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OCTOBER 2012



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INVEST IN AN
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PROPERTY?



“I NEEDED
TO FIGHT
FOR THE
UNDERDOGS”

ZHANG TINGJUN,
CO-FOUNDER
OF THE CHAIN
REACTION
PROJECT, LOVES
THE ADVENTURE
OF PAYING
IT FORWARD

HOW TO TELL
IF YOU'RE
EMOTIONAL
EATING

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FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Everyone talks about it but few really accomplish anything. Giving back to society is always part of an idealistic plan until our cushy cosmopolitan lives throw us more distractions. And then all the do-gooder ambitions take a back seat. Which is why the co-founder and director of The Chain Reaction Project, **ZHANG TINGJUN** has gotten our attention.

CREW CREDITS PHOTOGRAPHER: JOEL LOW FASHION STYLIST: UPRONG FASHION STYLIST ASSISTANT: AUSEON LIM HAIRSTYLIST: HUIMIN NG USING L'OREAL PROFESSIONAL MAKEUP ARTIST: LOLENT LEE USING LAURA MERCIER COVER OUTFIT COTTON GOLD DRESS FROM FOREVER 21 BRACELET FROM H&M BY ANNA DEL RUSSO SHOES: MODEL'S OWN THIS PAGE OUTFIT SILK DRESS FROM TOPSHOP EARRINGS FROM H&M BY ANNA DEL RUSSO SPECIAL THANKS TO THE SUITAN FOR LOCATION





Former national netball player, television news presenter, professional emcee and now social entrepreneur, **Zhang Tingjun**, 29, is energetic and tireless at whatever she sets out to do. While she confessed to being most in her element in just denim shorts, a tank top and slippers, she's dressed up in flawless make-up and a snug pencil skirt for our photoshoot. She extends a tanned leg, pointing to her calf, "Please cover up my mountain bike scar, I was coming down a hill too fast and scraped a whole chunk off!"

Born and bred in Singapore, her father is Chinese and mother American, she's organised events at Standard Chartered and did television reporting for Channel NewsAsia before starting The Chain Reaction Project (thechainreactionproject.com) with three other friends – Alexandra Toh, Anina Boshoff and Jasmine Wong. Calling themselves a social enterprise, the fantastic four traversed the world undertaking adventure races for adopted charities and now have a network of more than 1,000 volunteers.

Their maiden voyage was the 2009 Tour de Timor in Timor-Leste, a 450 kilometre mountain biking expedition across rough terrain and rugged countryside. This raised \$44,500 for HIAM Health, a children's malnutrition centre. Since then they have scaled Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa and Mount Apo in The Philippines, contributing a total of \$140,000 to Amani Children's Home and Visayan Forum Foundation respectively.

Statuesque, athletic and chatty, the dynamic Chinese-American is the second of four daughters in her family. Her parents met when her mother came to Singapore from Long Island (just outside of New York) to work. She muses on how her family has been just as supportive in her causes, "Both my parents and sisters came to help out on the trips. It's difficult to be in my unconventional line of work but they want me to pursue something I am passionate about."

All the physical challenges paid off, as Tingjun came in first runner up in July

at the Yahoo! Singapore 9. Nominated in the social entrepreneurship field, this came as a surprise to her, "The Chain Reaction Project is a young organisation and there is still a lot for us to learn. I am very grateful for this pleasant surprise. The increased recognition in turn allows us to do even more for our adopted charities."

And her efforts never stop, this December, Tingjun and company will be going to Siem Reap with a target amount of \$40,000 to aid against human trafficking. We hear more about her daring outdoor escapades and a little ditty about her time in the primary school playground which sparked off this notion to care for the less fortunate.

LIFESTYLE: In your own words, what exactly is a social enterprise?

ZHANG TINGJUN: This is any company set up to benefit society. There are non-profits and for-profits ones. The objective of any social enterprise is to be sustainable. To be successful in the work that we do and attract the talent needed to help charities, we need to be able to pay salaries and ideally at market rate. TCRP is not there yet, but we do charge a fee now when we run programs for companies and schools. At the end of the day, we want to be here for the long run and to do that we need to fund ourselves too or generate enough to break even. Right now all the four founders get a token salary but on the side we have other jobs too. I am a professional emcee and Alex is a spin class instructor.

How did you girls get together in 2009 to start The Chain Reaction Project?

I've knew Alex through some mutual friends and Jasmine goes to her spin class. Jasmine was looking to put together a team of four women to take part in the Tour de Timor in Timor-Leste. Alex asked me and within a day, we've formed a team together with Jasmine's friend Anina. Basically we didn't all know each other. It was only when we sat down to discuss race logistics that we thought of doing more for this race and using the adventure for good.



CC I didn't have many friends when I was a kid. I always felt like a misfit and needed to fight for the underdogs.



How exactly does doing adventure for good work to bring in funding?

Firstly everyone who comes along for a trip has to cover their own cost. Separately people have to raise \$1,000 on their own for the charity and collectively as a group we will set a target. We approach friends, family members and companies. When we say we have taken on a physical challenge, some friends are to put \$10 down for every kilometre we complete as a way to spur us on. The adventure element really helps to garner support and raise funds.

This isn't the usual pretty nine to five desk job, what sparked off the social enterprise notion in you?

I've always wanted to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate but I never really knew how. So I never really did much for the first 27 years of my life until The Chain Reaction Project and Timor-Leste came around. I found a really good fit to combine my passion for adventure, for people and the skill sets I learnt in my previous jobs. What started off as a mountain bike race, became a mini project and eventually got registered as a social enterprise.

Why this urge to give back to society?

I didn't have many friends when I was a kid. I always felt like a misfit and needed to fight for the underdogs. Now that I've grown up, I figured that it's much more than just standing up to the bullies in life.

Were you bullied in school?

I went to a Mandarin-speaking primary school, and I'm not going to say which one! The kids refused to let me into the playground because I'm white. I can't say I've faced a lot of discrimination, but it was enough to piss me off. I used to get into little scuffles over this. *(Laughs)* Sometimes I feel like I'm back on that school playground, still fighting for the underdogs.

How did all that training as an ex-National netball player

help while completing these bike marathons, cross country races and mountain hikes?

Years of focus and discipline in netball and the same "never say die" mindset is what I've brought across. The moment I step in the netball court, I am there to win and I do my best until the final whistle. With all the trips that we go on, bike race or mountain summit, I adopt the same attitude.

So you've completed all your adventure challenges?

Yes, all of them except the most recent one in The Philippines up Mount Apo. It was meant to be done in 24 hours but up to 36 hours, we were still trying to complete the challenge. In that 24 hours we were supposed to summit Mount Apo, the highest mountain in The Philippines, which involved mountain biking, water tubing and hiking. We had to survive on a mountain too, which was brutal. My teammate lost six toe nails because of the steep inclines and at 3am, we were huddled into a little hut trying to get shelter from the cold. By the time we reached the checkpoint for the final push to the summit, all the professional adventure racers coming back down warned us that it was extremely treacherous with a lot of huge boulders and we did not have a local guide with us. So we could not summit the mountain. We still hit the \$100,000 fund target for the Visayan Forum Foundation which is good thing.

You have beautiful photos on your website to show from all your trips, do you take them yourself?

Normally I'm so busy managing the charities so I'm emotionally and physically very engaged in what I'm doing. I seldom have time to take a step back to snap photos. Our photographer documents everything. This is why photographs are so powerful to me. It's only when I come back from the trip and look through the snap shots that I get to appreciate the trip. I start remembering the people, places and friendships and I

see things from a different perspective which gives the experience so much life and heart.

What kind of memories inspire you?

It's definitely the people. Like Cecilia Flores-Oebanda who founded the Visayan Forum Foundation. Her life story gave me chills, she was a freedom fighter and got imprisoned during the Marcos regime for four years with her husband. She gave birth to two children while behind bars. She thought that bringing them up in prison was the most degrading thing a mother could go through. She would climb the tree in the courtyard prison with one child on her back and another in her arms to show them what life outside looked like. She started working with victims of human trafficking after her release. She realised that what she had gone through in prison was nothing compared to their horrific stories. Cecilia has faced death threats and had to deal with vindictive criminals, but she still continues. I get to interact with people who fight the good fight everyday in the trenches, I always come home feeling that I need to do more, it's never enough.

What are some moments you always look back on?

While riding up a very steep hill in East Timor, I was going so slow that there was a kid walking next to me at the same pace. He was carrying two sacks of coffee beans. We made eye contact for this split second and in that moment I realised my adventure was his reality. And that was so powerful for me, and I always look back on that to keep me grounded. I also remember when I made our first donation to the director of HIAM Health, Rosaria Martinez Da Cruz during our first trip to Timor-Leste. She very tearfully said, "I want my people to be like your people – healthy in their bodies and happy in their faces." Her English is not great and this was such a simple line but I appreciate what I have in Singapore because of that. ★

WORDS GERMAINE LIM

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POSTCARDS FROM LIFE

Every overseas adventure trip brings a new set of memories for Zhang Tingjun. Here's what she has to say about her picture perfect moments.



AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH:

“ This was the top of Mount Apo in The Philippines which was a really tough fight for us. It was raining for three days, the ground was so muddy and we had to take on climbs which were almost at a right angle. I like the camaraderie within the team and the shared sense of accomplishment.

► THE KEY PERSON:

“ This is an African boy at the Amani Children's Home holding his locker keys. When street children enter the home, they are given a locker and for the first time they have somewhere secure to keep their belongings. They guard it very closely because they are so used to people stealing their things on the street.



◀ THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL:

“ This is HIAM Health which is a malnutrition rehabilitation centre for children in East Timor. The kids suffer from stunted growth problems and they use this wall to mark their height and chart their development. I see this sense of hope every time the kids gather at the wall.



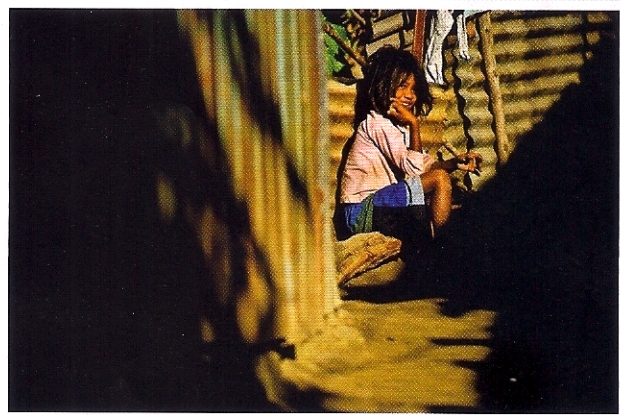


IN THE BEGINNING:

FF East Timor will always be a very special place for us, this was where we formed our team for the first adventure together. If you look at the rugged terrain, Timor is a very raw and unpolished country. This was when I saw my passion for adventure and people come together. I was allowed to be a part of something greater than myself.

► RIPE OLD AGE:

FF This is the village chief in East Timor and I love this shot because he's wearing The Chain Reaction Project bandana. He saw me wearing it and motioned for me to give it to him. He then promptly put it on his head and sat there looking at me almost daring me to take it back. This picture makes me laugh every time I look at it!



◀ LIKE A CHILD:

FF Our adventures give us the chance to interact with the communities we visit in a very personal way. And pictures like this in East Timor capture those magic moments when a smile is all you need to connect with a stranger despite coming from different walks of life. ★

WORDS **GERMAINE LIM**
PHOTOS **ALEXANDRA TOH,**
SCOTT A. WOODWARD & CHUA WEILI