

SUCCESS INGREDIENT

Teresa Wong Christie's



CHRIS

ART, AUCTION, ACCOUNTING

Christie's Teresa Wong talks to Reggie Rathour and Helen Luk about Hong Kong's meteoric rise to become Asia's top auction centre

Photography by Graham Uden

When Teresa Wong first interviewed for a job as Christie's Hong Kong financial controller 10 years ago, she knew very little about the global auction house and the rare art in which it deals.

And she was no more comforted when, after two days on the job, she realized the finance department was falling apart and that most of the finance staff had departed.

Since then, Wong has not only rebuilt and expanded the company's finance department, she has also risen through the ranks to become the Asian head of finance, overseeing Christie's 13 offices around the region. Along the way she has learned the intricacies of the auction business and witnessed Hong Kong's transformation into a global auction hotspot behind only New York and London.

Before joining Christie's, Wong worked at Chow Sang Sang Holding International Ltd. for three

STIE'S

A TRAGIC FIRE

On the afternoon of 19 November 1996, Teresa Wong said goodbye to her colleagues in the accounts department of Chow Sang Sang Jewellery Co. on Nathan Road after finishing work on the company's accounts and system upgrade. It had been a good job, working with about 20 colleagues and a financial controller who was her friend and former co-worker at Ernst & Young.

A day later, she was back in E&Y's Central offices in Hutchison House when she saw a plume of smoke rising from the vicinity of Jordan, where Chow Sang Sang was based. When she bid her colleagues farewell, she never expected it would be the last time she saw them.

"When I looked at the fire, I already had this gut feeling and then I overheard someone say 'Garley Building,'" Wong recalls. "I was shocked. I could have been there."

Eighty-one people were injured in the blaze and 41 died, including about 20 of her acquaintances and her friend, the financial controller. "For months I couldn't watch the television news, seeing people with their hands out of the windows, waving for help, and some of them falling to their death. I still have nightmares about it," she says.

Wong credits her Catholic faith for helping her through those painful days. She was later assigned by E&Y to help Chow Sang Sang recreate their records and accounts, which perished in the blaze.

"I had to work in the Chow Sang Sang Building just next to the Garley Building. Sometimes I had to work late into the night and I felt very uncomfortable doing it. The fire happened in November and we had to get everything back into shape after the Chinese New Year. The deadline for the audit was end of May and we had about three months to complete the task," she says. "I always looked forward and this helped me."

Wong's interest in auditing began when she managed the accounts of

her parents' souvenir shop in Perth, Australia, where the family migrated to in 1986.

She obtained her bachelor of commerce degree from The University of Western Australia and worked briefly as a junior accountant in a local accounting firm in Perth before returning to Hong Kong, where she was recruited by E&Y in 1992 to work in audit. Four years later, she qualified with The Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia. She has also been a member of the Hong Kong Institute of CPAs since 1997.

"When I worked in E&Y, initial public offerings were quite popular, so most of the time we dealt with due diligence work, looking for investment opportunities for Hong Kong companies in China," she says.

The exposure to various industries and management styles stood her in good stead when she landed the job at Chow Sang Sang to run the finance department. "The job was totally different from audit work and my boyfriend - a colleague at E&Y and now husband - encouraged me to try something different and expand my experience," she says.

At Chow Sang Sang, Wong led a team of 12 and oversaw all of the company's finance functions, including 28 branches in Hong Kong, six in Taiwan and 10 in China. The company was also involved in the securities and investments business. But she quit her job in 1999 and took a one-year break before she was headhunted by Christie's.

Now that she has two children, Wong says it is a challenge to strike the right balance. She usually returns home by 7:30 p.m. to spend some time with her son and daughter before picking up office work again by around 10 p.m.

"It is very important for me to get home in time to see my children. Some women would say, 'Monday to Friday is my work life and my helper would put the children to sleep.' I won't do that," she says.

years as head of its accounts department. Initially she was seconded by Ernst & Young to help the jewellery company rebuild its records and accounts after it lost most of its key finance employees in a tragic fire, but she soon joined the company as a full-time employee.

Wong's knack at rebuilding something from scratch caught the eye of Stephen Cheng, Christie's chief operating officer. Cheng told Wong the financial controller job was "interesting and involving only two auction sales each year with no worries about public company listing rules and not much statutory reporting."

A family project

In an interview with *A Plus*, Wong jokes that she was hoodwinked by Cheng, as she quickly had to take responsibility for the entire finance department, with only four temporary staff to help, and was frequently fielding complaints from irate art specialists.

"I had no clue whatsoever about the complaints and I was just wondering what kind of company I had joined," she reminisces.

Wong's team in the finance department has a dual role to play. Apart from the normal accounting and finance work, they also help with Christie's two annual Hong Kong sales, held in May and November. "It's good that way, my colleagues get a different experience. Everyone chips in during the sales like a family doing a project," she says.

Wong and her husband Terry, also an accountant, have two children: 10-year-old son Terence and daughter Terris, aged seven-and-a-half. Wong's parents, who live in Australia, come to Hong Kong to help with family chores at sales time.

"Every time it's sales time, I tell my husband that he must block out all overseas trips. I tell the kids that some of their activities have to be cancelled because mummy needs to do the sales," Wong says. "I'm definitely in love with my job. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

How Hong Kong took off

Entering into her second decade with Christie's, Wong has seen the tremendous business growth in Hong Kong and the changing trends in the business. She predicts that the growth in the territory's showroom will overtake that of New York and London in five years.

"Everyone is looking at the China market, including Christie's," she says. "We know there is a lot of potential on the mainland and management has strategies on how to invest our resources to promote Christie's name and art."

Christie's first sale in Hong Kong was in 1986. Auctions were also staged in other places across Asia including Taiwan, Japan, Singapore and Thailand. It was not until 2002 that the company decided to centralize all of its regional sales in Hong Kong.

"We found that it was much more cost efficient and more convenient for the clients to have everything consolidated in Hong Kong and to promote Hong Kong as an art hub," Wong explains.



PROFILE

1992

Graduated from The University of Western Australia and joined a local accounting firm in Perth as a junior accountant

1992-1996

Returned to Hong Kong and joined Ernst & Young as an auditor and qualified as chartered accountant

1996-1999

Appointed head of accounts department in Chow Sang Sang Holding International Ltd.

January 2001

Joined Christie's Hong Kong Ltd. as financial controller for Hong Kong and Taiwan

August 2001

Promoted to regional financial controller

2006

Became associate vice president

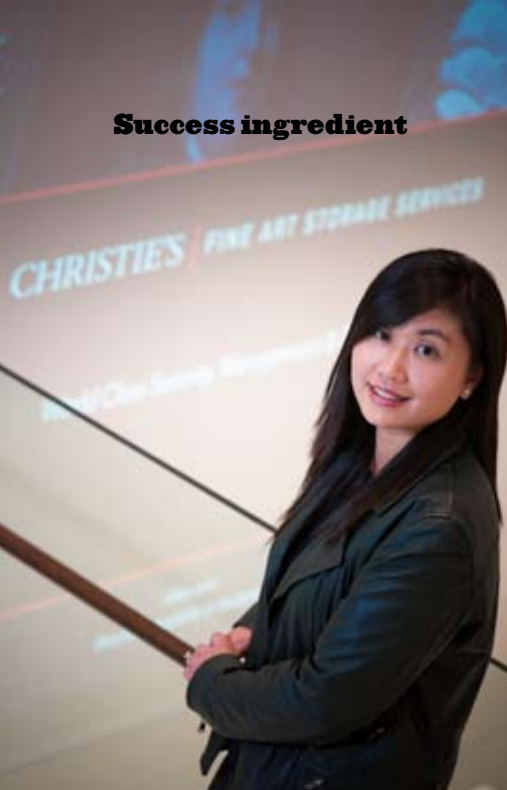
2008

Appointed vice president

2009

Promoted to Asia head of finance

Success ingredient



As a tax-free jurisdiction with a sophisticated infrastructure and banking system, Hong Kong has proved the ideal venue for Christie's. In the past, contemporary art items auctioned in Taiwan and Singapore occasionally sold for double the reserve price, "but in Hong Kong we can sometimes fetch five to six times the reserve price."

The consolidation in Hong Kong meant work for Wong, who was

initially only responsible for the financial affairs of the territory and Taiwan. Today, as head of finance for Asia with a team of 12, she is responsible for the management and financial accounting of Christie's representative and regional offices in Australia, Beijing, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Shanghai, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

A key function of Wong's finance team is client accounting. "We make sure that the buyers pay for the items purchased on time, and that the vendors who consign things to us get their proceeds on time with different costs, such as shipping, insurance, framing and restoration, being charged correctly," she says.

Accountants and art specialists are not a natural fit, and Wong says communication is one of her biggest challenges. "They are so devoted to art and their clients, and have a different way of thinking in terms of handling issues," Wong explains. "It is up to us to find a way to explain to them that we are there to help them and add value to the company, rather than give them trouble."

The China factor

China's appetite for artwork and other finer things in life has played a big part in Hong Kong's meteoric rise as an auction centre. Wong says nowadays private collectors from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China always feature in Christie's top 10 buyers. "In the past, one out of 10 came from China. Now, six out of 10 are mainlanders."

Christie's currently holds sales in 10 categories, ranging from historic Chinese art and jadeite jewellery to cutting edge contemporary Asia art, western jewellery, watches and wine. Chinese paintings and Asian works of art, such as antiques dating back to the days of the Chinese emperors, are still the most sought-after items in Hong Kong, she says.

"If you sell one, there's one less in the market. They can't be reproduced and most of the people buying them are private collectors," Wong says.

Even during the recent financial crisis, Christie's Hong Kong fared relatively well, thanks to the resilience of the Chinese economy. "It was the only site where the crisis had a minor impact, with only a few people laid off," Wong says.

The crisis hit just as Christie's was promoting its autumn sale in 2008, and vendors were unwilling to lower their prices even though buyer interest was low. The turnover for the November 2008 sale slumped to just HK\$1.1 billion, less than half of that year's spring sale, and slid further to HK\$1.07 billion in the spring of 2009.

Since then, sales began picking up to reach HK\$2.29 billion last spring and HK\$3.23 billion in November, bringing last year's total to HK\$5.52 billion. That figure is more than double the HK\$2.7 billion in 2009 and more than sevenfold of the HK\$753 million in total sales Christie's recorded in 2002, the year the auction house centralized its regional sales in Hong Kong.

Wong predicts that China's obsession with fine wines will continue to grow, with Chinese buyers targeting premier names such as Château Lafite Rothschild and Haut Brian. Global wine auctions hit a record US\$408 million last year, with Hong Kong accounting for US\$165 million of that, according to *Wine Spectator*.

"Many Asian buyers are in the initial stages of collecting and when they first start out, they buy practically everything for whatever it takes because their cellars are basically empty," Charles Curtis, head of wine for Christie's Asia, told the wine magazine.

Like a party

In addition to China's growing influence, Wong says the Internet has also revolutionized the auction business. Buyers today not only attend auctions in person or bid by phone, they can also log on to Christie's website and bid for their coveted artwork at home, in the office, or even at a coffee shop. Online bidding is particularly popular for watch sales, with a recent sale attracting 200 online bidders, she says.

Over the years, Wong says Christie's, which earns commissions from vendors and premiums from buyers, has changed its approach to auctions. While the events were once held in hotel ballrooms, they are now staged in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, where thousands of participants can be hosted in style.

"We had a three-day preview and a five-day auction in November and we had a big party with wine, dining and everything," she says. "We don't want to have an auction just for the sake of having an auction. We want to make it an event for our clients, like a party." **A**

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