

**Banyan Tree Gallery:** A case study of the positive impacts business can create  
Website: [www.banyantreegallery.com](http://www.banyantreegallery.com)

Incorporated in 1994

Located in 20 countries - Australia, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, UAE, USA, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco.

### **About Banyan Tree Gallery**

A for-profit enterprise supporting its Banyan Tree Hotel & Resorts parent organisation, Banyan Tree Gallery is the retail arm of Banyan Tree which also promotes cultural and environmental awareness and appreciation. Committed to supporting indigenous artistry, livelihoods of village artisans and environmental conservation, Banyan Tree Gallery acts as a global marketing platform and sales network to create cultural and green awareness, and helps conserve community heritage while sustaining their livelihoods through gainful employment. This main focus also includes showcasing and supporting community-friendly and eco-friendly products and projects.

Incorporated in 1994, Banyan Tree Gallery traces its roots back even further. Gallery's roots and founding ideals trace back to 1989 when its founder, Ms Claire Chiang was approached to buy two triangular maun cushions produced by community cooperatives in Yasathorn Thailand. This meeting led to outfitting the resorts of Laguna Phuket with the maun cushions.

Banyan Tree Gallery has a wide network of village producers and project partners around the region. Banyan Tree Gallery showcases traditional Asian village crafts via its global network of over 60 outlets worldwide. Of those outlets, about 25 are owned and operated by Banyan Tree Gallery, and about 40 are management retail consultancies.

The wholly owned and operated outlets and Gallery management team includes over 140 people as of 31 Dec 2007. Gallery's team manages the sourcing, development and fine tuning the design of product lines while also managing the entire logistics of a global retail network of shops combined with a web based suite of product offering available regardless of one's location.

### **About the Founder**

An ardent campaigner for improving family and community lives, Ms Claire Chiang has been dubbed the "social entrepreneur". In 1989, Ms Chiang was approached to buy two triangular maun cushions produced by community cooperatives in Yasathorn Thailand. Combined with her participation in a women's development conference in Hanoi, Vietnam the next year, Ms Chiang began formalising an effort to connect directly with village cooperatives and not rely on the involvement of commercial middlemen, who are potentially exploitative of villagers' income. She decided to open retail outlets that would become direct marketing channels for village crafts, working with community cooperatives and non-profit craft marketing agents instead of commercial enterprises. The ethos of a socially responsible tourism retailer took shape with the first Banyan Tree Gallery within Banyan Tree Phuket. Driven by culture, entrepreneurship in the social sector and people networks, and founded on sound sustainable principles, the business expanded quickly with over 60 Banyan Tree Galleries and Angsana Galleries today.

While serving as Senior Vice President of Banyan Tree, Ms Claire Chiang is also the fulltime Managing Director of Retail Operations of Banyan Tree Gallery and Angsana Gallery. She directs, oversees, and manages the global operations of over 60 retail galleries worldwide, and is actively involved in research, sourcing and business development. She makes an effort to pay a personal visit to the remote and outlying villages a few times a year to build relationships with the artisans and their families, share experiences, and explore new ideas for developing and marketing their crafts.

### **A new approach: Retailing with a difference**

Banyan Tree Gallery is based on the vision of preserving and promoting traditional craft skills from the local communities where Banyan Tree operates. Sustaining village development, preserving and promoting traditional cultures and crafts are part of Banyan Tree Gallery's business ethos as a socially responsible tourism retailer while also being in line with the Group's CSR mission to "Embracing the Environment, Empowering People".

Traditionally when new hotels opened up new tourism destinations, communities would tend to seek employment at such hotels and to benefit from such development, especially in developing areas. However, this often could compromise the cultural beauty of the local heritage and hence many of the local crafts would actually become vanishing trades. Even where local community produced crafts remained, commercial agents or middlemen would be able to come in and in the process may not provide the enabling framework to support community development and prosperity while respecting the local culture.

In addition to the social aspect, a consumer culture had led to an unsustainable level of new resources being depleted to sate customer appetites with little understanding and consideration for environmental issues. Gallery also predominantly features eco-friendly product ranges. Just as products produced with local village craft producers, the eco-friendly lines include informative product write ups to help explain some of the issues and potential avenues for remediation practices for consumers.

By embarking on projects to uplift communities where Banyan Tree resorts are situated, Banyan Tree Gallery has built up a wide network of village producers and project partners. Committed to sharing and supporting community-friendly and eco-friendly products and projects, Banyan Tree Gallery relies upon its global network of over 60 outlets worldwide to showcase traditional Asian village crafts.

Initially, Banyan Tree Gallery played the role of eliminating the need for commercial middlemen, who are potentially exploitative of villagers' income. Its role has evolved to assume deeper roots and responsibilities in the communities and locations where the Banyan Tree Group has expanded. By partnering with local community producers, Banyan Tree Gallery has led the way for Banyan Tree Hotels and Resorts to continually push for more socially and environmentally responsible sourcing and purchasing. Rather than relying on donations and pity for support, local community groups are empowered through a global retail network sharing their products with a wider audience of potential buyers.

Along with other global retailers with similar ideals and values who started around the same period, Banyan Tree Gallery has successfully helped showcase and inspire an appreciation for the local cultures and heritages where Banyan Tree's resorts are located. While working directly with community cooperatives and community producers may have been practiced by other retailers before, taking it to a global network and instilling the

education and awareness aspect has enabled further actions not only by Banyan Tree, but by the guests and customers of the resorts and galleries.

### **Banyan Tree Gallery's Reach**

Though Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts are located in various parts of the world, including Indonesia, Thailand, China, Maldives and Seychelles, Gallery has a wider presence through its standalone outlets in locations without a resort. Whether the outlet is onsite within a resort or on its own, Gallery continues to act as the platform for the cultures and crafts of these destinations.

Through both Banyan Tree and Angsana brands, Banyan Tree Gallery currently operates over 60 outlets around the world, with current expansion plans expecting another 50 more outlets within the next five years.

While it is impossible to pinpoint exact figures but if assumptions are made on the average that 20 to 50 households engage in similar craft work for large scale productions such as ceramics and textile weavings, then Banyan Tree Gallery has been supporting 50 x 17 projects = 850 households in a year. Beyond simply sourcing for products with community suppliers, Gallery's merchandising team works closely with producers to provide global retail buying trends with producers who may opt to slightly modify their product offerings to accommodate some global consumer preferences.

### **Impacting communities**

Thinking green -- once perceived as an alternative issue -- is becoming a main business. Today, it is a commonly accepted lifestyle norm and green thinking and community oriented entrepreneurs are leading new eco and socially responsible tourism initiatives. It is in this background that Banyan Tree Gallery has conceptualised its retail business. A wide range of eco-friendly products are developed via recycling and the use of indigenous natural materials.

Banyan Tree Gallery does not just rehabilitate the environment or address the issue of its sustainability, it also looks to enhance craft development. Craft producers' skills are usually self-taught or passed down from the generations. Instead, Gallery add value by applying leading business norms of process management, quality control and global marketing to create and sustain an industry preserving cottage crafts and the works of indigenous artisans. The product innovation process is enhanced by working closely with the community producers on new designs and applications that appeal to the international market. In this way, a bigger market would be created for these products which would enjoy a longer product cycle and reap more income for the producers. No longer do community craft producers need to sit outside of tourism destinations to sell their products, now they can not only reach into the resorts hosting the guests, but they can reach out to the global retail network and logistics support provided by Banyan Tree Gallery.

Through Banyan Tree Gallery's various initiatives and partnerships, women in Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia, Cambodia and other Asian countries have been able to make a living or supplementing their family income while helping to contributing to the preservation of the unique cultural heritage of their communities.

Some examples of the product lines featured and partnerships enabled and supported by Banyan Tree Gallery include:

- Artificial blooms - Songkla Province, South Thailand

- Mudmee silk shawls - Nongtakai, Buriram Province, North Thailand
- Mini bolsters & cushions - Kham Phra, Amnartchaoroen Province, Northeast Thailand
- Cross stitch designed bags - Mien, Nan Province, North Thailand
- Krajoed baskets - Ban Tao, Narathiwat Province, South Thailand
- Batiks - Yala Province, South Thailand
- Pua kumbu shawls - Rumah Garie Longhouse (Iban), Sarawak
- Hilltribe baskets - Mooser Hilltribe, Nalaung Hills, North Thailand
- Cotton ikats - Tai Leu Weavers, Thai Payap Association, Nan Province, North Thailand
- Laotian shawls - Tai Lue Artisans, South Laos
- Recycled photo frames - Fuen Fu Disabled Artisans Group, Loei Province, Northeast Thailand
- Silver jewellery - Ban Kwow Village, Surin Province, North Thailand
- Pashminas - Weaving Cooperative in Nepal
- Khmer Silk Pouches - Landmine and Polio Disabled victims, Handicraft Association of Cambodia
- Silver jewellery - Harbour House Foundation, Mae Sai District, Chiang Rai, North Thailand
- Recycled baskets - Product Development Cooperative, North Thailand

### **Expansion and adaptation**

As evidenced by its growth from the seed of the triangular maun cushion to a global retail network, Gallery's reach and efforts as a responsible retailer are imminently scalable and replicable across the globe. The growth of communities enabled, causes supported, and awareness raised is only limited by consumer demand. As evidenced by its own experience, there is no shortage of community craft producers or socially oriented handicraft producers who would benefit from tapping into Gallery's global retail network. Banyan Tree Gallery has expanded beyond the initial maun cushion partnership to support and partner with various groups including village communities, charitable groups, stay home mothers and day-care centres for the elderly. Banyan Tree Gallery collaborates with these groups, often by working closely with them to develop a product that has suits the preferences of today's consumers while using the traditional techniques of weaving or silver-crafting. And in the process, employing retail craft production to support community issues and support relevant social and environmental causes.

Two specific examples highlight the potential of retail to reach across borders and cultures to support relevant causes:

1. the Mooser hilltribe in Naluang Hills, north of Thailand:  
Using bamboo (which is easily sustainable and growing in abundance there), the female villagers used their basketry weaving skills to create baskets and carrier bags. Banyan Tree Gallery incorporated a twist to their traditional style with the implementation of the multi-coloured basketry style of the Eskimos.
2. Now, cross over to the other end of Southeast Asia to urban Singapore:  
Bizlink produced notebooks and the traditional "five stones game" which were then retailed in the Museum Shop by Banyan Tree; these products were made by people with disabilities in Singapore from Bizlink Centre Singapore, an employment agency that helps them achieve independence, dignity and integration into society through employment.

### **A continuing multi-partisan success story**

In business for over a decade, Banyan Tree Gallery has proven to be sustainable in all senses. Responsible fiscal, political, operational, social, and environmental practices and values have driven the triple bottom line success enabling Gallery to grow its revenue to S\$10.7 million in 2007, while expanding to over 60 existing retail currently, with future forecasts to reach over 120 outlets by 2011. This sustainable growth is driven by Gallery's continued focus to engage a wide network of village producers and project partners around the region, while simultaneously engaging the public and other stakeholders through the vision of sustainable retail and the branding power of sustainable retail.

Banyan Tree brings together dialogue between cottage craft producers and the wider public and consumer sector by not just taking items to retail, but also sharing market knowledge such as trends, pricing and customers' preferences to help the craftspeople improve their marketability and skills.

### **Mutually beneficial partnerships**

Additionally, through Ms Chiang's assortment of various community and business appointments and roles, the work and experience of Gallery are not only translated to a wider benefit via her roles on such organisational steering committees, but also Gallery's efforts benefit from the wisdom, experiences, and best practices surfaced in the various organizational steering committees and networks of which Ms Chiang is an integral part.

Below is a list of highlighting the range, scope and depth of Ms Chiang's various additional appointments, roles, and community contributions:

- Singapore Nominated Member of Parliament for 2 terms (1997 to 2001)
- National Tripartite Initiatives on Corporate Social Responsibility: Co-Chairperson (May 2004 to present)
- Singapore Compact for Corporate Social Responsibility: President (Jan 2005 to present)
- Singapore: Justice of the Peace (May 2008 to present)
- Wildlife Reserve Singapore: Director, Non-Executive Chairperson (Apr 2008 to present)
- Making Businesses Pro-Family Workgroup: Co-Chairperson (2005 to present)
- The Partner Connection Fund: Evaluation Panel Co-chairperson (2006 to present)
- Romancing Singapore: Co-Chairperson (2003 to 2005); Advisor (2005 to present)
- Employer Alliance: Chairperson (Apr 2007 to present)
- Tripartite Committee on Work-Life Strategy: Member (Sep 2007 to present)
- Raffles Girls' Secondary School: Board of Governors Member (Jan 2008 to present)
- Urban Redevelopment Authorities (URA): Member, Conservation Advisory Panel (Jun 2004 to present)
- Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry: Council Member (1994 to present); Chairperson, Finance Committee (2007 to present)
- Singapore Management University (SMU)-Member, School of Economics
- HSBC Trustee: Chairperson, Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund
- Tan Kah Kee Foundation: Director (Jun 2007 to present)
- Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall Company Limited: Member (Sep 2007 to present)

- Singapore Chinese Orchestra Limited: Member, Board of Directors (Sep 2002 to present)
- One-North Project, Jurong Town Corporation: Member, Advisory Board (Jul 2003 to present)
- Help Every Lone Parents: Patron and Advisor (1996 to present)
- People's Association Talents Advisory Council: Member (Mar 2007 to present)
- International Women's Forum: Member
- Association of Women for Action & Research: Life Member
- Society Against Family Violence: Honorary Member
- Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (Singapore): Patron
- Rotary Club of Suntec City: President (Jul 2002 to Jun 2003)
- Development for Woman Cooperative: Member
- South West Community Development Council: Resource Person
- Public Education Committee on Family: Member (2000 to 2001)
- Work Group on Marriage Education for the Singles: Co-chair (2000 to 2001)
- Family Matters! Singapore: Member (2002 to 2006)
- Advisory Committee on Chinese Programs: Member (2005 to present)

### **A role model for leadership**

Since before the opening of Banyan Tree Phuket and the formation of Banyan Tree Gallery, Ms Chiang has lived, led and immersed herself in sociological and community issues. Ms Chiang has done intensive fieldwork on factory workers and industrial relations in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. Upon her return to Singapore, she carried out oral history interviews with women migrant workers for the Oral History Department of the Government of Singapore. From 1982 to 1990, she taught in the Sociology Department of National University of Singapore and continued her research work in Centre for Advanced Studies from 1990 to 1994.

While in business since 1994, she continued to be involved in theoretical and practical issues in such diverse fields as human resource management, business entrepreneurship, voluntarism, gender relations, community development, and overall business strategy.

Ms Chiang was sworn in as a Nominated Member of Parliament of the Government of Singapore in 1997 and was re-appointed for a second term from 1999 to 2001. As an advisor to a number of social agencies, her community focuses are family and work-life balance, social services, female entrepreneurship, and education. Today, she is one of the first two women to be elected to serve on the board of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry – after 89 years of being a male-dominated domain.

Ms Chiang is also a co-author of *Stepping Out: The Making of Chinese Entrepreneurs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) which won a National Book Council Award that year. The Chinese version of *Stepping Out* published by the China Social Services Publishing House in Beijing was launched in June 1997. A 30-chapter Chinese drama serial using this book as a reference was launched in August 1999 by the Television Corporation of Singapore and won five awards for best drama serial, best song, best actor, best actress and best supporting actor. Ms Chiang co-edited a novel based on this serial which was launched in April 2000.