

Executive Decisions



Dying to get out of the rat race? Six former business professionals prove that following your dream is easier than you think.

In Hong Kong's work-till-you-drop culture, countless executives spend most of their non-working hours complaining about their boring careers, tedious deadlines and slave-driving bosses. But does it have to be that way? We've hunted down six Hongkongers who left their high-flying financial careers behind to pursue their true passions. Was taking the plunge worth it for them? You bet it was.



"Hopefully I get people feeling inspired..."

From Credit Cards to Crafts

After a decade as a risk analysis manager for Amex, Joyce Yung hopes to bring a bit of creativity into the lives of others. **By Beverly Cheng**

On location, photographer Joyce Yung moves like a ninja—leaping off of chairs, crouching on the ground and climbing onto rooftops—she'll do just about anything for the perfect shot. It's hard to imagine that just two years ago, Yung had been chained to a desk for nearly a decade in her former role as a risk analysis manager for credit card giant American Express. Though Yung fiddled around with her dad's manual camera growing up, she pursued studies in engineering instead. At uni, she honed the math and problem solving skills that would later land her a job at the Amex headquarters in New York, before a promotion brought Yung and her husband to Hong Kong.

With no formal photography training apart from snapping photos day-to-day and treading on the tails of photographers, Yung's natural talents quickly garnered admiration from friends and she was inundated with requests for freelance work from clients who had come upon her portfolio online. The positive response bolstered Yung's confidence to finally leave her desk job behind.

With all her newfound freedom between photo shoots, Yung searched for a place to take casual classes in jewelry making, scrapbooking and découpage—hobbies she had taken up in New York. She wanted a safe place to just create with other enthusiasts without having to commit to long-term courses offered



by schools, but didn't find what she was looking for. That's when the idea of RAW (Random Art Workshop) was born—a workshop that offers classes ranging from photography and painting to jewelry making and scrapbooking—all led by specialized instructors. Through her workshops, Yung hopes that Hongkongers will embrace art in their everyday lives. "Hopefully I get people feeling inspired and show them something different apart from eating and drinking," she says. Yung aims to one day have an informal gallery where hobbyists can show off their talents, bridging the gap between traditional galleries reserved for well-known artists and school classrooms.

Two years after the founding of RAW, Yung balances her time between managing the growing business and freelancing for wedding shoots and fashion editorials. She may work irregular hours, but looking back to her former life as a suit, Yung finds her growing business much more rewarding. "Everything that I've built is definitely more fulfilling. Especially seeing people come out of class looking like it resonated with them," says Yung.

Get inspired at one of the art classes offered by Random Art Workshop (Unit 2501, Fook Lee Commercial Centre, 33 Lockhart Rd., Wan Chai, 2811-1845, www.randomartworkshop.com).



"Right now, I'm happy."

From Top Trader to the Art Trade

At the helm of her own gallery along Hollywood Road and a role as an art personality on Now TV, Angela Li talks about life after banking. **By Beverly Cheng**



Photo: Joyce Yung

Contemporary by Angela Li

"I have Chinese parents," explains Angela Li, "and although I liked art and painting—thinking that I was quite good—I didn't take art beyond GCSE and basically never ever expected myself to do something in art."

Li went to London School of Economics instead, and was lost in a sea of students from around the world that all shared the same aspiration—a career in investment banking. "Ninety-five percent of my peers wanted to be investment bankers. The five percent remaining wanted to be lawyers, accountants and politicians," Li laughs. Unable to break from the mould, she soon snagged a job as a trader at the HSBC treasury. The exciting pulse of the trading floor was electrifying at first, but the allure quickly faded three years into the job. "Back then, my eye bags were down to here, not that they're much better now" Li jokes, pointing down to her jaw line. "It's a stressful job, and at the end of the day, I was doing it for other people."

Li escaped from daily work stress by immersing herself in the local art scene, collecting art and gradually befriending artists and gallery owners along the way. Inspired by the seemingly fabulous lives of her jetsetting gallery owner friends, Li eventually left her job in finance. "I didn't look underneath the glamorous exterior to see the complicated side. I just saw the exhibitions, the parties and the traveling." For the first couple of years, Li cold-called prospective clients and learned from people in the business, before opening a showroom in Central near Lan Kwai Fong.

At the time, appreciation for Chinese art was still in its infancy and Li toyed with the idea of opening a gallery dedicated to contemporary art, a platform for artists she admired. But it was not until 2008 that Contemporary by Angela Li opened its doors with an inaugural exhibition by photographer Chen Jiagang. Today, Li still represents a handful of Chinese artists abroad, many of who are her closest friends.

In a lucrative art market, Li boldly stands by her tastes, choosing artworks strictly based on her gut feeling rather than solely on what the market wants. "Art is supposed to be challenging; you have to take a step further and challenge ideas. I make choices based on what I like and how it moves me," says Li. "If you talk to anyone and they look at my exhibitions and what the artists represent, they can say: 'that's Angela's.'"

Recent development along Hollywood Road has led to more business, but Li doesn't have any plans to expand just yet. "Right now, I'm happy. It already gives me a decent amount of work, I don't want more," she says.

Check out the latest exhibition at Contemporary by Angela Li (90-92 Hollywood Rd., Central, 3571-8200, www.cbal.com.hk).

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"Life is all about
keeping a balance."



From Manager to Running Man

Derek Kwik runs ultramarathons
through extreme terrain to gain
perspective. By Hana R. Alberts

Derek Kwik is still a venture capitalist. But although he hasn't left the world of finance to pursue a nontraditional career, he's found a way to pursue his passion alongside his day job.

Kwik is an ultramarathon runner, meaning he runs races of 250 kilometers or more. It's not just the distance that's the challenge. He does them in wild places, from the Sahara Desert and Antarctica to the Amazon and the Australian Outback. He's been doing one hardcore race a year since 2000—except for 2008, when he tore his Achilles tendon and took it easy and, in his words, "just ran a few marathons." Next up: a mountainous course in Nepal this November.

A slender, spry guy, Kwik was always into sports, but he decided to put his endurance to the test. He's kept running to fundraise for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). He also delivers motivational talks at businesses and schools, and raises awareness about issues such as the importance of getting kids outdoors in Hong Kong via a children's book that's in the works. Despite long hours at BraveSoldier, a venture capital firm in Causeway Bay where

he is managing partner, Kwik fits in exercise by leaving the office at a reasonable hour but then working from home afterwards; he runs up to the Peak on weekends. Crucially, his hobby provides some much-needed perspective on the day-to-day grind of Hong Kong corporate life.

"Working late at night in front of a computer screen, enjoying air conditioning and a view of the harbor, all while I'm getting a paycheck, shouldn't be as stressful as running across the desert," he says. "Life is all about keeping a balance."

Do as Kwik does by running some long races and making a donation to the SPCA (www.sPCA.org.hk).



"What makes me happiest is
when things come out right."



Photos: Joyce Yung

From I-Banker to Cupcake Baker

Her cupcakes may be sweet, but Jennifer
Cheung is all business. By Beverly Cheng

With three locations and a fourth one on the way, Sift has been satisfying aching sweet teeth since it first opened in 2006. The central kitchen and shop in Ap Lei Chau churns out hundreds of macarons and pastries every day for the branches in Wan Chai and Central, but it's Jennifer Cheung's cupcakes that attract loyal legions of fans.

After a year as an investment banker for Deutsche Bank, Cheung traded in her stilettos for an apron. She underwent pastry training in New York, followed by a brief stint at Per Se, before returning to Hong Kong and opening a small dessert bar. Cupcake connoisseurs swear that there must be something more to Sift's scrumptious cupcakes, but Cheung says that it's just down to the ingredients. "We do everything really fresh; there's no secret," she says. "We use French butter, Valrhona chocolate and fresh fruit." Nowadays, the

business has expanded to twenty members on staff, including fifteen chefs on hand, though Cheung still spends most of her time manning the kitchen and maintains a firm hand in all decision making matters. "What makes me happiest is when things come out right, when they're up to my standard," says Cheung.

Try an impossibly yummy cupcake at Sift (46 Graham St., Central, 2530-4288, www.sift-desserts.com) and look out for its new location in the Prince's Building this fall.



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"It's also about how much you care. It doesn't mean I didn't care about my old job in banking."



From Banker to Chef

Tony Cheng left the world of business and now owns—and cooks at—three successful restaurants. By Hana R. Alberts

Tony Cheng always loved food—so much so that he attended culinary school while studying for an economics degree at University College London. Scared of the risk, he figured he shouldn't enter the restaurant business without sufficient funds to bankroll his effort. So after stints in auditing at PricewaterhouseCoopers and in investment banking and private equity at Australian firm Macquarie, he finally took the plunge in 2009 by opening Drawing Room, a high-end French joint at JIA Boutique Hotel in Causeway Bay. Now, at just 29 years of age, he's added two more notches onto his F&B belt: two branches of Hainan Shaoye, which specializes in chicken rice and other Singaporean staples. A longtime amateur chef, Cheng is thrilled that he turned what was once a hobby into a day job.

"During the day in the office, I'd be thinking about how to program financial models, and make them more profitable... and at night I'd be thinking about how I should cook a dish," Cheng says. "It was a very bipolar way to lead my life."

His years slaving away in the corporate kingdom, however, paid off—in both money earned and skills learned. While he was studying accounting for the CPA exam and working as an auditor, he observed how companies put in place measures to ensure that no fraud was taking place and maintained a consistently high standard for their products.

After deciding to change careers, Cheng worked with mentor (now Drawing Room chef) Roland Schuller at Aspasia, the former fine-dining Italian restaurant at the Luxe Manor hotel. He then trained at All'Oro, a restaurant in Rome, doing everything from butchery to making pasta from scratch to washing dishes. After getting Drawing Room off the ground, Cheng turned his attention to

a dish native to the region where he grew up, traveling to Singapore to hunt down the best recipe for Hainanese chicken rice. So Hainan Shaoye was born. With an outpost in Causeway Bay and one in Harbour City, Cheng aims to expand to the mainland this year.

To be sure, the move out of the finance sector was literally costly for Cheng; he earns half of what he did before. The hours may be long and strenuous, but he says he enjoys it.



"It's also about how much you care. It doesn't mean I didn't care about my old job in banking. But if it's your own business, you put in so much more effort, and you take it so much more personally," Cheng says. "Going to work on Saturdays and Sundays now—I wouldn't call it a necessity. I would call it a comfort."

Up next for Cheng is a new modern teahouse, which will serve cups of Chinese, Japanese and Indian brews along with dim sum, dessert and Asian-style salads and pastas. Watch for it in Admiralty this fall.

Grab a bite at Tony Cheng's restaurants: Drawing Room (JIA Boutique Hotel, 1/F, 1-5 Irving St., Causeway Bay, 2915-6628) or Hainan Shaoye (Shop P311, World Trade Centre, 280 Gloucester Rd., Causeway Bay, 2111-3166 or Shop 16, G/F, Ocean Terminal, Harbour City, Tsim Sha Tsui, 2110-3533).



Hainan Shaoye

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"Was I getting what I needed out of the profession?"



From Accountant to Nonprofit Founder

It took Kylie Uebergang years to discover her professional passion. Now she runs an organization that helps migrant women and their children. By Hana R. Alberts

Finding a first job was easy for Kylie Uebergang. She went into accounting because her father told her to.

"My dad said, 'Hey, there are lots of jobs in the newspaper for accountants, and you're good at math.' And I said, 'Hey, that sounds pretty good,'" says Uebergang, 40, an Australia native who has lived in Hong Kong for 12 years. "I did accounting at university. You got a job halfway through, and the rest was sailing."

During three years at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Melbourne and a few more in Vancouver, Uebergang specialized in helping businesses recover and restructure after liquidation and insolvency. Upon moving to Hong Kong, she took a job in the mergers and acquisitions division of Ernst & Young. It was there that she found the world of business unrewarding; she was one of a handful of English speakers in the office and felt socially isolated.

"If you take away the people, I asked myself, was I getting what I needed out of the profession?" she says. "And I decided I wasn't. I really wanted to go into something that was more socially oriented, more useful."

But figuring out exactly which path to take proved harder than Uebergang thought. She undertook six months of "career soul-searching," during which she spoke regularly with a career coach and spent six weeks working with three different NGOs (Civic Exchange, Crossroads and Mother's Choice) to determine her next step. In the end, she chose to work as the CFO of Civic Exchange, doing finance and accounting for the public policy think tank, which publishes research reports on topics from pollution to government spending.

After several years managing the books and taking on other projects within the organization, Uebergang decided she wanted a more hands-on job, one in which she could more immediately see the impact of her work. With a friend, she started informally giving guidance to migrant women who were pregnant and had overstayed their visas. In 2008, their efforts morphed into PathFinders, an organization that provides these women, most of them Indonesian or Filipino domestic helpers, with help accessing medical and pre- and post-natal care, food and shelter, and professional advice on immigration, employment and child care, including adoption in Hong Kong. PathFinders also assists these women and children in their repatriation home, if that is what they choose to do.

Naturally, Uebergang took a big pay cut to pursue NGO work: "What's on your business card, how much you got for your bonus, how much your salary has gone up—it's so defined. And in the NGO system it's not defined. You get [rewarded] by the work you've created."

Uebergang, a pro multi-tasker, still holds her old job at Civic Exchange, but now PathFinders takes up more time. A couple of case managers handle much of the face-to-face interaction with women in need, so Uebergang spends some of her time returning to her accounting and finance roots, handling crucial back-office work like writing proposals and fundraising.

"The easy days are the days where I get to do stuff that I know how to do," she says. "But if I only had those easy days, I'd be completely bored."

Take some time to volunteer at PathFinders:
www.pathfinders.org.hk

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