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# Figures and colours

Caroline Sze has meshed two skills into one thriving enterprise, writes *Cookie Micaller*

Photography by Mike Ho

In her six-year career as a make-up artist, Caroline Sze has painted the faces of many celebrities, including mainland actress Ning Jing of “In the Heat of the Sun” fame, Hong Kong supermodel Rosemary Vandembroucke and local fashion designer Rane K. She has also done make-up for an advertising shoot by Hollywood photographer Michel Comte.

Not many of Sze’s clients are aware that in a former life, she was a PricewaterhouseCoopers auditor who spent countless hours poring over ledgers and spreadsheets rather than working with brushes and colours, and mixing with the rich and famous.

So what prompted her to go down this rarely trodden path?

Sze, who spent her childhood and teens in the Philippines before returning to her birthplace, Hong Kong, at 16, says she set out to become a finance officer in her formative years and being a beauty guru was nowhere near that equation.

She always had a gift for numbers. That’s why her father, a successful businessman, advised Sze to study accounting and finance at The University of Hong Kong. She joined PwC after graduation and qualified as a CPA with the Institute in 2000.

## Fading from black

As her accounting career sailed along, a feeling kept nudging her throughout the years. “I knew I loved numbers, but

I also knew I had to do something else,” Sze tells *A Plus*. “There’s a little voice inside me saying that I wanted to go into colours.”

That vague yearning didn’t crystallize until one fateful day in PwC’s office. “My discovery happened inside the ladies’ room of PricewaterhouseCoopers,” she says. “My colleagues and I talked about stocks, the market and our work. Everyone looked tired. Then I thought, maybe I should talk to them about make-up. I put a little colour (on their faces) – and it was magic! They became so happy that their eyes sparkled and glowed.”

Sze says it was not that she disliked handling audit and taxation for Barclays, her client at the time, but



“seeing my colleagues’ eyes twinkle was more fulfilling.”

She quit soon after her revelation, drew up new plans and took up an intensive course at the prestigious London School of Fashion in 2002.

The decision to leave the accounting world was not easy, but Sze has no regrets about pursuing her second calling.

“I thought I needed a different path. Most of my peers plan their lives around marriage, career and getting a luxury apartment. That was the normal path. I am not sure if I wanted to be on that path,” she says. “It’s a bit challenging because people around me think that way. And I was very lonely.”

Sze says she originally considered switching to advertising or working

for an art gallery, but in the end she realized her heart was in fashion. “It is beauty that I like, so I started to plan my way into the industry.”

### **The big break**

Unlike an impulsive and spontaneous artist, Sze says she took a very “accounting” approach for her career switch. Returning from fashion school, the former accountant found herself starting from scratch and literally knocking on every door for a job as a make-up artist or cosmetic trainer in Hong Kong.

Sze approached beauty companies and fashion houses brandishing a unique résumé: “I told them I have a business background, I’m a certified

public accountant and I have a technical background in make-up and styling. I thought it was a good blend if you want to be a training manager for cosmetic brands.”

While waiting for a break, Sze freelanced for magazines and at fashion shows. “It’s not very stable, but I got some exposure,” she says. “It’s a different world. When I was with PwC, everything was very rigid and structured. But now in fashion and make-up, there’s no structure. You have to build your own career path; there are no rules. In accounting, do your job well and you get promoted, but this one is another swimming pool altogether.”

The transition from having a steady job in a respected profession

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to freelancing as a make-up artist was tough, Sze says. “In the past, as soon as I told people I was a CPA, they respected me for what I did. But my accountant status gave me a huge psychological burden when I had to keep knocking on the door of cosmetic brands to get a job. It was difficult. People didn’t take me seriously. I cried a lot at the time.”

It didn’t help either that her father, ex-colleagues and friends all questioned her about her career switch. Fortunately, her boyfriend, Rico, a photographer and advertising creative director, stood by her. They have since married. “My father was upset by my decision. Most people around me said my plan was impractical. But my husband told me, ‘Why not? People should pursue their dreams.’ He strengthened my belief. It makes all the difference to have at least one person believing in you,” she says.

In 2002, Sze finally got hired as a training manager for international cosmetic brand Aveda. Once she got her foot in the door, she was able to

move onto other brands such as By Terry and Shu Uemura. She led teams of make-up artists for fashion shows such as Max Mara and the Hong Kong Fashion Week organized by the Trade Development Council.

### Flying solo

Four years ago, Sze set up Seasoning Ltd., a studio in Central where she provides grooming services for frontline employees and managers of a wide range of corporations, private make-up workshops and bridal styling.

“It was a new business model to have a make-up studio that is independent from any cosmetic brand. People told me it wouldn’t work. But I wanted to be able to give independent beauty advice to my clients,” she says.

Today, Sze’s growing clientele proves that she was right. Her studio, a perfect mix of her business acumen and her creative touch, now boasts of big companies such as HSBC, Barclays, MTR Corp. and KPMG as its clients.

Sze attributes her success to her passion, perseverance and her accounting training.

“I analyze systematically how things should be done, how to position the business. I know logistics and how to minimize risks,” she says. “My accounting training gave me discipline and the ability to communicate with people effectively. For example, I learned how to present the books to the clients when I was working at PwC. These are great assets to have.”

Sze says lawyers, bankers and other professionals now turn to her for pointers on “what kind of clothes to wear, what kind of make-up to put on, how to take care of their skin and how to coordinate their ties and shirts.”

And nothing pleases Sze more than when she sees her clients’ eyes light up as she paints their faces. “Once they figure out what makes them look good, their faces glow. They begin to have confidence in themselves. It’s a change for life – that’s what satisfies me most.” **A+**