



# SUCCESSOR WANTED

As On Cheong Jewellery celebrates its 80th anniversary, 30-year veteran Ho Nai Chuen has some urgent unfinished business – finding someone to take over

BY VIVIEN SHIAO

**W**ITH more than three decades at the helm of On Cheong Jewellery, managing director Ho Nai Chuen is a familiar figure among the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) circles in Singapore. This is because he is a man who wears multiple hats – not only does he still actively manage his own business, he also serves as the president of the Singapore Jewellers Association, and is also the chairman of the Research and Publications Committee for the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, just to name a few.

In his time, Mr Ho has seen the company through multiple changes and economic crises, but he is not ready to call it a day just yet. In fact, On Cheong Jewellery is putting the final touches on its rebranding exercise to be launched at the end of the year, in time for its 80th anniversary.

Mr Ho also has some urgent unfinished business. His biggest priority? Finding a successor within the next five years, he tells *The SME Magazine*.

## JOURNEY TO THE TOP

Previously known as On Cheong Goldsmith, the company has come a long way since Mr Ho's father, Ho Yew Ping, founded the shop in 1936. After he died in 1965, the business was then run by his mother. Her death in 1985 resulted in a leadership vacuum.

While eldest brother Ho Nai Kiong – now chairman – had helped out in the shop during that period, he was also juggling his medical career at the same time, and was unable to commit to running the business. With nobody else in the family willing or able to take on the role, Mr Ho stepped up to prevent the family

business from folding up. In his own words: "I had no choice."

The youngest of eight siblings, he is the only one who has a business-related education. In fact, he was pursuing a career as an accountant when he was forced to take over the family business. Mr Ho shares that he had to sacrifice his personal ambitions back then, which was to become a professor as he felt that his personality – self-described as serious and straightforward – was more suited for such a career.

Reflecting on that point in time, Mr Ho recalls: "When I first came in, my mind was a blank. I was not in the trade, I was not prepared to come into the picture."

He had to start from the very bottom. Unlike many family businesses where the next generation is immediately parachuted into management, Mr Ho started off as a salesman on the ground, learning different aspects of the trade such as how to identify gemstones and how to design jewellery.

It was not till five years later in 1990 that he was appointed managing director, a position which he holds till this day.

## THROUGH THE YEARS

But while he is upfront about his reluctance to join the family business, the company has grown and changed considerably under his stewardship. For example, one key change that he has spearheaded is the move from being just a traditional goldsmith shop to one that sells modern, uniquely designed jewellery.

This was even reflected in the change of name in 2006 from On Cheong Goldsmith to On Cheong Jewellery. He says: "In the past, we don't need to crack our heads – we just buy from suppliers or wholesalers and put them up for sale. But we tend to source for less of these items now."



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREENPLASTICSOLDIERS; STYLING: JC GROOMING; HONGLING USING LA BIOTHETIQUE AND MAKE UP FOR EVER WARDROBE: JACKET (STYLIST'S OWN) HO NAI CHUEN'S OWN

To cater to the evolving needs of customers, the company now emphasises creating its own designs that are different from what is available in the market. "My focus is on producing something unique. Now, with some of our higher-end items, we manufacture only one or two pieces. We don't manufacture more as customers want what others don't have."

Mr Ho says that he does not believe that one must follow what their peers are doing. In fact, his philosophy is to sell what others do not. To him, standing out from the crowd is not difficult, as long as quality is there. This refers to both the gemstones used and their team of inhouse designers.

Some of the higher-end jewellery pieces even have a theme or storyline behind them that is one of a kind. Customers are not just buying an object, they are buying the unique story behind it as well – something that will only belong to the owner. Mr Ho says that this adds value for customers and deters copycats at the same time.

As a result of On Cheong's efforts to stay ahead of the curve, the shop is attracting more younger customers because of its more contemporary image and designs, says Mr Ho.

## KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

While Mr Ho is the face of On Cheong and deals with the day-to-day management of the company, his siblings sit on the board of directors. As he puts it: "In a family business, there are many issues that



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

"THERE'S NO SURE SUCCESS IN THIS WORLD, ESPECIALLY IN BUSINESS . . . IT'S YOUR WAY OF SECURING THE TRUST OF YOUR CONTEMPORARIES WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT."

– Ho Nai Chuen, managing director, On Cheong Jewellery



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

**▲ CHANGING TIMES**

Mr Ho (centre) has spearheaded On Cheong's move from being just a traditional goldsmith shop to one that sells modern, uniquely designed jewellery



are quite sensitive." Sometimes, there is a need to make difficult decisions that could impact family harmony.

To Mr Ho, family relationships are very important, and that can be a doubled-edged sword. "If a sibling is strongly against something that I strongly believe in, I will still follow the family decision. I cannot do things my own way without seeking the majority's consent. In this aspect, I feel like I could have done better . . . I could have used my own initiative and grown the business bigger."

But on the other hand, he muses that it is his personal achievement to have managed the business up till now and yet still maintain good family ties.

It may not have been a smooth journey running a business where occasional conflict and finger pointing happen, but Mr Ho is content in having managed to resolve issues which come their way. He points out that reaping maximum earnings is not the be all and end all in life as "money is not enough, no matter how good profit is".

"To me, I draw satisfaction from having strong bonds in the family . . . my siblings still stay together with no quarrels, unlike other families which end up in lawsuits. That's good enough to me. It's quite a happy venture."

**SUCCESSION**

One of the perennial problems of family businesses is the issue of the succession planning. Mr Ho says: "That is the most crucial objective now. In another five years, I may not have the same energy."

While he has two children – a son who is a management consultant and a daughter studying in the US – it is uncertain if they are keen to take over the family business. Says Mr Ho: "If I don't find any successor in my own family, or my nieces and nephews, then I will say 'engage outsiders'. I won't stick to the position that the family business must be managed by family members."

But he adds that while On Cheong may be run by non-family members, he needs to make sure that at least one or two family members are able to keep an eye on the business. "I'm not asking for somebody specialised in jewellery design or to run the business full-time. But

at least they need to know the accounts, the objectives and direction of the company, and to control the senior management. That's my challenge."

Mr Ho points out that quite a few members of his current team are not family members. He gives his team a free hand to run different projects, which he says leads to better outcomes as they are able to use their creativity and think out of the box. For example, in the recent renovations in the flagship store at South Bridge Road, Mr Ho was pretty much "hands off", he says.

"If everything comes from me, I will be using my old ideas in the last 10 years. I'd rather let them do it, if they make any mistakes that's not major, it's all right. If you don't commit, you don't gain."

**THE ROAD AHEAD**

As On Cheong Jewellery celebrates its rich history and heritage at its 80th anniversary – a significant milestone – this year, it is also keeping its eyes forward to the future. Aside from a refreshed storefront, the company will boast a new logo and slogan to be launched at the end of the year.

On Cheong will also focus on digital marketing for customers to view their products. Mr Ho explains that the online platform is a good form of communication to let customers know the background of the items. But that being said, he also believes that people prefer to touch and see jewellery for themselves, and that is why they are not jumping on the e-commerce bandwagon as yet.

This dynamic between the traditional and the new encapsulates On Cheong's approach to business, and is a likely factor in its success to date. Reflecting on his journey so far, Mr Ho says: "If you asked me at that time if I will ever be here today, I will say no. I could never have imagined that I can still survive after so many years."

But after years in the business, one lesson he has learnt is that failure is not to be feared. "There's no sure success in this world, especially in business. Nobody knows when it will happen. It's your way of securing the trust of your contemporaries which is more important." ■