

BUSINESS IN VANCOUVER

CHINESE-LANGUAGE TV MOGUL
THOMAS FUNG: TOO SHY TO APPEAR ON
THE COVER—AND TOO BIG TO IGNORE

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Profile Thomas Fung

Shadow master

Thomas Fung just wants to be left alone. But as a multimillionaire real estate developer who controls Canada's Chinese-language television, total anonymity is beyond his reach



Well, okay, just this once: the camera finds a smiling Thomas Fung cutting the cake at the Toronto opening for Fairchild TV, flanked by Premier Bob Rae (left), MP Art Eggleton and Fairchild TV exec Peter Man

By Rosemary Eng

Nearly four years ago, the shy and relatively unknown Thomas Fung abruptly cancelled an interview with *Business in Vancouver* when he realized it would be for a personality profile.

To make amends, he hastily lined up a substitute, Stephen Leung, the Hong Kong electronics whiz who brought his fortune to Vancouver to start the Marco Polo Group real estate development company. Leung was on the cover of Issue #10 and Fung slipped back into anonymity for a bit longer.

But since then, he has managed to tolerate the heat of the spotlight occasionally to promote his Aberdeen Centre and Parker Place shopping malls in Richmond's "Little Asia," as well as his purchase of both of Canada's Chinese-language television stations and multicultural radio station CJVB. Seclusion is simply not possible when one is the most influential player in the Canadian Chinese-language electronic media, which is publicly regulated. But it hasn't made him much more forthcoming—

reporters from Chinese-language media say Fung regularly declines interviews. "I never appear on my TV or radio stations," he confirms. "I very seldom attend public functions. I don't belong to clubs. I don't like to be recognized when I walk down the street."

But the larger and more diverse his businesses, the greater the curiosity about him. Such is his dilemma, so he recently agreed to sit still long enough to fulfil his commitment of four years ago.

A Hong Konger by birth, Fung considers himself both an old immigrant and a new immigrant. He attended Magee Secondary School and the University of B.C., becoming a Canadian citizen before returning to Hong Kong in 1974 for a 10-year stint with his late father's merchant-banking and securities business. That established him in Canada well before Canada's immigrant-investor program got rolling in the mid-to-late '80s and before the recent flood of passport-seekers from Hong Kong, even though his

business growth here has been concurrent with the emergence of those groups.

During his North American youth, Fung enjoyed expanding his horizons. In the 1970s, he went through what he calls an "orientation" program at the New York brokerage firm Merrill Lynch, whose largest shareholder at one point was his father's firm, Sun Hung Kai & Co. Ltd. But while he was learning about shares, Fung also studied filmmaking and design at night at New York University, a course of learning undoubtedly not high on his father's agenda.

In Vancouver, he once operated a photo studio located in the Cambie Street building which now houses his company, Fairchild Holdings Ltd., and his fascination with the arts remains strong. Renderings of two Fairchild developments—Parker Place shopping mall at Number 3 Road and Hazelbridge Way in Richmond, and Fairchild Court luxury townhomes, under construction at 675 West 45th Ave.—are executed like classical Japanese prints, at his request. The colours are

intense, the background dramatic. His promotional brochure on Parker Place, covered with a sleek, geometric image of copper-toned marble, opens to a parchment page bearing a stylized chop (Chinese seal) of the development's Chinese name, *bak-ka' deem*, meaning "one hundred shops." (Parker is the Anglicization of *bak-ka'*.)

"I do the write-ups," he explains. "I choose the photographs, the lay-outs. I really enjoy the creative work."

Despite these artistic leanings, Fung has tried to keep on a conventional business track. When he re-settled in Vancouver in the mid-'80s, he bought an option on land in Coquitlam from developer André Molnár and created a subdivision called River Heights. Fung says he acquired Molnár's subdivision plan, but used his own housing design scheme.

Fung also became owner of Saint Germain Bakery at 16th and Cambie, and the first of what has become a chain of five shops is next door to Fairchild Holdings. The fancy cakes reflect a mixture of European, Japanese and Hong Kong styles, he says.

However, his reputation grew rapidly with the development of Aberdeen Centre, which opened in 1990 and started Richmond's Asian commercial district. His selection of relatively inexpensive vacant land beneath the flight path of Vancouver International Airport was regarded a shrewd move, but he claims the venture started out a failure, and he had to dip into his reservoir of creativity to bail the project out.

"Nobody wanted to come as a tenant. For the first six months, there was no response. As a way to survive, I had to do most of the operation myself, [being] the landlord and the tenant."

"Originally I had to learn all the businesses," he says, referring to the bowling centre, cinema, restaurant, herbal tea store and other retail operations in the mall. That way, he says, he could present the retail package "like a turnkey system to individual investors."

It eventually worked, and Fung was successful enough that units in his next commercial development, Parker Place, went on the market as strata-titled vacant space, not newly started businesses. But the strata-title concept at Parker Place is facing a new obstacle: within the past year, Japanese-financed Yaohan Centre and Taiwanese-financed President Plaza have opened blocks away with their own retail areas, leaving many units in the second phase of Parker Place sitting vacant.

Fung's current project, Fairchild Court, is probably closer to what he wants to be doing: a luxury townhome development with Italian-influenced kitchen designs, a putting green and an indoor pool, all surrounding a small lagoon. Fung says he had a hand in all elements of design. He aspires to be like his friend Molnár, whom he says "likes his projects to be outstanding."

The regard is mutual. Molnár, chairman, president and CEO of Molnár Capital Corporation and the recipient last year of a Canadian Homebuilders' Association award for contributions to the residential construction industry, says Fung does not develop land just to make money. "He looks at how people relate to colours, shapes and to the building."

Fung estimates his investments in Canada at about \$100 million. Declining to identify specific ventures, he says he is involved in a scope of businesses including food, restaurant, interior design and printing. On revenues: "I think that's something we'd rather keep quiet."

What he has established in Canada is his and not part of the family business in Hong Kong. His Canadian company, he says, has been developed without benefit of an inheritance. Has he received an inheritance? "Not yet."

"As far as family holdings," he says, "I am still a shareholder in the family business. My brother (Tony) is running the show in Hong Kong. I'm pretty well here."

He is reported to have committed \$11.5 million to gain 80 per cent of Vancouver station Fairchild Television (formerly Cathay TV), 80 per cent of the national station, Talentvision (formerly Chinavision TV) and 20 per cent of YBC Holdings Ltd. (CJVB radio).

Acquiring the stations was grueling, he says, "with questions back and forth (with the Canadian Radio-Television & Telecommunications Commission) and checking [of] financial, personal, political background."

The TV stations are starting to break even, he reports. The old Chinavision studios in Toronto are being relocated and re-equipped, and the Calgary and Edmonton facilities will be upgraded next, so that television commercials can be produced there.

The company is not geared up for film production, though he has looked into the possibility. Feature production can only work if it is cost-effective, he says, and facilities in Taiwan, Singapore and Indonesia represent too much competition. As Fung's family no longer has shares in the big Hong Kong broadcaster TVB, he has lost his ties with that powerful network.

Despite the talent in Vancouver—many Hong Kong show business stars are said to live or own property here—the most his companies could produce here is "some kind of sitcom programs made for TV... no serious drama." For now, he is content with small-scale programming.

"I hope we can help immigrants assimilate into local society. We have two local programs, one to interview people from the Far East and the other program, Vancouver Case, is mainly on what's happening in the overall society, like 20/20... a smaller version."

In one show, reporters "interview the kids...how they mix with the local kids. Then they interview the local kids and ask what they are feeling about immigrants. We try to reflect both sides, balancing the opinions."

And because he wants to encourage assimilation, he says he is helping to organize a new Community Care Foundation, to provide grants to local hospitals from funds raised within the Chinese community.

John Fraser, a lawyer with Lawson Lundell Lawon & McIntosh and a member of the Community Care Foundation board, notes that as the eldest son of a well-known Hong Kong businessman, Fung feels a sense of duty to carry on the tradition of responsibility.

"He sees this foundation as an opportunity to use his position in the community to raise money to assist hospitals be more multicultural." The foundation, incorporated late last year and now focussing on its goals, could help hospital staff to develop a more multicultural outlook and

to become aware of different cultural attitudes to medicine, Fraser says, making hospitals "more user-friendly for all."

Fung occasionally goes back to Hong Kong, where his father, Fung King Hey, died some five years ago. But unlike his friend Stephen Leung, who recently decided to move back to the action in the Crown colony, Fung prefers the West Coast: "I really got a sense of belonging here more than Hong Kong. I'd rather stay put." He lives here with his wife, Amy, and one child.

into manufacturing and trading in China, but is unwilling to say whether new investor-attracting projects might be related to China.


In fact, there is much he is unwilling to say, and after an hour, there is little left to talk about. After four years, he says, he agreed to an interview because he realized that since he refused *Business in Vancouver's* initial request, he had granted interviews to a limited number of other media. He insists that these interviews have never revealed personal information, only what relates to business.

I never appear on my TV or radio stations. I very seldom attend public functions. I don't belong to clubs. I don't like to be recognized when I walk down the street'

He has considered taking his company public in Canada. If so, he would start in Vancouver, and then move onto the Toronto exchange. "The market will dictate how we move. For a listed company, you have to look for some projects that roll into the company that would appeal to investors," he says. He adds he wouldn't mind expanding

So, he says, it seemed only fair to grant today's interview.

But he lets a telling personal detail drop: When he was naming his company after his father died, he says, "what came into my mind is when I was young, he told me to be a nice child, a good child and...a fair child." And a fair child he is. ♦



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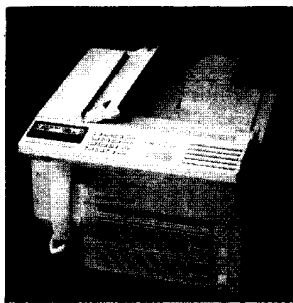


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