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Spotlight

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Filmmaker: THOMAS FUNG

Vancouver's Media Emperor reveals his secrets of success

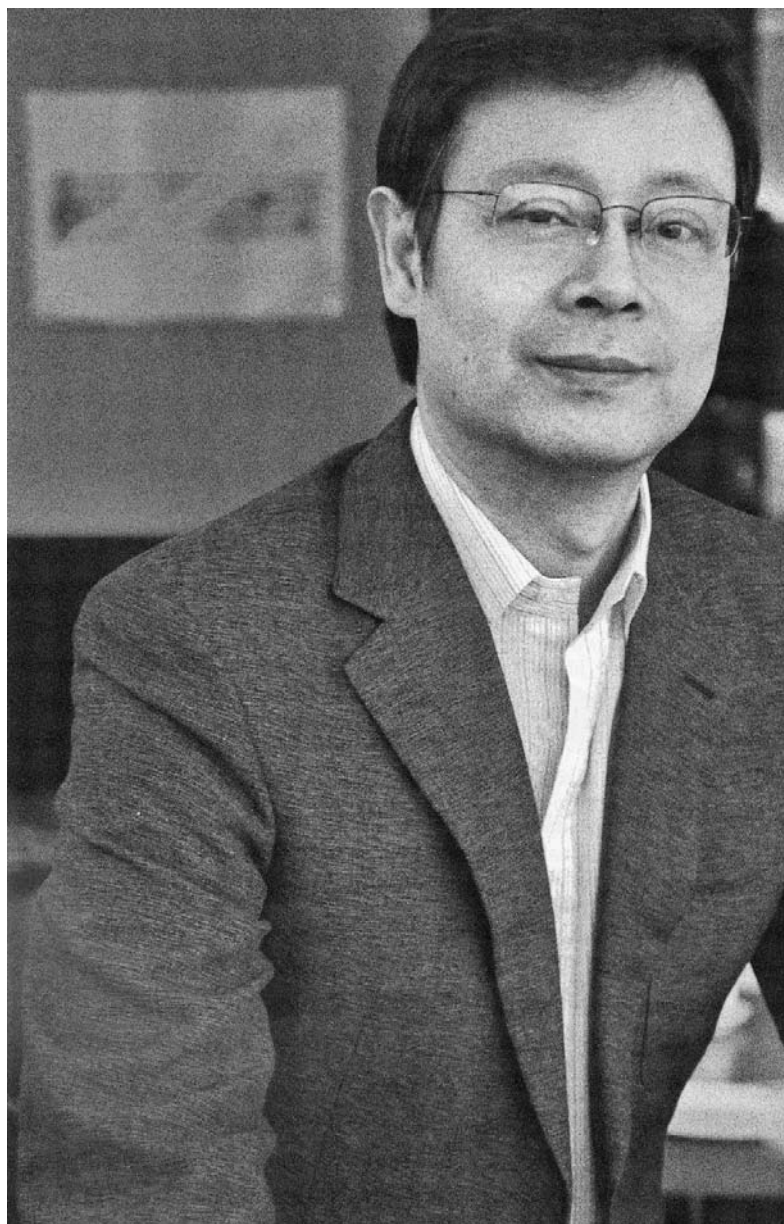
Elvis croons in the backdrop while I scan *Seventh Heaven* café, on the upper floor of Aberdeen Centre, as he politely answers his cell phone. Many may know him as the owner of Aberdeen Centre, Richmond's \$150 million, 380,000 square-foot high-end fashion mall, or you may also know him as CEO of Fairchild Group, a media cartel that owns five specialty channels, five radio stations, a new Asian movie channel, and six more channels underway. But I wonder if you would know him as Thomas Fung, the filmmaker. With his second one currently in the works, he's got a very impressive list of credentials.

The café is a delightful ménage of plush contemporary décor and 30s upper Shanghai ballroom flavour, seasoned with antiques from various eras – colourful ergonomic seating, soft illuminated lamps, and framed cigar-card posters of women

dressed in mandarin dresses. Mr. Thomas Fung, with a subtle childlike excitement pulls out a pen and says, "It's a recorder pen. I have it with me all the time and I use it when I have immediate inspiration." Ahh, Mr. Fung, so that's your secret (Note to self: invest in a recorder pen).

The soft-spoken man with a gentle disposition would not strike me as someone whom *Time* magazine named one of the most influential people in our dog-eat-dog corporate world. But he has caught the attention of CNN, CBS, CNBC, NHK, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes* to name but a few. He is a multi-dimensional man with a keen creative eye, and not until I sat down for a chat in his personalized café did I realize just how gifted this man really is.

They say he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, growing up among the most prestigious Hong Kong elite, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. His father, Fung King Hey, launched Hong Kong's first and now one of the city's largest financial trading groups, Sun Hung Kai and Co. Fung King Hey started out with nothing 30 years ago, and has accumulated such a fortune that no member of the Fung family would ever need to work again. The younger Fung learned many lessons from his father, a man with no educational background who appreciated the importance of street smarts. Going by mostly "gut feeling" and intuition, Fung started out in the retail market and gradually worked his charms into real estate development and media.



FUNGFACTS IN TEN SECONDS

1. Named one of *Time* magazine's most influential men in Canada
2. Introduced Daiso, the wildly successful 100 yen store (\$2 in Canada) to Vancouver
3. Enrolled in film school at New York University...
4. ...While working at Merrill Lynch
5. Agnostic, doesn't believe in superstitions or surveys
6. Reads books, magazines, but never touches fiction
7. Likes to play tennis
8. Looks to father as inspiration
9. Is opening new fashion stores
10. Donates annually to hospitals

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Scenes from *Paper Moon Affair*.

Fung is not all about business though. As I sit here, while the Beatles wail 'Let it be', he beams as he tells me that he compiled those tracks himself and is very proud of it. Slowly, I learn that this man is not just a CEO sitting back in his plush leather chair puffing away at a Havana cigar: his commitment spans farther than people think. He is involved in every way possible, right from the naming of his companies (the name "Aberdeen" refers to one of HK's toniest neighbourhoods) to choosing the style and décor of his retail shops and eateries (all decorated with antiques he personally collected over the years), right down to the music selection.

Being the creative businessman that he is, Fung is also an avid fan of cinema and already has a feature film touring the film festival circuit (he acquired his training in film school). Fung's inaugural *Paper Moon Affair* (Holiday Pictures) was a dramatic love story about a young small-town boy who fell in love with Keiko, an older and mysteriously beautiful Japanese woman who comes to the village with her cold but wealthy husband (played by John Lone from *The Last Emperor*). The story, which refers to a parable on the doomed love affair between a butterfly and the moon, he says, reminded him of a film he had watched and adored as a child.

What is unique about his films is

that they are not only creative, but also comply with Canadian content, as it is a requirement now by the CRTC. Fairchild Media must invest 30 percent of its gross revenue into local Canadian productions. Fung announces that he will begin writing the script for his second film. This one will be a romantic about a bold young girl with a wild spirit. "I try to have a different genre with every movie." The toughest part for Fung is casting the lead role. He is currently searching for a Caucasian male to play the lead, and it's still open, he announces.

When asked what he thinks formulates a great film, he laughs, saying it's the combination of generating big profits and getting good reviews.

"It's better to have both. But if people hear about it and it doesn't make that much money, it's still okay with me," he says, smiling.

Although his initial endeavour reaped neither, it seems it hasn't discouraged him. He has strapped on his helmet and is at it again, learning from past experiences to ensure that his upcoming film meets his own criteria for success.

"I was not 100 percent satisfied with the first film (*Paper*) because the second day of shooting, I had to leave on a business trip." Fung, with three years training in fine arts and photography at

NYU, was gone for the entire month. The film passed the first screenings for the Czech film festival and the Cannes Film Festival but couldn't make the final cut. But clearly it didn't faze him, which is in part, his secret to success. He doesn't let the little things hang over him.

As our interview comes to a close, he says he has another meeting in 10 minutes and offers me lunch on the house. As I prepared my palate for a sliced beef brisket with noodle in soup or perhaps spaghetti with pesto sauce served with chicken steak, he was getting up to attend his next meeting and says as a final word: "My father was very approachable, trustworthy and rose quickly, without much English or formal training. He was fair to everybody and taught us to be fair to others. This is why I call my company Fairchild, to respect his teachings."

"To put it simply, I can work very fast, make quick decisions and quick responses. I can accomplish within one day what would take a week for others." Keep an eye out for what Mr. Thomas Fung presents us with next. Filmmaker and business tycoon, Thomas Fung is a new breed of the Renaissance Man. ■

For more on Thomas Fung, go to www.ricepaperonline.com.