

BACK PAGE


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Toasting Moutai

Making the spirit as popular Down Under as Australian wines have become in China is businessman's dream

By XU WEIWEI
and KARL WILSON in Sydney
For China Daily Asia Weekly

China-born Frank Chou has spent more than 40 years of his adult life building his business in Australia. From humble beginnings, his business not only includes wholesale and retail, but also property development.

Although he has stepped back from much of the daily operations, he still has one more thing to do, and that is to make Moutai as popular Down Under as Australian wines have become in China.

Moutai is a brand of *baijiu*, a Chinese spirit distilled from fermented sorghum, made in the town of Maotai in Southwest China's Guizhou province.

Sitting in his modest home in suburban Sydney surrounded by photographs of his family, Australian and Chinese politicians, Chou speaks about the liquor and his success in business.

"Moutai is not just a drink," he said. "It is engrained in China's rich history and culture.

"It has traditionally been the liquor that Chinese leaders treat their distinguished guests to at State banquets. It is also popular on business and social occasions.

"It has also become the drink of China's new rich."

In April this year, the State-owned liquor maker Kweichow Moutai Co overtook Diageo — the parent company of brands including Smirnoff and Johnnie Walker — to become the world's most valuable liquor company, despite having most of its sales in China.

The "Baijiu culture" in China dates back many centuries, Chou said, adding that it can potentially "deepen the cultural and commercial ties" between China and Australia.

For more than two decades, Chou has been Moutai's agent in Oceania. The brand is popular with Australia's small and mainly expatriate Chinese community.

Australian sales of Moutai this year are expected to reach 100,000 bottles at a turnover of A\$23 million (\$18.2 million), a significant rise from A\$18 million in 2016 and A\$15 million in 2015. According to the company, supply in Australia "has fallen short of demand" due to the strong purchasing power of Chinese communities.

Chou is a key driving force behind the push. Two years ago, he opened the first Australian store for Moutai

in Sydney's Chinatown, and he has plans for more.

"Although my children basically run the business now, I am still a businessman. It's probably something I inherited from my father," he said.

Despite his 80 plus years, Chou said he would be a happy man if Moutai reached a much wider consumer base in Australia.

"Already some bars in Sydney are offering Moutai cocktails, and recently someone approached me with the idea of Moutai ice cream," he said.

Born in 1936 into a well-off business family in Chaozhou in the northeast of South China's Guangdong province, he moved with his father to Hong Kong when he was 13.

There his father established a small business, but the young Chou grew restless. A few years later he moved to Laos where he started a general store before moving to Thailand.

Although life was comfortable for him and his family in Thailand, he looked further afield to Australia.

"At the time, Australia seemed like a remote land," he said. "It looked beautiful with nice weather and we were told the people were very friendly. And it was also a long way from the conflicts in Asia at the time."

Chou and his family immigrated to Australia in 1977, and two years later he started his first Asian food wholesale business in Sydney. One thing he noticed on arrival in the city was the lack of Asian food items, especially vegetables and ingredients.

With his wholesale import business up and running, he started to set up supermarkets aimed at Sydney's growing Asian population.

His company rapidly grew into Australia's leading Asian food import and export business, distributing thousands of goods, such as grain and oil, non-staple foodstuffs and medicines.

Chou soon became known as an Asian food giant in Australia.

Later, his firm turned into a comprehensive corporation as he diversified his business into areas like real estate development, shopping center management and food production.

Chou owes much of his success to his late mother who taught him to be a "righteous and fair person".

"As a woman with the virtues of being kind, fair-minded and generous, she enjoyed a high status and reputation among their rural neighborhood back in China," he said.

At age 12, he suffered from a rare foot ailment, which forced him to



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leave school abruptly. His mother strived to find him medical treatment but had no results at first.

By accident, Chou learned that his mother was praying that she would rather exchange years of her own life for her son's speedy recovery. The young man was deeply touched.

Later, her efforts paid off and his foot was cured by a Chinese medicine practitioner.

While the young Chou moved to Hong Kong with his father, his mother stayed behind.

"I wrote to her often and she usually wrote back," he said. It was not until 1985 that they were reunited in Sydney.

Because of his illness, Chou missed high school. Fortunately, his parents appointed the head of his school to be his private tutor.

Chou said he was "intensively taught Chinese ancient literature".

"For two years, at a young age, I was able to fully immerse myself into the old classics, including the Confucian works *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics*, and grasp a better understanding of them," he said.

This rigorous learning experience has made Chou well-versed in ancient Chinese language and culture.

In Australia's Chinese community, Chou is widely known as being a good-natured and humble leader. He treats people with sincerity and honesty, and has always been very enthusiastic about social charity in and outside Australia. More than wealth or success, it is his devotion to public service which has won him so much respect.

Despite his connections, Chou has always kept a low public pro-

file. He retains strong links with his hometown, making contributions to various projects and encouraging foreign investment. "My mother always reminded me not to forget my roots back in China," said the businessman, who considers himself an Australian.

Chou returned home to Chaozhou in 1989. It was his first trip back since leaving for Hong Kong with his father all those years ago.

In 1988, he set up the Australian Chinese Teo Chew Association with a few friends. "Setting it up aims to help the new immigrants to Australia, especially those who do not have adequate English skills or other resources, so that they can quickly adapt or even integrate into the local society," he said.

The association recently established a program to cultivate or assist young entrepreneurs so the older generation can have successors.

He would like to support young talent starting their own business, holding the belief that the environment for doing business has shifted significantly in recent decades.

"Technology has played and will continue to play a more prominent role in the world of business. Just look at the quick rise of Tencent by Ma Huateng, and unmanned supermarkets run by Ma Yun," he said, referring to the billionaire Chinese Internet entrepreneurs better known, respectively, as Pony Ma and Alibaba founder Jack Ma.

"So, if the new generation of young entrepreneurs can take advantage of the new technologies, they will be highly innovative. They need to stay at the very cutting edge. They need to grasp the chance."

Bio

Frank Chou

Chairman, Australian China Group Development

Education:

2014: Honorary degree, Atlanta University, US (Hong Kong)

1948: Middle school. Private tutor for Chinese classic literature and language

Career highlights:

2005-present: Chairman, Australian China Group Development, diversified business, Australia

1988-present: Founding president and honorary life president, Australian Chinese Teo Chew Association

1979-present: Founder and owner, Win Kwong (grocery wholesale supermarket chain), Australia

Awards:

2011: International Teo Chew business leader social responsibility award

2010: First Asia-Pacific Chinese business leader's social contribution award

2009: New South Wales outstanding business leader and social responsibility enterprise award

2000: New South Wales premier's lifetime achievement award for social contribution

1999: Medal of the Order of Australia

Quick takes:

What has been your biggest achievement?

My biggest achievement is to be able to devote myself to social service and charity. I want to facilitate and advance cultural and economic exchanges between Australia and China.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career and why?

My mother. She has inspired me to be a righteous and humble person and reminded me not to forget where I came from. According to her, personal integrity comes before wealth or success.

What has being a businessman taught you?

Being grateful. I received very solid Chinese literature and language education, so I have a great passion for and deep understanding of the Chinese culture. It has taught me to be a trustworthy and grateful person.

How do you relax?

I do some simple exercises when I get up and keep busy with social engagements. I enjoy music, swimming and dancing.

Date of birth: Aug 8, 1936