

PUTTING PEN TO PAPER

CzipLee has been a prominent name on the local stationery landscape for half a century now, surviving the onslaught of big bookstores and a horrific fire that threatened to end founder Peter Chen's involvement in the business. Joined by his wife and children, he sits down with **Petrina Fernandez** for a rare interview to talk about the stationery store's beginnings and the transition of a family business to the next generation.

A push of the door reveals to the first-time customer a wonderland of paper and art and craft materials. These range from the award-winning Kokuyo Kadokeshi 28-Corner Eraser for intricate drawings to the aspirational Mission Gold Watercolors by Mijello. Enthusiasts know from experience to set aside a full hour or more just to browse, flitting from shelf to shelf in search of the kind of ecstasy only a new creative find can bring.

Homegrown brand CzipLee has been serving the stationery needs of offices, schools and art aficionados for 50 years now, branching out from a humble stand in Kajang to establish a formidable presence in Bangsar in 2006. Today, the Kajang branch is still in operation and comprises four shoplots while the Bangsar store is a two-storey corner-lot landmark in the commercial neighbourhood of Telawi.

Should you happen to visit the Bangsar branch, you might spot a gentleman with a pleasant smile industriously tackling a loose shelf with a screwdriver or analysing the arrangement of a display. Until June this year, some visitors might have assumed that he worked there or was a silently critical customer. An Instagram post by CzipLee identified him as the founder, Peter Chen.

"We didn't even tell him we were doing it," says son Alvin of his famously shy father. "It was Father's Day and we thought okay lah, it's the brand's 50th year, let people know who the face behind CzipLee is. They probably thought he was one of the staff, always fixing something."

This is the first media interview Peter has consented to and, even then, it is only because the brand is turning 50. "At least there will be something out to celebrate it," he says, laughing self-consciously. "I was 17 years old when my mother put up RM2,000 of her own money for me to start a stationery business in Kajang. In 1968, that was a lot of money."

"Why stationery?" I ask. "No choice," he jokes, and his wife Karen and children, Alvin and Jason, laugh. "Actually, no. I was a naughty boy and my mother wanted to keep me occupied. I liked stationery, liked writing and discovering new instruments."

A man of few words and evidently uncomfortable in the spotlight, Peter's sprinkling of sentences is bolstered by his obliging family members. Karen steps in when he trails off. "If you don't mind me interrupting, he is not very good at this. I think we should paint a picture of what the shop looked like."

A NEW PAGE

"It started off as a little corner newsagent, selling sweets, newspapers and a bit of stationery," says Jason, as if by rote.

"It was also very messy," laughs Karen. "There were stacks of newspapers, some exercise books, a single choice of pencils, erasers and rulers — the basics. His mother wanted to give him a sense of responsibility and he took it seriously, working very hard to expand the business. He started supplying to schools and offices, and then he wanted to open a complementary store to sell gifts and sports equipment like

badminton rackets and football shoes. It was common to sell those things side by side back then."

She joined Peter in 1978, when he needed another pair of hands. "He put me in the front 'temporarily' and when he saw that I was good with customers, he said, 'Wah, you know how to sell things. Okay lah, you can stay here, no need to leave.' We were not married then but that is how we got stuck together," she laughs. "We opened the second store and he taught me how to do everything. I engraved trophies for schools by hand, learnt to restring badminton rackets. We then diversified into books; schools reached out to us for textbooks and we became a contractor. We were one of the early birds in this business, so we managed the whole Hulu Langat district. It was hard, laborious work and involved a minefield of logistics; that's why we are so physically strong today."

In the midst of the chaos of expansion, the two got married and started a family of their own. Their daughter and two sons grew up in the bookstore, living and breathing stationery.

"It was fun," says Jason.

"Yeah, we had the coolest stuff in school," says Alvin, raising his chin in feigned smugness. "Our classmates would come with boxes of 12 colour pencils and I would bring out 48 colours. It was like 'Sorry, dude, I win, sit down there and watch me play'. The government had by then introduced a textbook loan scheme. Since our parents supplied books, we were not eligible for the loaned books so we always had brand new copies."

There was a price to pay though — they were expected to work in the store every holiday throughout their schooling, returning home during semester breaks even when they were studying overseas.

"It was child labour," says Alvin indignantly to the laughter of the rest.

"Yeah lah, they would always complain we were abusing them," says Karen.

"It was effectively an unpaid internship. We would write our own letters of recommendation and ask dad to sign them," adds Jason.

He lived in Australia for 12 years, staying on to work in the finance office of a college after completing his degree in commerce. Alvin, meanwhile, studied biological science with the vague aim of going into medicine. Neither of them had ever felt pressured to work in the family business as Karen insisted they be allowed to pursue their own interests. Peter's brother, who had worked with him since the beginning, had brought his sons into the business and they were being informally groomed for succession. But a casual trip back home and an unexpected conversation with his father in 2005 set Jason on a new course.

Peter, never one to sit still, harboured dreams of a second branch for years. Karen firmly vetoed the idea, granting an exemption in the implausible event that the children came on board.

"I didn't think there was a point otherwise," she says. "He held the dream in his heart for years and when they said yes, he came alive again."

"He asked for help with an expansion he had in mind, and it was a yes or no sort of situation," says Jason. "I was at a turning point in my career and had a lot to lose, like my Australian PR, but I came home. It had its challenges; we had different ideas and clashed over a lot of things. It was my first time working for my dad in a professional capacity and it was hard at first but we worked it out. I roped in Alvin and together we opened the Bangsar outlet."

Alvin was working in an investment company in Malaysia at the time but agreed to the venture. They rented a shoplot down the road from their current location and opened CzipLee in 2006. They could immediately tell it was a different ball game. The Kajang branch, now run autonomously by Peter's brother and his children, grew in tandem with the development of the country — "It was a cowboy town when we first opened," describes Karen — to take up four shoplots and become the largest business of its kind there. There was a lot more competition in Bangsar, with MPH occupying a large corner lot near the store and Popular Bookstore within driving distance.

"People asked us how we would compete against the big boys," says Karen. "We cannot play the same game they do, we do not have the space or resources to carry the range of books Borders or MPH can, so we try to be different. We don't compete, we complement."

CONTINUES NEXT PAGE

From left: Karen, Peter, Alvin and Jason Chen



FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

While Kajang customers tend to look at price points, the Bangsar crowd demand value, pushing the Chens to bring in higher quality products. Their customers' worldliness also influenced the stock. A magazine editor who frequented the store recommended they bring in Moleskine notebooks. The brothers went online to look up the brand and so began an active interest in keeping on top of global trends.

Jason, in particular, inherited his father's restlessness and the two revised stock and displays constantly in their search for a better customer experience. "In our Kajang days, we had good friends who knew us well," says Karen. "They could see how much Peter liked changing things around and bringing in new things and they would say, 'Good thing he doesn't change wife ah.' But he taught me what passion means, especially after we came here. I never knew how passionate someone could be until I saw his devotion to growing the Bangsar branch, especially after we moved into this permanent space in 2011. I think his blood is rusty with all things stationery."

FROM THE ASHES

On a hot afternoon during the Chinese New Year holidays in 2016, a sudden power surge overwhelmed the mains on the first floor of CzipLee and a fire broke out. Jason and Alvin were there with a handful of staff members, doing a stock take before the store opened. The building was quickly evacuated and the fire was put out within half an hour. Initially optimistic, the Chens thought operations could resume on the ground floor while renovations and repairs took place upstairs but their hopes were quickly dashed.

Water destroyed what the fire didn't. Between the firemen's hoses and the storms that followed before the building was deemed safe for entry, 80% of stock and equipment were damaged beyond repair. The extent of the destruction came as an almost physical blow, especially to Peter.

"It was the first time I ever saw my dad disheartened," says Alvin. "We were all very tired and debated if we should even rebuild. It would mean starting from scratch, all over again. But the first time we went in, after being given permission to re-enter the site, the first book I picked up was a copy of Joel Osteen's *Fresh Start*. I took a photo and WhatsApped it to the family. It was a sign."

First, though, they had to sift through the heap of rubble and ash for salvageable material. It was a monumental, back-breaking task but they found they were not alone.

"The community really became our family," says Karen. "Customers became friends. The days following the fire, they stood with us in the rain, rallied around us and offered moral support. Neighbouring businesses kept sending over food and water, even for the firemen. People as far away as Melbourne texted to say they were sorry, those living in nearby districts drove over and others sent over friends to help. It took six months of working in the ashes, with the smell of smoke clinging to us, to remove all stock. We could not have done it without our friends. It was nice to feel that we belonged to this community, the way everyone showed their love and care."

When CzipLee was founded in 1968, Peter named it after the Cantonese words *ji* and *li*, depicting unity and strength. It embodies the gathering together of the family and the collective strength of their unity, symbolised in the brand's logo of a quiver of arrows. This was best seen in the days following the fire, when the family really pulled together and accepted the situation with as much grace as possible under the circumstances, even looking for that metaphorical silver lining. Despite the horror of the experience, Alvin says the months it took to rebuild were good for the family, who had time together outside of work for the first time in years.

"We had a chance to reconnect and reflect, and took this as an opportunity to rethink what we were doing," he explains.

Apart from the new layout of the interior, the redefined concept also includes a dedicated Takeo section — the brand's first outside Japan — with every kind of paper imaginable, and an intimate event space. Here, artists and designers are invited to host talks or workshops. The aim is to provide local talent a platform to talk about their work and enable customers to have a better experience with their products. Malaysian-born artist and architectural designer Hong Yi, better known by her moniker Red, was a recent guest.

"It was like rising from the ashes lah, literally," says Alvin. "Our theme that year, in 2016, was 'emerge'. We were thinking along the lines of emerging from the previous generation, the transition to the new. Then the fire happened and the word took on new meaning: to emerge from the ashes."

"It was the word that carried us through," says his brother. "We were just talking about it casually before Chinese New Year, playing around with the word. We wanted it to have real meaning and it did."

"And we haven't dared to have a word of the year since," adds Alvin. "We're not taking any more chances."

A FAMILY FIRST

CzipLee has transitioned from its founding father into the hands of his sons, with the Kajang branch undergoing the same changeover and now belonging to the second generation. Despite the handover, Peter and Karen are still deeply involved with the business, though placing the reins completely in the hands of his sons was a learning curve for Peter.

"What I like about this old man is that he's always learning," says Karen fondly, reaching out to pat her husband on his hand. He smiles sheepishly at her.

"He is very gracious," says Jason.

"He didn't always use to be this way," she continues. "It took him time to accept that people have different ideas. He is used to thinking he is the boss and the father, and I had to keep reminding him that the children were invited

"He looks at building long-term relationships and acts accordingly," says Jason.

"That's what makes people come back," says his father when pressed for the reason for this insistence.

"It also spills over into the way we treat our customers," adds Karen. "We have so many little items on the shelves and we used to be afraid of customers shoplifting but then we thought, we have to trust them and we have to trust God. If someone takes something without paying, it's between them and God. But our faith has been repaid."

Manifold too from the stories they share. People often leave the store forgetting to pay, but they run right back in to complete the transaction. Recently, one woman even drove all the way to Serdang before remembering she had not paid for a sheet of mahjong paper. She turned her car around and returned immediately to settle the debt, which was under RM1.

"I said, 'Aiyoh, you could have paid the next time, your petrol for the return trip costs more than that.' But she said 'Never mind lah, since I'm here I'll buy more things.' It makes us feel good," says Karen.

"We also receive letters from people who have pocketed something as children and, now that they have grown up, they send us the money they owe along with an apology," says Jason.

"Many cases, in fact," adds Peter.

Much like the management is now in its second generation, so too are their loyal customers.



to come on board as equal partners and we have to treat them as such. They need to express their aspirations too."

"But he still doesn't give us face," says Alvin. "If we come up with something new, his immediate reaction is to say no because he wants us to convince him it is the right thing to do. It is good because it makes us think things through, and work out how to best present our case."

"Like this interview," his brother inserts cheekily. The family laughs. Securing this interview took the better part of two months as Peter was hesitant about being in the limelight.

Sitting with them at the table, it is easy to see from their candour and easy banter that they are a close-knit family generous with their affection. That they share a similar sense of humour surely helps. I look at their business cards in search of their official titles and instead find hashtags describing their strengths or roles. Peter's says #iamtheboss, Karen's is #iamtheOG (Original Gangster), Jason's reads #imovemountains and Alvin's is a deadpan #pleasedonotdisturb.

The children clearly hold their parents in high esteem and espouse the values instilled in them from a young age. Honesty, integrity and righteousness come up in a conversation about virtues.

"Dad has always taught us to be honest in all our dealings, right down to the smallest thing," says Alvin. "Even one extra pen in the box has to be returned to our suppliers. He knows it sounds ridiculous and that the vendor will likely ask us to keep it, but he is adamant we tell them and that all dealings are above board."

"I meet all these people who say, 'Aunty, you're still here!' and I say in return, 'Of course lah. If I'm not here it means I sudah meninggal,'" says Karen. "We served them as children and they now bring their children."

It even happens to the boys. "They will come up to Jason or me and say, 'Do you remember me? I used to buy stationery from you when I was in primary school. I'm working now.' It reminds us how old we are," laughs Alvin.

Now that his sons run the store, Peter has time on his hands to indulge in pursuits such as going on mission trips with his church — he was days away from a trip to Sri Lanka at the time of the interview — and spending time with his grandchildren. The family of five has expanded to 14, with six grandchildren for him to dote on. Although his brainchild reaches a milestone this year, in characteristic fashion, the patriarch is disinclined to make a fuss about the occasion. Apart from a few products designed in collaboration with local designers and brands to mark the occasion, there are no plans (as yet) to celebrate the landmark anniversary. I ask if he is proud of the achievement and he just smiles.

"How? Proud or not? Are you happy or not?" prods his wife.

He pauses. "Very happy," he says finally. "It's nice seeing the children take over, seeing something I did for 50 years being continued and improved. It's like watching a flower blossom."

Alvin glances at his father before looking at me. "It is a legacy that has been put on a platter for us, so we try to do our best to honour it."