



STYLIST ASSISTANT THOMAS HONG
GROOMING KEITH BRYANT, LEE USIN & JACKET, TOTH FROM ETRÖ. COTTON
CLOTHES, COTTON SHIRT & WATCH, FROM ALDOUSIUS FIGUET

HIS

STORY

To comic book devotees and movie buffs, Ron Tan has the best job in the world. As executive chairman and group CEO of Cityneon, he gets to call the shots when building theme park sets and exhibitions filled with superheroes, robots and dinosaurs. But getting there required true grit.

OF

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FUN



CLOTHES: COTTON SHIRT, COTTON JACKET WITH MATCHING PANTS, ALL FROM PAUL SMITH. WATCH: FROM AUDEMARS PIGUET

IT WAS THE YEAR 2008

when Ron Tan found himself in a bit of a pickle. He and his two friends had made a pitch to Marvel and Disney to produce a one-of-a-kind exhibition celebrating Marvel's Avengers franchise – and somehow won it. “I wouldn't say it was because we had the strongest concept, which was based on delivering experience. Our winning the contract had more to do with everyone else dropping out,” says Tan with disarming frankness. “When we got the contract, we were thrilled – it was a leap of faith on Marvel's part. We popped the champagne after we signed it. But after that everything fell apart.”

With no prior experience in building an exhibition of this scale (or any exhibition at all, really) the trio had to hire 200 to 300 freelancers to work on the project, taking up 50,000 sq ft of space in Valencia, California, even though the exhibition was set to debut in New York. They were now 250 per cent over budget and two weeks late to launch. The pile of letters threatening legal action was growing ominously taller.

In those moments an ordinary man would have crumbled under the pressure, but we don't put ordinary men on our covers.

Tan wound up saving the day with his extraordinary powers of perseverance. He should not have built the exhibition in California, for example, which was an expensive place to run a business and led to additional costs because they had to ship the products east. “I gave up many, many times – but only in my mind. The next day I would get up, forget the fact that I had given up because there were so many things to deal with, and just keep going,” Tan, 48, recounts. “When people become successful they like to look back and think they had a special part to play in that grand plan, but the only part we played was to keep going, even when we went the wrong way or had to make a lot of U-turns.”

When the Marvel's Avengers Station exhibition finally opened in New York City's Discovery Times Square museum in May 2014, it was a raging success and has since made its way to Beijing, Seoul, London, Paris, Sydney, Moscow and Singapore. “But it was a very long and painful

journey. I still keep that folder of legal letters at home to look at when things get rough, as a reminder that nothing could ever be worse than that time.”

As it happened, things got better. After forming Victory Hill Exhibitions in 2011 following the deal with Disney, Tan was approached by Singapore-listed firm Cityneon four years later with a buyout offer. From then on, it was less pain and all gain. With Tan's direction and Cityneon's resources, the company's market capitalisation grew from \$20 million to over \$300 million last year. As of this February, Cityneon was delisted from SGX in order to gain more control of the company's future direction, and revenue is expected to hit \$250 million this financial year – almost double that of 2018. Disney's “last choice” had become the go-to name for mega-movie franchise exhibitions that include Transformers, Jurassic World, Hunger Games and Universal Studios.

FUN FORMULA

But all of this, Tan says, happened quite by chance. “I left the corporate life in 2003 and while browsing autobiographies in Kinokuniya one day, I came across the story of Guy Laliberte, the man behind Cirque du Soleil. Who could have imagined a circus without animals back then? Or one that could sell its own merchandise? That book left a deep impression.”

Inspired, Tan realised that the secret to a good experience was storytelling and personalisation – two themes that drove the Avengers Station. “No one had done anything like it before. Up until then exhibitions were just architecture you walked through,” he points out. In the Avengers Station, visitors are inducted as recruits, experiencing the comic book-based universe through high-tech interactive displays placed among original sets, props, costumes and special effects. “These days when you take a group photo, how good the photo turns out

HUMANS BEHIND THE HEROS

Behind the scenes at the Avengers Station

ADVICE FROM A LEGEND

“I met Stan Lee when he was 90 years old. He was a very nice, very happy gentleman. He kept saying ‘Stay true to your beliefs, to everything that you like and everything you do.’”

PLAN B

“Forbes shot a video of Stan Lee talking about the exhibition and you might recognise the setting as Iron Man's Hall of Armour area. The reason he was in that room was because the exhibition still wasn't ready for the launch, so we staged it as an interview room.”

NOT ALL FANTASY

“There's real science behind some of the Avengers' super powers. For example, the Hulk turns green because Bruce Banner's body is working overtime to heal, like our bodies when we get a bruise. We worked with Nasa for Thor because he is all about space and extraterrestrial objects.”



“I met Stan Lee when he was 90 years old. He was a very nice, very happy gentleman. He kept saying ‘Stay true to your beliefs, to everything that you like and everything you do.’”

RON TAN

is dependent on how you look, not how everyone else looks. So the personalised experience is key.”

Technology has helped in that regard, but Tan maintains that it should only be used to enhance an experience, not centre it. “We have AI and VR now but people ultimately prefer to be wowed by the real thing,” he says. “One of our most popular experiences is Jurassic World: The Exhibition. It’s weird, but what stood out for people was the realistic skin and movements of our animatronics. They would rather see a physical dinosaur than a holographic one.”

Even with these insights it still seems incredible how a relatively small local firm could gain and maintain the trust of billion-dollar US brands. This Tan credits to the diversity and dedication of his team, which consists of 400 to 500 staff based all over the world. Rather than hire people with an exhibition background, Tan looked for people who cut their teeth in entertainment. “One of my creatives was from Cirque du Soleil and studio executives found his perspectives fresh and interesting, while my tech and operations guy came from Sea World. He managed fish, not installations.”

Tan believes Cityneon has gained a reputation as brand custodians by approaching studios with cautious reverence. “Pitching to big names is always scary. You have to understand that you are talking to someone who has lived and breathed their brand every day, so for you to go in and tell them you want



to build an experience around that, you have to really understand what they’re about,” he says. This is why it can take 18 to 24 months to complete a project, and also why his creative team are often die-hard movie fans themselves. “They know everything, down to the Pantone shade of Thanos’ pants. My job is to come in from a business and casual fan point of view.”

Being an Asian CEO helps, too. “Our clients find it intriguing,” he laughs. “It’s rare to find an Asian CEO in this business. A chairman, perhaps, because we’re supposedly good with money, but not a CEO who predominantly handles Western intellectual properties (IPs). But the industry has seen that we have had no issues in the last 10 years, and we are able to penetrate markets they want to get into.” China is of course one of those markets, and with China-based Citic Capital investing an approximate 10 per cent stake in the company, Tan is gearing up for expansion into North Asia.

The plan now is to become the biggest player in this field, and seeing as they’re courting two more IPs – keeping in mind that Cityneon’s criteria is that these IPs need to have made at least US\$1 billion (\$1.4 million) in ticket sales with sequels or prequels planned – it’s safe to assume the goal isn’t too big of a reach. In fact, Tan is thinking out of the box office.

“We want to move into original artefacts, like the Terracotta Army of Xi’an. Anyone can exhibit them

but they can be pretty dry, so I want to give people context and content. The younger demographic may think a cup is a cup is a cup, but if there’s a good story behind this cup, it could excite them,” he says. Cityneon is also working on its own asset-based IP, which Tan hopes to release in Singapore next year. “90 per cent of our profits come from outside of Singapore, so we hope to do more here.”

THE THING WITH LUCK

Not one thing Tan has shared so far has been with the slightest hint of a frown or reminiscent distress. Maybe it’s easy to be cheerful when you’re sitting in a spacious office decorated with comic book memorabilia, housed in a shiny new office building purchased two years ago, while basking in the glow of the title of EY Entrepreneur of the Year 2019 in the media and entertainment category. But it’s more likely that Tan’s smile, which isn’t moulded for charm or carefully engineered to mimic charisma, comes from a place of deep gratitude.

“I was awarded the Singapore Government Scholarship to pursue a bachelor’s degree in tourism from the University of Hawaii, but I didn’t do well in the system and saved up enough to break my bond after five and a half years. I later joined a multinational company but after six years with them I was made redundant in six minutes. Working on Avengers Station was so awful that if there was



a chance to go back and do it all again, I wouldn’t take it,” says Tan, recounting the periods where life handed him enough lemons to fill an Olympic-sized pool with lemonade. But he’s thankful for each and every one of them as they taught him valuable skills and experiences that serve him well today. “Being able to have this interview is a blessing. It’s a beautiful moment. I’m so glad we’re doing this for Christmas because it’s about giving thanks.”

You would think a man whose job is to recreate cinematic worlds for the general public would know how to cut loose during the holidays but Tan admits he’s “actually a pretty boring person”. He unwinds by taking walks every morning and playing the piano. “I’m a creature of habit. I like to do the same things over and over. I like my work, so I don’t stop working.”

Indeed, even if Cityneon hadn’t come along to add sequels to Tan’s career, he would have simply found another crazy idea to bet on. “Maybe I would be with a private equity firm or something,” he shrugs. “That’s the thing about entrepreneurs – something will definitely happen as long as you keep believing it will. There’s never just one route to get to where you want to go.”

WORLDS OF HIS OWN

Pockets of entertainment all over the world

Marvel Avengers Station
Permanent home: Las Vegas
Currently in: Cardiff, Mumbai, Shenyang
The current phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe may be over but the Avengers fandom is still going strong. The Avengers Station now has a permanent home at the Treasure Island Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, with 31,000 sq ft filled with interactive props and costumes like Black Widow’s uniforms and weapons, Iron Man’s suits and Bruce Banner’s laboratory. The retail space offers plenty of merchandise and collectors’ items, and a dedicated event space will also accommodate up to 200 guests for special occasions and parties.

Transformers Autobot Alliance
Currently in: Jeju
Upcoming: Dubai
After more than two years of development, the Transformers-themed interactive exhibition officially launched in January last year in Chongqing, China. It is currently in Jeju, South Korea and will open soon in Dubai. Guided by familiar characters like Optimus Prime, Bumblebee and Windblade, fans are invited to join the Autobot Alliance to acquire skills and knowledge – such as learning the Transformers language to decode missions throughout the exhibit – to protect the human race from the Decepticons. Special effects, reflex tests, virtual reality, motion sensors and other features help bring the walk-through experience to life.

Jurassic World: The Exhibition
Currently in: Seoul
Upcoming: Chengdu, Guangzhou
The exhibition promised visitors it would be the closest they would get to living dinosaurs, and though it sounds sensational, there’s no denying the animatronics are top-notch. Not only were they developed by Creature Technology Company, which previously created the animatronics for Walking With Dinosaurs: The Arena Spectacular, they had design input from palaeontologist Jack Horner, who was the consultant for the four films. In this exhibition, guests were given a VIP tour of a scaled-down version of the park, where highlights included a petting zoo, the Hammond creation lab and the Gyrosphere Valley.

LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGY

Despite developments in artificial intelligence and virtual reality, Tan has discovered that people are still impressed by the “real thing”, the touch and feel of an exhibit, such as the texture of a dinosaur’s skin.

