

Enter the Creative Dragon Feature

“Fun”, says **Rachel Chan (SLN2006)**, “is an important component of work.” But she is very serious in wanting to make a meaningful difference to business through service innovation.

ENTER THE CREATIVE DRAGON

InnoFoco, the business Rachel set up in 2007, aims to help organisations think differently about their approach to service excellence, how they create memorable customer experiences and identify new business opportunities. Rachel takes an unashamedly creative approach to business, an approach that she says was inspired in large part by Sloan at London Business School.

A more creative world

Rachel is a woman on a mission. She is determined to make the world a more creative place, and as part of the process make many more people recognise the vital importance of creativity. Underpinning this mission is the belief that creativity is not just good for the economy and for competitiveness but is also the source of personal happiness. However, achieving this fundamental change means changing the DNA of society, starting with a new approach to educating the young. One of her current projects is to create a new ‘conference’ experience to promote creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and global thinking among young people aged 16–30. “We will invite thought leaders and role models from around the world to share their experience with the audience”, she says. “There will be opportunities for young people to demonstrate their

talents and stir their creative juices – it’s a bit like *American Idol* meets Davos.” The conference will have both online and offline components allowing the organisers to create a community of participants who already know one another before they attend the conference itself. “A key element will be to provide learning opportunities that participants will truly enjoy”, she adds. Rachel’s efforts to make society more creative are mostly channelled through InnoFoco, whose mission is to help organisations create unique value propositions and build brand loyalty through service innovation. It focuses on achieving service excellence, creating memorable customer experience and identifying new opportunities. “The concept of service innovation is applicable to all industries”, she says. “Even if you make a product, there is a service element to your business and you need to make sure it’s a good and memorable service.” Rachel became



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interested in the concept of service innovation and customer experience while she was at the School. Returning to the UK after an earlier visit in 1992 while a member of the Hong Kong Government administration, she was struck by the improvements that had taken place in customer service. “I was pleasantly surprised at some of the innovations of the banks, the supermarkets, telecom companies, even the NHS! Although I had been responsible for promoting design in the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the concept of designing for intangibles, like service, was totally alien to me. Then I heard two talks, one by service designer Oliver King at the British Library, the other by one of the guest speakers on the Sloan Discovery Programme, Sean Blair.”

She realised at once that this was an idea that would really fly in Hong Kong, one of the most service-oriented economies in the world. “To me, whether you are a company or a city, innovation is vital; and you need an innovation process to turn creative ideas into dollars and cents. In the case of Hong Kong, the city needs to differentiate itself through innovation – and it is innovation at a very strategic level, from the city’s vision, its core values, its value proposition and the policy priorities.” Rachel firmly believes that if Hong Kong can get these elements right, it can create a truly unique selling proposition. The School played an important role in helping her formulate her ideas.

Creative career change

Participating in the Sloan programme clearly helped Rachel make the transition from government official to entrepreneur, but she has not entirely left her former career behind. Much of her work at the moment is for public sector clients. The result is a challenging combination of strategy, innovation policy, branding and marketing. As a former government

administrator and diplomat, the success of Hong Kong is also dear to her heart. Rachel is currently working with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to review and augment the Hong Kong brand, both in Asia and internationally. It is a major commitment that has already absorbed her for ten months and will continue well into 2009.

Apart from the conventional research you would expect in a major government project of this kind, Rachel and her colleagues are committed to taking a more creative approach to engaging with the people of Hong Kong to find out what they want. “We do this through a wide variety of activities including interviews, focus groups, visioning workshops, online activities, competitions and awards. A key objective is to create a shared vision for Hong Kong in the year 2020, and engaging young people through social media is vital.” This project builds naturally on the work Rachel did at the Hong Kong Trade Development Council where, during her final year, she was tasked with setting up a department to promote Hong Kong as a premier business hub in Asia. The project identified the opportunities for the territory to become a content hub for East and West culture, as well as a regional supply chain management centre and a technology marketplace.

A good global citizen

Rachel is proud to be what she describes as “a good global citizen”. She ascribes her first taste of internationalism to the period she spent at Oxford in 1992. She and ten other students from Brazil, Canada and Germany lived in a small lodging house. “It was like a tiny global village”, she recalls. At weekends Rachel made Chinese soup and sweet-and-sour pork for her room-mates. “My next-door neighbour was Italian and he taught us how to make pasta al dente. My Brazilian

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room-mate made wonderful salad the Brazilian way – with a lot of fruit. A German friend also taught us to make a healthy drink by growing some sort of a mushroom with sugar and fruit tea in a big jar.”

Rachel’s Sloan work group was similarly diverse, including a Singaporean, an Indian, a Canadian and a Brit, and the diversity did not stop there: “We all came from very different industry backgrounds and had very different personalities, but somehow the chemistry was right. There were differences but they added value to everything we did as a team.” The group was very effective, she remembers. They also embraced Rachel’s philosophy of making work fun, and their presentations created a real impact. In a microeconomics strategy presentation they performed a rendition

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

As a government employee, Rachel was always uncomfortable with the status quo and desired to be an agent for change. She arrived in Brussels in 1995 to represent Hong Kong in discussions with the European Commission on bilateral trade issues, but soon realised that bilateral issues were not a high priority. So she carved out a new role supporting the Geneva office in advocating Hong Kong’s position on major issues to be addressed at the Singapore Ministerial Conference in 1996. Two years later, after Hong Kong’s transfer of sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China, she worked in the

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London to promote ‘business as usual’ through a range of commercial and cultural activities. These included the first major Hong Kong film festival organised with the Institute of Contemporary Arts and a Chinese contemporary dance debut for the Peacock Theatre. Previously, the office had only dealt with political issues arising from Hong Kong’s status within the UK. It is fair to say that these initiatives reflected Rachel’s more creative approach. **AN**



RACHEL CHAN

Born Hong Kong

Education BA (University of Hong Kong) in Linguistics, European Literature (Drama) and Sociology. Oxford University – a diploma programme for Hong Kong administrative officers. London Business School, Sloan Fellow.

Career

1989-2000: Administrative Service, Hong Kong Government: A variety of roles, including Assistant Secretary in both the Transport and the Civil Service Bureaus. Her final role was as Principal Assistant Secretary in the Economics Service Bureau.

2001-05: Hong Kong Trade Development Council
2001-02: Council Secretary

2002-04: Director of Services Promotion

2004-05: Director of International Marketing

Since 2007: Founder and Chief Catalyst of InnoFoco.

Family: I am the eldest daughter in the family – this probably explains why I am bossy at times!

Greatest inspiration: Reading Paolo Coelho's book, *The Alchemist*. When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.

Most unusual job: The job I do now – introducing service innovation and design to Asia.

Achievements she feels most proud of: Being a global citizen; having the courage to leave a secure job and start my own business.

Skills she would most like to acquire: Painting – I'm learning sketching now.

Favourite pastime: Trying new restaurants, Latino aerobics, movies, music, theatre, reading, hiking, travelling, shopping and organising events for the Hong Kong Alumni Club.

BRITISH COUNCIL'S CELEBRATION 60

In 2008, Rachel Chan was one of 60 people honoured as part of 'Celebration 60', marking the British Council's 60th anniversary in Hong Kong. Celebration 60 is a roll-call of successful Hong Kong citizens whose UK education has benefited from a British Council scholarship. The chosen individuals come from many different walks of life and were selected for their 'colourful and distinguished background'. They include banker Sir David Li, music conductor Yip Wing-sie, ballerina Jean Wong, Sir Ti Liang Yang, Professor Charles Kao, glass maker Rachel Cheung and Choy Ka-fu, chef from the Peninsula Hotel. [AN](#)

of Aqua's 'Barbie Girl' song; in another presentation where the aim was to help Chinese companies acquire international brands, the group actually entered the lecture theatre doing a dragon dance. No prizes for guessing who came up with that idea. By attracting attention in the first 30 seconds of their presentation, Rachel believes that she and her teammates were more likely to get their audience to listen to what they had to say. Remembering their team sessions, **Greg Pestrak** (SLN2006) says of Rachel: "She has the ability to do incisive analysis and then mix something creative from left field into the output to really drive her point home."

These learning experiences at the School left their mark on Rachel who believes passionately in the value of international

teams. "As individuals and as organisations we are all competing globally, and we have to benchmark ourselves against the best international standards. As an Asian company, there is no point in benchmarking against other Asian companies – it is simply not good enough." As evidence of this philosophy, InnoFoco boasts what Rachel describes as "a truly international team", including a number of the School's alumni. She has also forged close associations with thought leaders and design and innovation experts in the UK, the US and other parts of the world. "In creating international teams, the size of your firm, or your geography, should not be a limiting factor", says Rachel. "You can always find partners on a global scale." [AN](#)