



**MEETING OF MINDS**

DW's co-founders (left to right) Sunny Lee, Victor Lee and Conrad Chua are all entrepreneurs with different backgrounds



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIIN

# SOLE MATE

*Would you kill for a bespoke, Boba Fett-inspired pair of shoes? Or, if you are not a Star Wars fan (not everyone is!), how about an all-gold leather loafer with your initials embroidered on the face of the shoe? If such designs entice you, Diamond Walker may be your sole mate. A Singapore-based bespoke luxury shoe brand, DW specialises in customisable, quality leather shoes for men. All shoes are made-to-measure, before they are designed and handmade by craftsmen in Seoul, South Korea, and ready in just six weeks. DW co-founder Conrad Chua shares how the company has helped customers – from chief executives to celebrities to royalty – stand out from the crowd with their outrageously designed shoes.* **AS TOLD TO JACQUELYN CHEOK**

**DO YOU MAKE SHOES FOR MEN ONLY?**

**Mr Chua:** We do have women as our clientele as they love how they can customise brogues (low-heeled shoes with decorative perforations), loafers, sneakers and boots (including equestrian boots) made to their size, unique style and colours at DW. Like men, they struggle with odd feet sizes and issues which only bespoke shoemaking can help address. DW, however, does not do women's open-toe shoes with heels.

**WHAT INSPIRED THE COMPANY?**

We knew there was a gap in the market for our business model where we can disrupt the high-end luxury shoe brands in terms of the sheer amount of designs we offer, an attractive pricing for a luxury brand, true customisation with a multitude of options for the customer and a fresh story to tell.

We basically threw the book out on how the bespoke industry operates – bound by its stiff legacy and traditional ideas on how things should be done – and introduced bespoke shoes that excite our customers who like both traditional styles as well as the truly outrageous designs that legacy brands wouldn't do. We also felt that mass-

produced shoes – even from luxury brands – usually do not give true comfort for the wearer as everyone has different feet. True comfort can only come from customised or bespoke shoes. Today's fashion forward customers, especially the millennials, also do not want to be seen wearing what everyone else is wearing. To stand out from the crowd is both our corporate philosophy as well as our customers'. Our customers come from all walks of life and all ages – chief executives of big listed companies, professionals, businessmen, royalty, celebrities, fashionistas – they are drawn to DW bespoke shoes because we help them create their own unique creations.

**WHAT MAKES DW STAND OUT FROM THE COMPETITION?**

The key difference between us and other bespoke shoe brands is that we are much more progressive in our branding and product positioning – without any heritage baggage that the much older European brands have – so we offer a lot more designs and customisation choices. We can do the classics to the wickedly wild shoes that today's experimental and more fashion forward males demand.

**WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR TEAM? ARE THEY MOSTLY DESIGNERS AND SHOE MAKERS?**

The core founders of DW are all entrepreneurs with different backgrounds. You can say we have a lot of ideas and creative flair but we are not shoe designers and makers by trade.

Victor Lee, 42, our chief executive, has run a pet products business and actually owns patents on a special dog bowl that prevents dogs from choking by helping them eat slower. He also has 15 years of experience in sales and marketing in various industries including pharmaceuticals and supply chain management.

As for me, I am 44, and the chief marketing officer at DW. I have an 18-year corporate career in branding and marketing for media and lifestyle brands, have launched my own alcohol brands, and have been an entrepreneur in interactive technology and brand consultancies.

Sunny Lee, 34, chief operating executive of DW, has run her own post-production company with an annual revenue of more than US\$4 million.

**WHO ARE DW'S CUSTOMERS? WHICH PARTS OF THE WORLD ARE THEY FROM?**

Our clientele is 70 per cent local with a rapidly growing 30 per cent segment of expatriates and tourists from all over the world including the US, Japan, Indonesia, China, South Korea, India, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, many parts of Europe such as Denmark, England, Spain, Germany, France and Italy, and the Middle East including Qatar and Oman. Some of our customers fly in just to make shoes with us because they have heard of us.

**WALK US THROUGH THE BESPOKE PROCESS?**

Every customer who walks into a DW boutique is given a short introduction to our brand and what we do. Then a walk-through of the store is conducted where designs and the various options that can go into the custom shoe design – from soles to leather to insole to laces – are shown. The customer's feet are then carefully measured, assessed and then he is made to try on a few pairs of shoes that fit closest to his size before the order is sent. The shoes will then be handmade and the customer will get his shoes in an average of six weeks' time.

**WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR MORE INTERESTING CREATIONS?**

We have too many to list! But the ones that got the most attention include a unique pair where one side of the shoe is a derby and the other side is an oxford (made with the same leather and sole); a pair of diamond-embedded brogue shoes, and one made with limited-edition leather soles with a World War II-inspired airplane nose art and a sexy pin-up girl hugging a diamond.

A 2014 Fifa World Cup Brazil pair of shoes which we hand-painted in the colours of the Brazilian flag and hand-tattooed with the flag and national motto got noticed, liked and shared by Fifa on social media.

We also make "couple shoes", where they can be of the same matching colours and leathers but spotting different designs. ■

