

# STRATEGY FOR A FULLER LIFE

To succeed, one needs to be able to seize opportunities that come your way, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**T**WO boys, both under 10, roam the streets of New York. At first, they're excited by the sights and sounds of the metropolis. Soon, they become tired and want to go home to Connecticut. They take the subway hoping to reach home in time for dinner. Only, they begin to soon realise they're becoming thoroughly lost. Mercifully, they finally find their way home, safe and sound.

Forty years later, the younger of the two, now grown up, tells the story of that day: "That was the New York of the 1970s," says Derek Chang. "It wasn't safe and I think we almost reached Coney Island." That said, he believes that the New York of today has become "gentrified" and is the place to be. He adds: "There's a tonne of energy there."

Derek is the managing director (Asia Pacific) of Scripps Networks Interactive (SNI) and was recently in town to launch a US home and lifestyle channel called HGTV on Astro, dedicated to the growing home and lifestyle category in Malaysia. Programmes include *Property Brothers*, *Cousins Undercover* and a show by Ellen DeGeneres called *Ellen's Design Challenge*. SNI will also commission locally-produced shows like *Extreme Homes Asia* and *Asia Traditions*.

As he recounts his achievements in business, he realises his ability to create successful strategies began when he was very young. His training, he supposes, began with his father, an insurance executive who spent time helping him solve puzzles and play chess.

"This was learning through play," he muses.

## LESSONS FROM ROWING

When he was 14, he became a boarder at

Phillips Exeter Academy. Unsure of what sport to take up, he asked his brother and sister for advice. Partly in jest, they told him that since he liked to yell at others, he should take rowing lessons and become the coxswain, who sits at the back of the boat and issues instructions to everyone else in the team. He's responsible for steering the boat and motivating the crew.

In hindsight, Derek feels that the biggest lesson he learnt from his days rowing is that of leadership. "To get eight people in a boat to move together is quite a task," he observes. Likewise, in business, getting all the members of a team to work together can become a challenge. Still, the prime objective of the coxswain and a business leader is the same: Motivating everyone in the team. While some members would prefer to be yelled at, others will break down if you shout at them. The trick is to figure out what drives each person to strive for the best and work with that.

## RESILIENCE

When his time at school came to an end, he couldn't attend the college he wanted as his application was deferred. He stated this as his reason for wanting to apply to a college that wasn't his first choice.

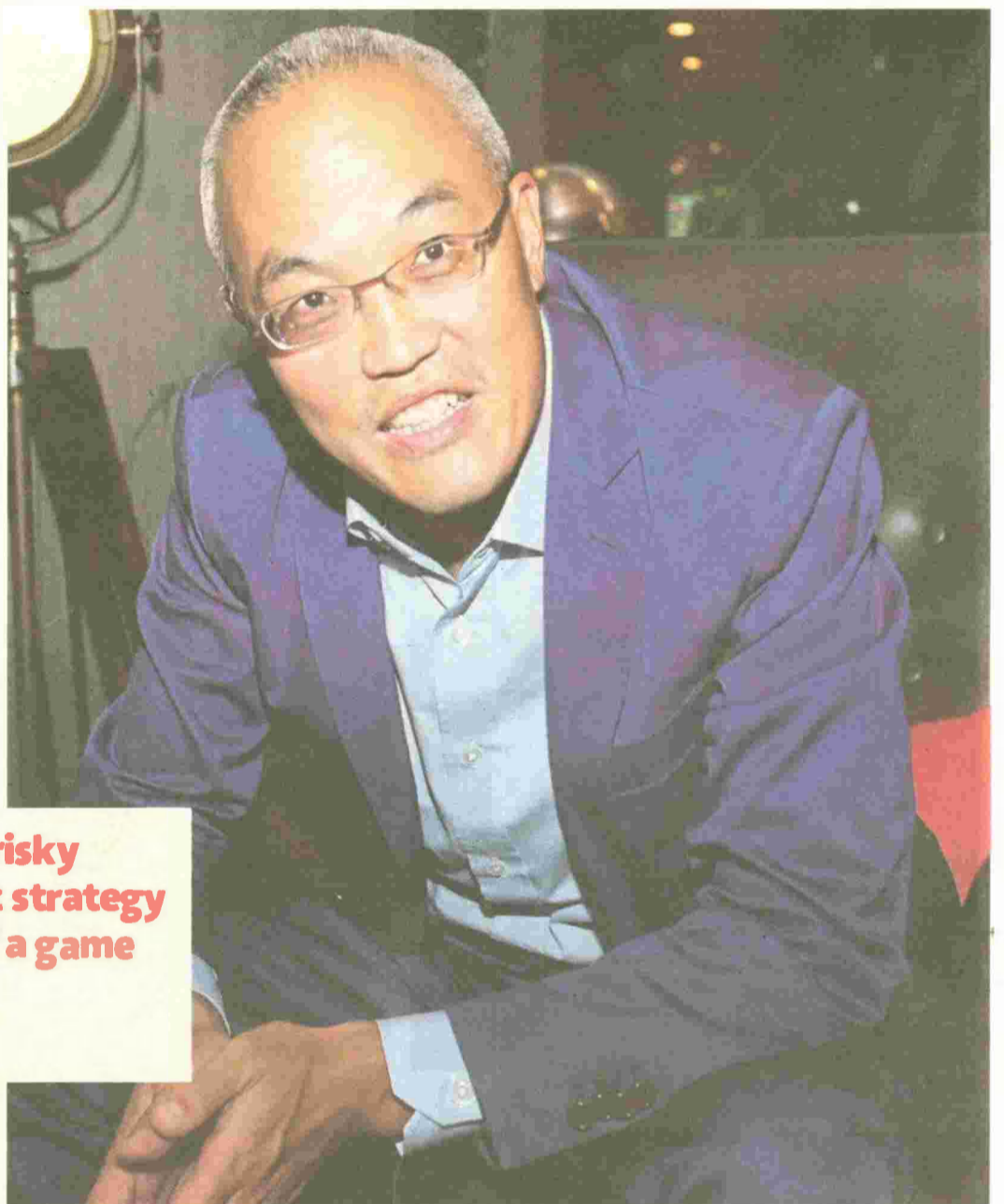
"It was a risky move, but strategy is in itself a game of risk." Through this experience, he says that he learnt another lesson — that of resilience.

All said and done, he did eventually obtain a bachelor's degree in history from Yale University and holds an MBA from Stanford. A curious topic he chose to study was sports in modern China. This was, of course, in the early 1980s and he confides that on school-sponsored trips there, he could see that the Chinese weren't particularly advanced in that area. Since then, he's marvelled at the progress China has made to the point of being able to host the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

Describing those as his formative

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*Derek Chang*



years, he talks of another trip he took from Beijing to Berlin on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Like most young people of the time, he listened to the music of Madonna on his Walkman. One of the train attendants was particularly kind to him. So, when he got off the train, he decided to give her the cassette.

With his ready smile, he says: "She looked like she'd died and gone to heaven. I suppose I was doing my part for cross-cultural relations."

Although he says that his first, short-lived career as an investment banker was an "ill-fated-one", he still has some quirky memories of the time. For example, barely 23, he had to travel from Chicago to Mexico for work. He decided to make a holiday of his weekend in the tropics and visited both Acapulco and Monterrey. On Monday, he was late for the meeting, but in time for lunch.

"Of course we had tequila," he says, then smirks. "Let's just say that I don't have a good memory of the rest of the day."

## CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS

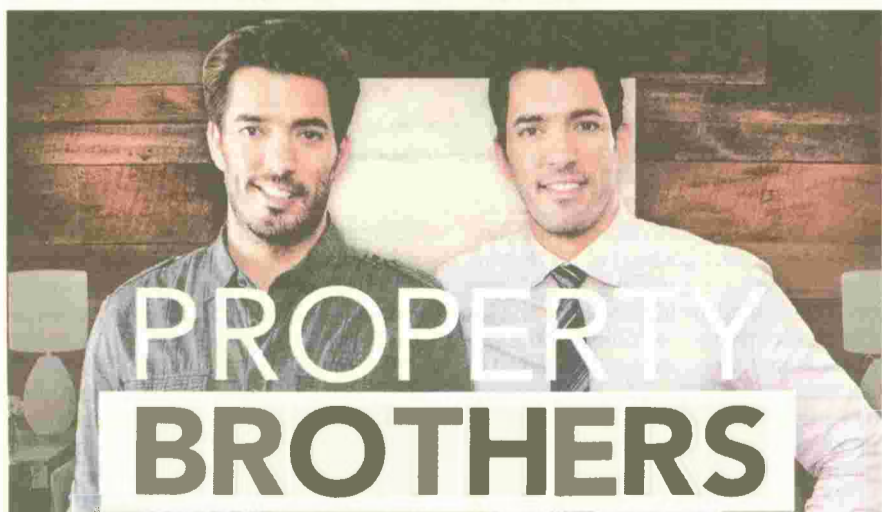
When his banking career ended, Derek ventured into the media industry and has worked in a substantial number of areas, from cable network to internet space. From the published articles about him, there appears to be a recurring theme: Derek cultivates those connections he's made from his days in school and university.

"Being part of the alumni certainly helps," he says. "There is an affinity and we're willing to help each other out. Isn't it a case of six degrees of separation? In some cases, it's two or three?"

For example, it has been reported that while a former colleague, Leo Hindery, didn't know Derek personally, he was introduced to him and agreed to interview him (Derek). This was because Leo was also a graduate from Stanford. Meeting a potential boss through an intermediary in such a way is not something that is bad, says Derek. In fact, it is a "shotput way of getting a foot in the door".

Today, this 47-year-old father of two girls says that with all these experiences behind him, when he creates a strategy, he's learnt to rely on something more: A sense of opportunity — like the chance to bring channels like HGTV to Malaysia because he could see that the home is a special place for many people. They take great pride in it and it becomes part of their personality. It's not about the house, but the home. Since no one else was doing something like this, he decided to bring programmes that would showcase this strong connection that people have to their homes.

Ending the interview on a positive note, Derek refers on a cliché and says that he sees a glass as being half full. "Life is short," he adds. "If you spent time focusing on the negatives, then it won't make sense."



"Property Brothers" is one of the programmes on HGTV on Astro.