



TRENDY TANNI: Wu's lifestyle brand includes 10 stores across China, with plans to open up to 30 more.



Bringing Chic to China

Drawing on her business and fashion talents, Tanni Wu leads one of the country's hottest lifestyle brands.

BY OLIVIA M. HALL

As a primary school student in Beijing in the 1990s, Tanni Wu '06 was shut off from fashion. There were no department stores or malls, and virtually no new styles flowing into China. Every day she trudged to school in the same kind of jacket that all of her classmates were wearing.

Twenty years later, Wu not only has plenty of fashion options, she is helping create them. Since 2011, she has opened ten stores, named Tanni, to offer trendy women's clothing, accessories, and household goods under a branding concept that's new to Chinese consumers.

Barely three years after Tanni launched, it now employs 100 people and brings in more than \$4 million in annual sales, according to Wu. She plans to open as many as 30 additional locations—in China, for the time being—during the next few years.

Wu traces much of her success to Cornell, where she nurtured her love for fashion and developed an understanding of brands that aim to represent the tastes of a larger group or culture.

"I did a lot of online shopping back [then]," she laughs. "Many lifestyle-related brands like Anthropologie came online during that time, and they sent a lot of catalogs to campus."

When the former policy analysis and management major (who took many courses in fashion design and management) returned first to Hong Kong, and later to Beijing, where she worked in investment

banking and private equity for five years, she found an absence of Chinese lifestyle brands.

"Most stores aren't multibrand, and the styles are similar across the whole market," Wu says. "Traditional Chinese clothing brands are more old-fashioned and formal."

Wu sensed an opportunity—an intuition that was confirmed at her day job in finance.

"I worked with many customer-retail investments and met a lot of industry leaders in China," says Wu. "When we discussed their plans for the next three to five years, most of them told me that they were interested in building lifestyle-related concepts. That pushed me toward my own idea, because I thought the market was ready."

A Running Start

With that vision, Wu set about researching her clientele, their buying habits, and potential retail locations. Finally, dipping into savings from her years in banking, she opened three stores, largely on her own, in different parts of Beijing in 2011.

"Retail in China is very different," Wu says about this ambitious start. "Unlike in the U.S., where people tend to try to perfect one store before branching out, stores here tend to expand very fast in the first couple of years. I think in China people recognize a brand as a brand by hearing about and seeing it everywhere. To have



confidence in your brand, they need to know that you're not just one small-time boutique."

While Tanni started out as a concept similar to Anthropologie, its founder quickly used customer feedback to develop a unique identity suited to local tastes. At trade shows and through social networks, Wu recruited designers in Europe and the United States who fit the Tanni brand, which is aimed at women ages 25 to 40.

"People in China like clean, fresh looks, not vintage," says Wu of the brand aesthetics. "So we are focused on very sophisticated and detailed designs with a highlight of European styles."

Despite the challenges of building a successful venture—"The business environment in China is very tough," she admits—Wu loves being a fashion entrepreneur.

"I enjoy being in the store or standing outside and looking at what direction people go in after they enter the store, which display attracts them, what gets them interested," she says. "I even like to draw a map. I just really love retail."

Building her Brand

Wu's other great love is Cornell.

"I know this is a little cheesy, but I'm really, really proud of Cornell," she says. "And I hope that one day Cornell will be very, very proud of me."

Since graduation, she has been active in the Cornell Alumni Admissions Ambassador Network (CAAAN), and her dedication, most recently as CAAAN chair for northern China as well as in leadership roles for the Cornell Club in Beijing, has attracted attention at her alma mater.

"I learned about Tanni from a colleague about two years ago and was really fascinated by her life trajectory and professional profile," says

Hongnan Ma, MA '01, director of international programs at Cornell's Office of Alumni Affairs. "We are looking for that next generation of Cornell leaders in China, where the alumni population is rapidly growing."

According to Ma, Wu fits the bill, serving as a model for students and alumni. Although Wu was one of only a few Chinese undergraduates when she arrived at Cornell, that number has grown rapidly—more than eightfold between 2004 and 2012, Ma says. The growth has inspired Wu to look for new ways to connect to students, such as a forthcoming internship program at Tanni.

"Tanni is a successful professional because she is a thought leader," says Jeff MacCorkle '88 (Arts and Sciences), president of the Cornell Club in Beijing. "Her diverse international experience and the ability to communicate across cultures and segments is an important part of her success. She effortlessly bridges gaps between Chinese and expatriates in the club."

Plus, Ma adds, "Tanni knows how to move initiatives forward, both on the visionary and operational levels, especially in a Chinese cultural setting."

Take Ma's recent proposal for a small Cornell Women's Network event. Wu promptly turned the idea into a joint affair with Yale University, drawing more than 300 people, with coverage on the state-owned CCTV, China's primary television channel.

"Tanni's an amazing leader," Ma acknowledges. "But when you speak to her she's soft-spoken, modest, and emanates a very positive, constructive, and warm energy. That's the magic that makes things happen."

LINK tanni.com

Olivia M. Hall, PhD '12, is a freelance writer and anthropologist.