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Blackie the Labrador bravely stood up to a cougar and saved this man's life
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One-man incubator for businesses

THOMAS FUNG: Quiet entrepreneur spawns ideas for retail, real estate, even movies

BY WENDY MCLELLAN
BUSINESS REPORTER

When Thomas Fung walks through Richmond's Aberdeen Centre shopping mall, no one gives the slightly built man in grey flannels and glasses a second glance.

That's the way Fung likes it.

The founder of the Fairchild Group — a diverse collection of business holdings, including Aberdeen Centre, TV stations and a chain of bakeries — has a huge influence on the local Asian community, although Fung prefers to live quietly and pursue his business and creative interests rather than seek the spotlight.

But last night, Fung was the centre of attention at a Vancouver Board of Trade banquet, where he received a Spirit of Vancouver Leadership Award.

"I have no idea why I was chosen," said Fung, 56. "Maybe because I try to bring the two cultures together."

The low-key assessment of his business success is typical, said Henry Lee, chairman of the Vancouver Board of Trade.

"He's a pretty low-profile person, but he does a lot," Lee said. "Thomas Fung stands out uniquely."

Fung has built a business empire on creating bridges between Asian and North American cultures.

His TV and radio stations broadcast community and political news for Chinese immigrants in their own languages; his retail and wholesale ventures bring Asian goods here as well as exporting local goods to the Far East. Even his Saint Germain bakeries combine the perfection of Asian presentation with the richness of French pastry.

The Fairchild Group, which employs close to 1,000 people in B.C., includes a range of investments worth more than \$400 million, according to the company.

The various divisions include media, a real estate and development portfolio, a retail group operating under the name Thomas and Fenn Trading Ltd., and a wholesale



Thomas Fung at Aberdeen Centre, the pioneering Asian mall he built in Richmond. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE

and distribution company specializing in dollar-store products.

It's an impressive list, but it doesn't capture the range of Fung's interests.

Next month, for example, he will launch a new flying school at Boundary Bay airport, called Sealand Air. He said it will teach pilots with brand-new planes rather than the older models used at most schools.

Fung is also investigating retail and wholesale opportunities in Eastern Europe and South and Central America, as well as adding more TV and radio stations to his media portfolio.

"I really enjoy working, the everyday challenges and frustrations," Fung said.

"My friends and classmates are retiring, but I am not ready. We've opened a new business every two weeks for the past three years."

Success seems to come naturally

"My friends and classmates are retiring, but I am not ready. We've opened a new business every two weeks for the past three years."

— super-entrepreneur **Thomas Fung**

to Fung. Born in Hong Kong, he came to Vancouver with his parents when he was a teenager. His father, founder of the Hong Kong merchant banking empire Sun Hung Kai and Co., wanted to learn English and brought his family to B.C.

Fung attended Magee Secondary and finished his last two years of high school in Vancouver, then moved on to the University of B.C. and New York University to finish his business degree.

As the eldest of five children, Fung was expected to follow his father

into business, but he was also drawn to more creative pursuits.

In New York, he took courses in filmmaking and design at night school while completing his business program. After graduation, he worked for a decade in his father's business in Hong Kong as well as with Merrill Lynch in New York.

On the side, he operated an advertising agency and film production and film lab companies.

In 1984, Fung returned to Vancouver and began building his own business empire while also finding ways to fuel his creative interests.

He set up new ventures, then designed the logos, graphics and wrote marketing information on the weekends. He also writes movie scripts. His film, *Paper Moon Affair*, was shot on Bowen Island and was released in 2005. As well, Fung is one of the founders of the CCF Community Care Foundation, a charity that raises money for health

care and services in the Lower Mainland.

Fung travels about two weeks of every month, and his wife, Amy, accompanies him on his business trips. In return for the constant disruption, he takes her dancing every Friday night. Fung admits he doesn't enjoy dancing, but he keeps his promises.

The Fungs have one son, now 26, who is currently working with the Hong Kong offices of investment company Morgan Stanley.

Craig Jones, executive director of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, knows Fung for his developments in the municipality but was also in the same high-school graduating class.

"He is a great guy, but he is very quiet. In high school, he just went about his life, getting westernized," Jones said. "In that era, in 1970, there were maybe four Asian students in the class, and I don't think it was easy for them."

Greg Halsey-Brandt was mayor of Richmond when Fung began developing Aberdeen Centre.

"At that time, the area was way north of the main shopping district — there was nothing else around there," Halsey-Brandt said. "We thought it was a real gamble, but obviously it was very successful."

"He has anchored us in terms of Asian shopping — people come here from all over."

In Aberdeen Centre, Fung's creative talent is obvious in the signs above Fairchild Group stores: Pot Art, A Light Idea, Living Colours are just a few of his concepts. He designed and merchandised more than two dozen of the shops in the mall and has plans to open three more in the coming weeks, including one called Look So Real, which will sell high-quality fake food items for home and business decor.

"I enjoy every moment in life, and in the office," Fung said. "I am always reading, I keep my eyes open and I talk to everyone in sight. As long as it makes sense business-wise, I will give it a try."

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