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Retail visionary

Starting with just one store, this determined CEO now heads a consumer goods empire in Myanmar

By **LOW SHI PING**
in Yangon, Myanmar
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

Unobtrusive, soft-spoken and gentle. These are adjectives that come to mind when first interacting with Win Win Tint.

Yet, as the CEO of City Mart Holding Company starts to open up, a steeliness in her personality surfaces.

It is what has enabled her to build the retail chain from just one store in 1996, near Yangon's Bogyoke Aung San Stadium, to more than 200 now, across seven cities.

City Mart is the Myanmar equivalent of Wal-Mart in the United States or Tesco in the United Kingdom. It offers eight different brands ranging from convenience stores to supermarkets and hypermarkets.

Fittingly, the 43-year-old cites the building of this mini empire as one of her proudest achievements to date.

"We are the first to introduce the modern way of shopping to Myanmar — from buying goods from the traditional or wet market, to supermarket and hypermarket.

"All this brings a lot of benefits such as convenience, quality products and comfort. We have successfully transformed how the customers shop and complemented the change toward a modern lifestyle."

In doing so, City Mart has also established an elaborate ecosystem that involves suppliers from local small and medium enterprises and farmers.

A third achievement: Providing employment for its 8,500 staff, which affords them a livelihood and career advancement.

"We are one of the main economic contributors in the country. I am very pleased with how we have progressed to this stage and are able to contribute to larger society," Win Win Tint said.

The mother of three admits she started out with a vision to become a leading retailer in Myanmar, guided by examples in the region like Singapore's NTUC FairPrice. Singapore is where she spent three years getting her bachelor's degree.

"Along the journey, when you gain more confidence of what you can do, you see the bigger picture."

For a large part, the growth of City Mart was organic. "The business and customers shaped us to who we could become," she said. "Along the way, we saw the opportunities.

"From the first supermarket, we branched out. From customers' feedback, we see what type of services they are looking for and provide them."

Other compelling reasons were the economies of scale that a larger setup offered.

With City Mart firmly entrenched in a leading position, Win Win Tint looks to the digital transformation of its business model.

"Myanmar has suddenly awoken in the middle of all the changes happening in the world, thanks to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, from technology to new business models and ideas. We see a lot of opportunities for us to leapfrog."

On the retail front, she wants City Mart to be an "omni retailer", meaning products and services will be available to consumers at all times.

She is also looking to improve the brick-and-mortar stores, planning for upgrades to cashless payment systems and offering services like bill payment and banking.

Customers can order items online and either pick them up in the stores or get them delivered. "These will be enabled by technology. We want to bring our service to the next level in the store. We want these experiences to be seamless for the customer."

While she wants to expand the presence of the physical stores, "they have to be smart, not traditional, stores, which will elevate the customer shopping experience and complement our online stores"

"We have our fundamentals to be a strong retailer with good retail technology infrastructure, but what we need to work on further is the transformation."

The challenges are plentiful, particularly in areas like delivery logistics and the banking network. Another is Myanmar's limited talent pool.

Win Win Tint is keeping a close eye on China, as far as innovative business models and ideas are concerned.

At the moment, City Mart's relationship with the country is limited to it being an important source of its nonfood products. Up to 50 percent of the consumer goods it sells come from China, including kitchen products, electronic appliances and garments.

She is also hoping to establish partnerships with Chinese companies. "China is the most happening place at the moment. It is the original place of this new retail and distribution concept that is enabled by technology.

"We will be interested to collabo-



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rate more with Chinese companies, for instance through software and hardware, using smart devices and smart kiosks. We want to acquire those kinds of technologies from China."

City Mart was established in 1996 by Win Win Tint's parents and aunt (her mother's sister) on the heels of the country's transitioning into an open economy four years earlier.

Still family-owned today, it was conceptualized after her aunt suggested growing a supermarket business. "She told my parents everyone goes there almost every day."

Because her parents came from a traditional business background — they previously ran a wholesale then trading business — and were unfamiliar with how to execute the idea, Win Win Tint, only 21 at the time, volunteered to run it.

"I knew I always wanted to run a business; it's in my blood. I was helping my parents since I was 10 or 12 years old, so I think it is natural."

And she has never looked back.

Outside of running City Mart, or perhaps because of it, she is an ardent proponent of a more business-friendly environment in Myanmar.

In fact, her reputation precedes her on this point, which is why her soft-spoken demeanor comes as a surprise.

"It is one of my passions," she said with a smile. "The country has so much potential. Because of history, we were left behind, but we should not be defined by who we were. We need to progress and catch up with the world."

For this to happen, enterprise must be allowed to flourish, she said, and a good business environment is key. In turn, it will increase living standards and upward mobility for society.

"I am a believer in that. I like to push our government to create an

enabling environment, so that everyone will get equal rights and opportunities to progress further."

Top of her wish list are better policies for the private sector, eliminating red tape and moving on from outdated practices.

"I understand parliament is catching up with 50 years of work. But even in the new policies, there are many things that are not (consistent with) modern economic practices."

As an example, she cited the need for banks to report transactions of more than \$80,000 to the central bank.

And some things affect City Mart directly: Samples from every shipment it receives must be sent to the Food and Drug Administration for examination.

"This is why Myanmar's ease of doing business is still very low. My wish is that we have an enabling business environment. There are many entrepreneurs in Myanmar — they are capable but need the environment to excel."

She admits that she feels depressed when contemplating how much still needs to be achieved. But as she speaks, her quiet positivity and strength shine through.

"You have to see the bigger vision, and believe in it. When you believe, you can overcome those moments."

"You have to know what is really happening in your business and market, and have a broader outlook as well — be exposed to the world, get ideas and strategies from there."

Does being female help her cause?

Win Win Tint answers in the affirmative. Women need more time and effort to prove that they are as good, if not better, than male leaders — but when they "arrive", the recognition is much more, she said.

"When I go to important meetings with government officials, there may

Bio

Win Win Tint

CEO,
City Mart Holding Company

Career milestones:

2013-present: President, Myanmar Retailers Association

1996-present: CEO, City Mart Holding Co Ltd

Awards:

2017: Woman of the Year, Retail Congress Asia Pacific

2016: ASEAN Business Award — Young Entrepreneur

2015: Asia's 50 Power Businesswomen — *Forbes*

2014: ASEAN Business Award 1st Runner-Up — Woman Entrepreneur

2012: Young Global Leader, World Economic Forum

Quick takes:

Do you shop in your own stores?

Yes. I usually visit the stores on the weekend. It is very important to do it. I talk to staff and customers to get their feedback and see if we have any shortcomings.

What is your leadership style?

Theoretically, you know what a good leader should be. But you know what your personal constraints are. I try to be aware of what mine are — for example, public speaking and meeting people; I'm an introvert. I want to improve them, but I also realize who I cannot be. I am good at dreaming, at having that vision of what we can be and do. I am a good listener, so I can better relationships this way. With vision and good listening skills, I try to communicate what or how we should be doing things.

What keeps you up at night?

The pace of change in Myanmar is so fast. We want to catch up with the world. The worry is if we are doing enough. Is our organization ready to be in line with the changes or to be in this leading position (that we are currently in)?

Year of birth: 1975

be bigger businesses led by men, but I get to participate anyway."

She hopes to see more female business leaders, she said. "There are definitely more and more. It's an encouraging trend but there are not enough, especially at the top."

Regardless of the challenges she faces, Win Win Tint is clearly on an upward trajectory. So, why not just be content with building City Mart and making money?

Her reply is heartfelt: "Myanmar is still a poor country. How do you justify driving a Rolls-Royce on its streets? How do you justify living in a very large house when everyone around you is very poor?"

"You cannot. I don't think you can live with yourself. You'll always be guilty about your wealth."