed cabaret.

At other times, Hannah has worked with a bride and groom of very different personalities and tastes. "This time, my bride Jo, was very Victorian in her tastes. She had her gown





designed by Tan Yoong in French Chantilly lace, she like pastel colours and lacy motifs. While the groom, Chak liked everything 'country' and with autumnal colours like orange and brown," narrates Hannah. She asked them to give her month to do the concept – at the end of which she presented two distinct styles – one very Victorian, the other very Country. "I knew what they'd say: 'Hannah, can you do both?' she says laughing. So eventually, Hannah blended the two together for an English Victorian Country Wedding. "We had a large golden birdcage as the angbao box; another bird cage was placed near the chocolate fountain at the dessert buffet; there were handpainted eggs placed in delicate eggcups in front of each guest at the tables. "We had fairy lights – it was very intimate and pretty. Chak's lapel corsage was made up of dried flowers that sparkle when they bloom – these were flown in from South Africa. We had a half sit down course and a canapés spread as well as a BBQ and buffet spread. The wedding ceremony was held under a tree which we had decorated with flowerpots and ribbons," elaborates Hannah. The wedding took place at Changi Cottage at Aloha Changi, "In fact, Jo booked us nine months before the wedding, their date was in June – which is a peak season, but she was willing to take the risk on booking this

venue as they only let you know whether you've got it three months before the date," she narrates.

In the end, the risk paid off, and even the photographers enjoyed taking pictures of the wedding. There have been numerous such occasions when Hannah has been highly complimented for her work. Whether it's incorporating requests and expectations from parents of the couple or working with constraints of time and logistics. Whether they are funky eccentric or very precise themes, Hannah enjoys creating unique personalised weddings.

Hannah also believes it's important to constantly upgrade her skills and knowledge. She continues to take short courses in specialised areas but at the start of her career as a wedding planner, Hannah was trained and certified by Weddings Beautiful Worldwide, a global organisation that provides professional education and certification for wedding planners across the world. Today, she's also a member of the Association of Bridal Consultants, US. Hannah has also worked very closely with others in the Singapore wedding industry, increasing interaction between different professionals and encouraging them to come together and work more closely.



