

THE PEAK

MALAYSIA

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THE 'ALL THINGS NICE' ISSUE

NOTHING COMPARES 2 U
JEWELS ON THE CROWN

ROOMS WITH A VIEW
7 DESTINATION HOTELS TO
CHECK INTO

ISLAND DRIVE
SUN, SEA & SPEED

OIL PALM PILOT

DATO' DR JESSIE TANG OF
EAST WEST ONE GROUP
AND THE SLICK FUTURE OF
THE OIL PALM INDUSTRY





Dato' Dr Jessie Tang is wearing HERMÈS and TIFFANY&CO timepiece and jewellery.

OIL PALM PILOT

Dato' Dr Jessie Tang, Founder & Group CEO of East West One Group, makes everything she does – from starting her career as an A&E doctor to metamorphosing into an oil palm cultivator – look effortless. But, beneath her polished, gentle exterior beats the steady heart and razor-sharp mind of a determined entrepreneur.

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THE PEAK INTERVIEW

The world of a hospital A&E (Accident and Emergency) department, with its intensity and, depending on the situation, pressure-cooker environment, might seem as far removed as can be from the heat, hum and humidity of a tropical oil palm estate. But, having chosen to change career paths some 15 years ago, Dato' Dr Jessie Tang has no regrets. "I don't miss medical life at all," says the soft-spoken 48-year-old.

ATTRAVERSIAMO

Having graduated from Kasturba Medical College in Manipal, India, in 1994 and then worked in Hospital Alor Setar's A&E department for two years after housemanship, it took one particularly gruesome incident, where a staff nurse had the tragedy of seeing her own lifeless son brought in after a motorcycle accident, to set Tang on a completely different career path. "He was only 18," she says quietly. With the full support of her parents (even her doctor father), Tang then began exploring different entrepreneurial avenues before finally settling on oil palm cultivation. "My father is a doctor, so, naturally, he steered me into following his footsteps. Also, back then, it was the trend to send your children to medical school and many children were pressured to study medicine. I conformed to my parents' wishes but I realised the profession was not my calling and didn't really suit me. I felt that I would be more fulfilled as an entrepreneur and my real wish had always been to run my own business."

It is here, then, that nostalgia plays a part in Tang's career trajectory. "My grandfather had owned a rubber estate and, growing up, I'd spent a lot of time helping him with various chores; from processing rubber sheets from latex and then drying them out in the smoke house. It was fun for me although I remember the stench from the smoke house being unbearable," she recalls, laughing.

This early exposure sowed the seeds for what has now blossomed into Tang's flagship company – East West One Consortium. "The early exposure to the plantation industry got me fascinated while giving me hands-on understanding of the nature of the business," she shares. "In early 2000, I realised the palm oil industry was booming in Malaysia and knew, at once, the opportunity presented itself." Living up to the Latin phrase of *carpe diem*, Tang pounced and entered the oil palm plantation business as a player in mid-2000.

OF EAST AND WEST

Having observed the rise and rise of the general oil palm industry, Tang admits she "wanted a piece of the action. I had friends who wanted to own plantation land and be involved in the industry too but lacked the know-how, experience and a viable cost-effective strategy to venture into this business. Both these 'push' and 'pull' factors led me to start my group's first oil palm plantation share-farming scheme in Sabah."



“MY MEDICAL BACKGROUND ACTUALLY HELPED ME MAKE THE TRANSITION TO THE BUSINESS WORLD AS I’VE BEEN TRAINED TO THINK ON MY FEET, PRESCRIBE THE RIGHT REMEDIES TO ACHIEVE DESIRED RESULTS AND DISSECT PROBLEMS FOR PROPER DIAGNOSIS.”

On her choice of location, Tang says it was obvious. “Sabah offers highly favourable agronomic factors and weather conditions,” she explains animatedly. “The soil, rainfall and sun are near-perfect and unrivalled in most other parts of the world! Tested crops in Sabah over the years have also been highly favourable and profitable, ensuring higher yields and oil extraction rates, given the general cost structures facing the industry. Besides this, Sabah already had an established and strong plantation culture, in terms of management, labour and support services. It is also important to remember Sabah’s proximity to key markets, including China and other growing regions.”

As an *orang Semenanjung*, seizing the day also meant major shifts in Tang’s life – for her personally as well as for her family. Born in 1968 in Sungai Petani, in the de facto ‘rice bowl’ state of Kedah in north Malaysia, the decision to spearhead an oil palm plantation business necessitated a physical move to where the action’s at. “I remember my first time in Sabah and I instantly fell in love with the friendly people there,” she recalls. “It only took minor adjustments before my family (comprising of her husband Dr Tan Eng Heong – an orthopaedic surgeon who has since given up practising in order to join her in East West One Group – and two sons, Yao Zhong and Yao Zhu) and I settled in. Ever since we moved in 2007, I can honestly say that Sabah has given my family and me a better quality of life!”

IN THE PALM OF HER HAND

With encouraging response from her friends and contacts who willingly assured her of their financial commitment before the interest scheme was approved, things, naturally, took off the minute the Companies Commission of Malaysia (CCM) gave it the go-ahead. It also helps that an ever-growing global population (now surpassing the seven-billion mark and expected to exceed nine billion by 2035, according to certain population studies) makes the concern of ensuring adequate food supplies a real and pressing one.

“Crude palm oil (CPO) is an important world commodity and its demand grows in tandem with world population growth for food, energy and so on,” Tang explains. “As such, over time, the price of CPO will increase, although prices over the past 50 years have been generally on the upswing, despite fluctuations from time to time.”

Operating under the East West One Consortium banner, Tang’s company owns interests in several businesses within the oil palm value chain, beginning with oil palm plantation development to palm oil seedling distribution and collection centres for harvested fresh fruit bunches (also referred to as ‘FFB’), which are used to produce CPO, and is regarded as the leading and largest CCM-approved oil palm plantation interest scheme operator and manager in Malaysia, with a total land bank of close to 30,000ac. “Although most of our businesses are presently based in Malaysia, we have made positive inroads into Sulawesi, Indonesia, and we hope to commence business operations there in the near future. We also plan to have our own palm oil mill in the near future to be an integrated oil palm plantation player,” she lets on.

2015 proved to be, pardon the pun, a fruitful year for Tang, with the East West One Group achieving a few key milestones, including a fully subscribed début oil palm plantation share-farming scheme – the East West One Planter’s Scheme (EWOPS) – as well as a successful foray into palm oil seedling distribution and FFB collection centres. “These new businesses offer additional revenue streams to the Group and I am pleased to say that our regional expansion looks promising too. But,” she adds, cautiously, “like all food commodities, palm oil is always subject to the demand and supply for food oil. The implementation of bio-diesel mandates will also have an impact on oil palm but this will, likewise, depend on crude (fossil) oil and bio-ethanol prices for the energy sector.”

She adds: “The El Niño weather affecting oil palm-growing regions and the corresponding La Niña, which may impact other food oil crops like corn, soybean and canola,

Dato’ Dr Jessie Tang is wearing FENDI and TIFFANY&CO jewellery.





will also determine the production of these competitive oils. Hence, weather will wield major influence on prices. Nevertheless, we know that oil palm is a highly resilient crop and grows in the tropics, where weather fluctuations are less severe, compared to soybean and corn, which can sometimes be wiped out by severe drought, flood or frost. Furthermore, unlike soybean and corn, oil palm is a perennial crop and will produce oil as long as the sun shines. And Malaysia has plenty of that," Tang laughs.

"The major challenge for us," she goes on, "is to ensure our palms are well-looked after with the right agronomic and management inputs. We have deliberately acquired the requisite expertise by hiring the right personnel from the very start, thus putting us in a good position to reap the forecast yields from our plantations. We are also very fortunate that the oil palm industry is very well supported by the Malaysian government. Together with the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) and key industry players, oil palm is progressively researched, so that we benefit from the research findings and expert advice given."

THE GOOD DOCTOR

For those who seem puzzled by Tang's effortless transition from ER doctor to entrepreneur, she cites her medical background as invaluable experience that "actually helped with the transition." She explains: "Both environments constantly experience change. Medical doctors need to understand how to treat new diseases using the latest medical knowledge, while the business world is always in a state of flux due to changes in politics, economics, technology and law. As such, good communication and interpersonal skills, the ability to think on your feet and be creative are musts in both fields. Medical doctors are required to learn how best to deliver sensitive and emotional news to patients and their families, as well as recommend the best treatment options. Likewise, entrepreneurs need to be able to motivate their staff in order to achieve the desired business objectives."

It also helps that the two professions demand long working hours with a constantly high level of stress. "Like doctors, entrepreneurs are also almost always 'on call' and typically not entitled to holidays," she smiles. "My medical training, I find, also equipped me with an analytical mind that enables me to see things differently, allowing me to dissect problems into digestible portions for proper diagnosis of the causes and, thereby, able to prescribe the correct remedies to achieve desired results. I've applied part of what I learnt as a medic into running my business and I definitely know that has contributed to its success."

WORK & LIFE GOALS

One key lesson the good doctor keeps close to her heart, though, is to never take one's health for granted. "It's something money cannot buy. Busy as we are, we should cultivate a healthy lifestyle as early in life as we can. Also, in order to succeed in life, one needs to be both book-smart as well as streetwise." Citing her corporate hero as the late Anita Roddick, who founded The Body Shop, Tang admires

how she built her business from scratch into a global business empire. "I also admire how she championed CSR, was an activist with a strong set of personal and business values, as well as being an all-round industrious lady who left her mark in the world. She inspired me to believe in my own ability as a business owner and to give back to the community through our company's CSR programmes, and continuously and constantly self-improving in order to keep the success momentum going."

And, when asked if she ever regrets giving up her profession as a medical doctor in order to follow her heart to pursue a career in business, Tang pauses for a moment before replying: "You know, I have never felt it to be a waste. In fact, my father was very cool about it when I broke the news, while my mom, a strong, intellectual woman herself, was extremely supportive. Anyway, life is too short for a single career, don't you think? And besides, medical training never, ever goes to waste. Whenever my children experience high fever in the middle of the night, for example, I know exactly what to do. Likewise, I never need to see a GP. And, I can tell you," she adds with a grin, "that my neighbours love it. They feel so safe with my husband and me living near." A case of *je ne regrette rien* indeed. ☺

CURRICULUM VITAE

Dato' Dr Jessie Tang at a glance.

BORN 1968 in Sungei Petani, Kedah, Malaysia.

CURRENT BASE Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

STAR SIGN Capricorn.

CHILDHOOD AMBITION Veterinarian.

BEST PRACTICES "Start early so you can get more things done; I meditate and exercise before going to work as I find it helps regulate my thought and emotions while preparing me for the day ahead. I also find I am most effective and efficient in the morning, as there are fewer disturbances, allowing me to focus on accomplishing what I have set out to achieve."

READING RIGHT NOW "I enjoy reading and try to finish at least one book each week. I'm halfway through a spiritual book now called *365 Days of Wisdom*. I find reading to be so important as it really is the window to knowledge and life, not to mention a key contributor to the ongoing, lifelong learning process."

SECRET WEAPON Black belt in Kalis and Kuen Tao martial arts.

DIVERSIONS Playing the piano and classical guitar occasionally.

FAVOURITE WAY TO DE-STRESS "I like to retreat to a peaceful and serene environment. You need peace and quiet to calm and rejuvenate the mind and soul."

AD