

# A Mother's Work at Motherswork

Sharon Wong turned a desire for fashionable maternity wear into a journey with women into motherhood.



Premium mother and baby products retailer Motherswork started off as a maternity fashion label that founder Sharon Wong created to dress herself professionally while pregnant with her first child. Twenty-five years on, the company hires over 160 employees in stores across China, Vietnam, and its home market of Singapore. Following Motherswork's acquisition by parent-tech company The Parentinc, the mother of three looks back at how the business which she dubs "a hobby" became synonymous with premium mother and baby products, and how "having it all" is all about having the right mindset.

## How did the idea of Motherswork come about? How has it grown from what you described as your hobby into what it is now?

It started off when I was first pregnant in 1996, a time when fashion for maternity clothes was still in its infancy. I was in a corporate role in Hong Kong then, and I wasn't going to meet bankers dressed in a frock that looked like a curtain. I contacted a fashion designer, and he said, "I could design something for you." So, without knowing anything about the fashion industry, I created my own fashion label called Mothers Work Maternity.

It got off to a good start because everybody needed some basic pieces, but I couldn't scale without a fashion background. I ran my store for two years until we moved back to Singapore. That's when I closed it because I didn't know how to manage it remotely. At that point in time, I was pregnant with my second child, and I was getting stopped by people asking about my maternity clothes. "The entrepreneur in me came to life again. I realised, there's a market for this in Singapore!"

After that, I discovered that there were fashion designers overseas who had become mothers, decided that they had nothing to wear, and so they designed their own clothes. I got in touch with them and became their stockist in Singapore. By the time I was pregnant with my third baby, I had done a lot of research on baby products and put together a little black book of what to buy and when to buy. And I wanted to share this with other women.

So instead of waiting around for someone else to build it, I decided I would do it: Create a one-stop shopping experience to journey with women to make motherhood a little less overwhelming.

Then right after my third baby was born, my husband got a job in the US. I convinced a supplier to join me to help handle day-to-day operations in Singapore. Once we settled down, I started attending baby fairs and contacting American baby product suppliers, and began building relationships with the major brands in the baby industry.

Once you have a few brands under you, you gain credibility. I also believe we do justice to these brands. Once we take a brand, we grow it, and the brand blossoms and the brand principals trust us. We entered Vietnam in May 2024, and because of the good relationships we have with the brand principals, we secured most of the brands we have been working with. But we also have to run fast because there is a time period when you are allowed to play without delivering, and thereafter you must deliver. And luckily for us, because my whole team is very hands-on, we have always managed to deliver. Come crunch time, we deliver. And I think that's what's important in getting us to where we are today.

### China is your first international market.

#### What prompted you to expand into China? What obstacles did you face?

I moved back to Singapore in 2009, and Motherswork was still very much a mom-and-pop store then. After living in the US for almost 10 years and window shopping while the kids were in school, I saw firsthand how shops can be transformed visually and become successful. I travelled back to Singapore for three months every year during those 10 years, and the store was already evolving. I expanded the business, redecorated the store to improve its ambience and the experience for mothers, and we've grown rapidly since.

But at that time, only around 40,000 babies were born in Singapore a year, so the market didn't have a lot of growth potential. A number of people said, "Sharon, your business is too small. If you want to support more mothers, if you want investment, Motherswork needs to grow." So we looked at Malaysia, Indonesia, and China, and found that Indonesia and Malaysia were no-go's for several reasons at that moment in time.

In fact, China was also initially a no-go. We had chosen Beijing instead of Shanghai, as I thought Shanghai was too competitive. But when we met the Beijing mall operators, they all said the same thing: "You've not operated outside of Singapore. How do we know you can be successful?" And then they added, "Open one store, and if you are successful, we will give you space." But how do I open

a store if nobody gives me that first opportunity?

Two months later, one of the malls had a change in leadership and the new management invited us to look at a space. It was dead space in the middle of the mall, but I also saw the potential for it to become a one-stop shopping experience that did not exist for mothers, babies, and children in China at that point. Imagine the possibilities if we can make it in Beijing, and those three words—"imagine the possibilities"—took us to the fastest growing consumer market where we had to run fast, evolve, and adapt to what I call 'China speed'.

That first store we opened in 2012 turned out to be a big success. We learnt so much from operating in China because it's such a huge country and the players move so fast. We had landed in one of the largest retail landscapes in the world, and we survived. Since then, we've brought all those best practices back to Singapore.

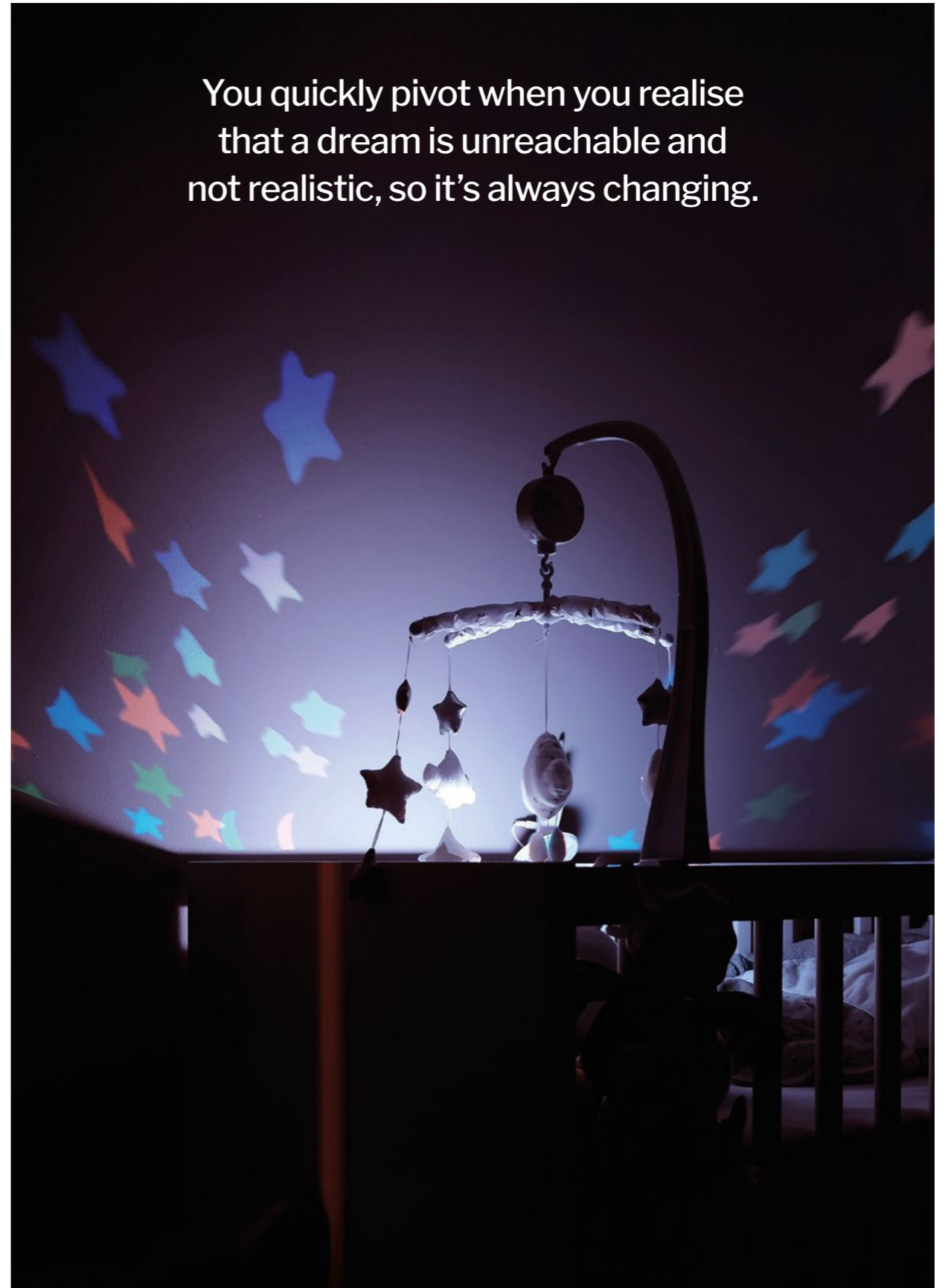
When I first went in, I had dreams of opening 100 stores. I then scaled that back to maybe 30 stores. At our peak, we had 14. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we closed a few stores and now we're down to eight very profitable, successful stores in China. You quickly pivot when you realise that a dream is unreachable and not realistic, so it's always changing. If you ask me what our plans are for the next five years, I'll tell you we want to expand in Southeast Asia. We've made it work in Vietnam and Bangkok will be our next stop.

### You bootstrapped Motherswork's expansion in China without external funding, and you rejected numerous buyout offers before The Parentinc approached you. Why did you accept this deal after turning down the previous ones?

As soon as we entered China, there had been offers on the table. Some of those offers didn't align with our values. At different points in time, I thought, "I'm tired. Maybe I will accept an offer and exit." But when we got to the negotiation table, it just didn't feel right. Our purpose and mission was to journey with women into motherhood. It was passion that got me starting the business, and it has always been the purpose that kept me going, not forgetting the people too. We became one giant family where you have many families to support. You realise that you're responsible for not just yourself when you walk away, but that there are so many people whose livelihoods depend on this and they've been happy doing this.

So why now? Why am I doing this after 25 years? I started and scaled the business, but now I want to sell it to scale it further. Do I still want to bootstrap all the way? No. For me, when you come across the right partner that you can trust, it changes things. I've known Roshni Mahtani Cheung, The Parentinc founder, for a long time and we catch up regularly. On Motherswork's 25th anniversary celebration in 2023, we decided we would seriously discuss the possibility of The Parentinc acquiring Motherswork. I always say,

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“I’m constantly learning to dance, whether it’s with my staff or the customers, and similarly, they’re also doing the same with me.”

So Roshni learnt to dance with me. She understood what is important, rather than saying, “We want your business. I need you to work for me.” For her, the acquisition was a merger of two families. Her message was, “I love and believe in what you’ve done. Is this what you want to do to continue to grow?” That’s why I said yes, and I sold it. When the investors to whom I said “No” asked me why I chose The Parentinc, I told them it’s because Roshni learnt to dance with me, and she understood what we needed.

**Some of your staff have been with you for over 20 years. How did you achieve that when retail jobs are often perceived as dead-end jobs with little prospects for development?**

Before we expanded into China, I was losing my retail staff. In Singapore, people seem to believe that retail sales is at the bottom of the food chain. I wanted them to understand that this can be a career, and they can work with us for a long time.

I thought maybe they just needed to see something different, so I took my top store managers to one of the baby fairs in Las Vegas in the US. We did three days of store visits, walking into literally every single store just so that they understand what it’s like in the US where people are full-time sales associates who make decent money.

My staff were like, “Why are they all so friendly?” In Singapore, salespeople are often accused of running away from customers! After that trip, they came back refreshed and wanted to try out many ideas to improve the business.

When we expanded into China, that empowered them as well because they got to train people. They got to travel when the perception was that salespeople just sold products in stores. So we created a whole different type of culture, and that is why my chief operating officer has been with me for 24 years. And the new hires usually stay for at least three to five years because they are learning new things.

**Instead of calculating the risk, imagine the possibilities.**

We want the people we hire to stay because I dedicated my time to growing and grooming them. Hiring new people costs you more and the downtime is longer, but people don’t realise this. To retain people, we need to groom them. We must harness their strengths and continue to help them grow, so that they can grow with the company. We don’t hire and fire. We grow together. In fact, my daughter was the one who said, “Mum, you run the business almost like a family. When people make mistakes, sometimes you get mad at them but you continue to let them grow.”

So our company culture is very much like that of a family where you grow your children. I grow the team, and they are happy to follow me. Actually, it’s a privilege to be able to lead. That’s why I always say, “Success to me is when they walk through fire with me.”

**You seem to epitomise the dream of “having it all”: marriage, career, and children. Is that so?**

I think we should change the narrative of what “having it all” means. I used to say, “Women can have it all.” You don’t have to choose between having a family and being a business owner or a high-level corporate leader. It is actually a mindset. For the new generation, with all the new technology available and everything else, I think the question shouldn’t be, “Can we have it all?” The question should be, “Do we want it all?” If you answer, “Yes”, then what is the

problem? If someone throws you a curve ball, you run the curve. For me, it’s really that simple.

Here’s an example of running the curve. When we were preparing to open our first store in Vietnam, we applied for all the relevant licences except one, which we didn’t know we needed. Four weeks before opening, we realised we needed this licence to sell merchandise at the store, so we applied for it. Two weeks before opening, I knew it wasn’t going to happen, so we pivoted very quickly. As we had an online licence, we pivoted to a click-and-collect model, where customers bought online but collected the merchandise at the store. We began to be associated with terms like ‘click-and-collect’ and ‘omnichannel’, and we got covered in every major newspaper in Vietnam as being the new player in the market with a new gig in town. Actually, it was because we failed to do something that we needed to in order to open on time. We move fast, evolve, pivot, and adapt to the market.

**What advice do you have for budding entrepreneurs, especially female entrepreneurs?**

I have an acronym for that: CCIR. *Courage*, *Confidence*, a bit of *Insanity*, and taking a *Risk*.

Ninety percent of our journey is about courage. Do you have the courage? Do you have people who give you courage to believe in yourself, trust in your instincts, and take action? Today, we have a community of female entrepreneurs that has come together in the last

10 years, and we can bring these women together to share with those who may not have access to the right contacts or expertise. Previously, there used to be private boys’ clubs; now we have these women’s clubs, and we’re happy to come together, and share our knowledge and experiences. I really hope people can find others who can give them courage.

As for confidence, if you have no confidence, who’s going to help you? Most Asians seem to think, “Hey, don’t brag! It’s not good to brag.” I learnt in the US that it’s not bragging. This is standing up for yourself and pitching yourself to others. We don’t teach university students enough about how to communicate and tell people what you’re selling. It’s getting better now, but for my generation, it was different then.

And finally, insanity and risk—why would you give up a stable income and a high-level job to be an entrepreneur? Because you see the opportunity, of course. So go a little bit insane and say, “I’m going to take this risk and jump in.” Instead of calculating the risk, imagine the possibilities. Of course, there also needs to be a little bit of luck, and luck is really that intersection where opportunity and your ability to run with it come together.

I’ve had new entrepreneurs or relatively unknown brands that came to us and managed to set up a meeting. Instead of thinking, “I will do whatever it takes to get into Motherswork”, some of them are not willing to play because they’re too conservative or scared, and the opportunity is lost. When

they come back a year later, we no longer have space for them. What many young entrepreneurs don’t realise is that when you want to go somewhere, you need to give in. It’s almost like being a loss leader. Why do we give space to certain brands and not others? It’s not always just the numbers. Sometimes it’s as simple as, “We’d love to be able to work with you and support you, and see how we grow together.” If you’re not ready, the opportunity is gone.

Motherswork was the first to believe in local brands such as Hegen and Maison Q, and give them a platform to lift off as their first retailer. They know we were the first to give them their big break, and they were ready at the time. So, I say to many entrepreneurs, “Don’t calculate your risk; imagine the possibilities.” 