



## Yintong talks with...

**Yin Li Chuan, chief executive of East and Silk International**



I am delighted to have found a woman entrepreneur, the boss of a company that supplies silk fabrics around the world. And – here's the surprise – she is none other than my English teacher that I miraculously reunited with recently in London after a gap of over 30 years.

First question. How has an academic in English literature become a successful business woman?

Having graduated from Beijing Normal University, Li Chuan stayed on to become a lecturer. In the 80s, China was in desperate need of English teachers and speakers so she and some of her fellow lecturers were encouraged to gain further education in the West to enhance their skills. Like other young people at that time, Li Chuan was enticed by Western charms and opportunities, especially those in America. However, as fate dictates, she won a Commonwealth Scholarship to read a Master's degree at the University of London, becoming one of just over 2,000 Chinese students to study in the UK in 1988 – the figure today is 80,000.

### Destined

On completing her Master's degree, Li Chuan felt one year was too short to completely soak up the

***"I believe if I do my best today, tomorrow will look after itself."***

English language and its cultural context. To pursue her continuing American dream she was planning another degree in the States. But it seems she was destined for a life in the UK as she was granted a long-term visa to remain here and, after meeting her partner, she decided to settle down and start a family.

After the birth of her second child, Li Chuan started to contemplate a second career. On one of her visits to China she had been provided with some sample pieces of silk velvet to investigate business opportunities in the West. Despite her lack of experience in the industry she took up the challenge and on her return to London went straight to a garment fair. After an initial lack of success Li Chuan finally met her first client who bought a small amount but gave hope of larger orders to come. This gave her the confidence she needed and led to a ten-year business relationship, setting her on the path to creating East and Silk International Ltd.

### Commitment

Initially her company sold off-the-shelf silk material but in 2004 Li Chuan began to develop her own patterns by commissioning Italian designers. She recalls that at times she would write out big cheques for tens or even hundreds of patterns hot from designers' desks – she was very popular with the Italians. Her ongoing commitment had put a very niche market of the Chinese 'burnout silk' onto the map internationally, keeping this traditional labour-intensive technique alive and sustaining the whole industry, albeit small.

Her life has certainly been hectic – trade fairs in London, Paris, Munich and Los Angeles, regular trips to Lake Como in northern Italy, visits to China five or six times a year. On top of looking after a fledgling business she has also single-handedly brought up two children, now excelling at university. How, I asked, did she manage the work life balance? Does she have any regrets as a 'business mother'?

### Example

"I am proud that I have been able to provide the best education to both my children, and put a roof over our heads. It is true that I had to be absent some of the time during their school years, but I do believe in leading by example. Hopefully, they share my hardworking and independent ethics, it will become part of their DNA, setting them in good stead for the future," she says.

From zero business background, experience and zero contacts, East and Silk International now has a solid foundation with two offices, one in north London and one in Shanghai, a collection of up to 10,000 designed patterns for clients to choose from, and a vast resource of suppliers, customers and designers at her finger tips. The company is turning over half a million metres of silk per year at peak times and she can spot her products in department stores and boutique shops up and down the country. Does she feel she is successful and what is the secret of achieving her success in business?

### Control

"My company is relatively small. When I first decided to stay on in the UK, my single priority was to make a living, providing for my young family. If this is the goal, I have certainly achieved it. It is satisfying to be in control of my own life and still enjoy what I do," Li Chuan continues. "If there is anything that may be useful to other new entrepreneurs, I think it is about being persistent, positive and focusing on today's good work. There were times that I could be tremendously worried about the mortgage and school fees, but I tend not to focus on future worries. I believe if I do my best today, tomorrow will look after itself."

What is Li Chuan's next goal for her business. Can she relax a bit now? "Other than looking after our customers in the UK and Europe, we are also consolidating the business coverage in North America and are trying to open up the market in Latin America. In today's social media dominated world, we will give more focus to our online business, so that more people globally will have access to our beautiful product ranges. On a personal level, with the support of my colleagues, I am now able to enjoy interests between travels. For example, language has always fascinated me, I am learning Spanish at the moment, and this may well benefit the business when we open up the South American market."

Any regrets, especially with not having made it to the USA? "Not at all. My life spent here has now lasted longer than that in China. Britain is where I raised my family and it has nurtured my career. I love this country with its green scenery. I look back with immense gratitude for the opportunities and consider it my home."

Yintong Betser is the author of a series of books on doing business in China and the UK and managing director of ACTIVE Anglo Chinese Communications.

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INSIDE

University challenge –  
Professor Peter John at UWL  
Page 6



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COVER STORY

## Traditional China vies with modernity

Pages 12-13