



## a gem of an idea

IT TAKES A SPECIAL PERSON TO PUT TOGETHER PERSONAL BELIEFS AND A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS PLATFORM TO BRING NOT JUST MONETARY PROFIT, BUT TO KEEP TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND A SENSE OF PRIDE IN CULTURAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS. CHOO YILIN BRINGS CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO AN EFFORTLESS LEVEL OF ATTAINABILITY.

Story by JULIANA LOH

**A former research analyst** with the civil service, Choo Yilin left her career and familiar turf to relocate with her diplomat husband when he took up a posting in Bangkok. There, Choo started her eponymous artisan jewellery label, working with European and Thai craftsmen trained in the ancient arts of lapidary-cutting and metal-smithing. From purist craftsmanship – where almost everything is hand-forged and hand-crafted – to using only organic gemstones and metals as homage to the old European luxury houses, the jewellery label is an amalgamation of her personal values.





► From this budding business, Choo decided to take her entrepreneurial skills one step further up the ladder; she incorporated her concept of practising corporate social responsibility. She went on to invest considerable time and effort in sustainable design by helping to continue and maintain the hill tribes' centuries-old silver culture.

The hill tribe silver is being prominently featured in her inaugural collection, The Lanna, where Choo has put together modern-cut gemstones fused with fine silver ornaments. These textured silver pieces, hand-forged by hill tribe artisans, give each piece an old world charm that offers whimsy and a sense of history. There is little or no sterling silver in this collection as the traditional hill-tribe craftsmen only work with fine silver 99.9 percent grain, instead of the more modern sterling 92.5 percent variety. The result is that the jewellery pieces are more tarnish-resistant than the usual 92.5 percent silver.

Her choice of using this hill tribe silver, albeit more costly and difficult, was an attempt to keep this artisan craft going before it becomes obsolete with the mass production of 925 silver today. This collection renewed the demand for hand-forged silver, allowing the tribe artisans to continue with this traditional craft without leaving the villages for the city to find employment.

In addition to sustainability, Choo has committed part of the sales proceeds to be donated to the Scholarship Committee of the American Women's Club of Thailand (AWC), where she is an active volunteer. The money will help fund Thai girls' last three years of high school education, to ensure that they graduate with a high school diploma. This is a fully transparent charity where she knows exactly where the funds are allocated and is a project that resonates with her own principle of encouraging education for girls.

Unlike most artists and designers striving for symmetry and perfection, Choo craves the asymmetrical and rough edges that inspire her designs. While colours complement the seasons, it is largely an intuitive and ongoing investigative process of picking the precious stones in the rough to piece something together. For winter and spring, her designs favour blue sapphires, green-grey aquamarines, pale icy pink and green amethysts as well as black spinels generously woven together with the silver, creating a different texture, and colours, highlighting contrasts.

As for advice on how to select and purchase semi-precious stones, Choo clears the misconception of the term 'semi-precious'.

"First of all, there is no such thing as a semi-precious stone. To say something is semi-precious is the equivalent of someone saying they're semi-pregnant. It's just a term that was used to classify all gems that



1&2. Thai hill tribe artisans at work.

3. Hill tribe silver featured in inaugural collection called The Lanna.

4. Choo Yilin.

weren't diamonds, rubies, sapphires or emeralds," says Choo. "Those four were the original 'gemstones', and anything else fell into the category of 'semi-precious'. Today, the term doesn't hold anymore because there is a whole range of non-traditional gemstones like rubellites, tanzanites and tsavorite garnets that can cost as much or more than the big four."

Of course, there is a large range of gemstones that are relatively inexpensive. Quartzes for example, are beautiful and widely used, but will never be in the same league as the tourmalines or the beryls.

"The thing about purchasing such non-expensive gemstones is to realise that they're really solely for aesthetic purposes and not for investment." Choo believes there aren't any hard and fast rules to follow when it comes to buying jewellery of this nature, as it eventually boils down to your personal preferences – you buy what you like and most of the time, also





5. Gems for use in jewellery crafting.  
6. Keeping the tradition alive.



what is within your budget when it comes to buying 'non-heirloom' pieces.

As for investing in gems, Choo recommends some reading, such as *Secrets of the Gem Trade: The Connoisseur's Guide to Precious Gemstones* by Richard W Wise. She also cautions about making these decisions based merely on reading materials. It takes many years of hands-on experience to make important purchasing decisions, and stresses the importance of consulting an experienced and certified gemologist first. Still on the continuous learning journey in gems and design, Choo believes that it is important "to purchase investment stones not solely for their value, but there should also be an emotional engagement with the item", so that no matter which direction the value of the item goes, you still treasure it.

"Fakes are everywhere, as with anything of value. Synthetic stones of every kind are available on the market and it is important to only buy from a retailer you can trust." Imitation gems are so well crafted these days, that even with experience and proper equipment, it is sometimes impossible to discern the fakes from clean organic stones. Occasionally, even jewellers with decades of experience can be fooled. However, the good news is that with 'semi-precious' stones, "there's little incentive to create the synthetic versions, simply because it's not worth their money to do so. For example, the real organic quartzes don't typically cost an arm or leg, and sometimes, the synthetic versions can cost more than the real version."

While everyone has their own style, it can sometimes be difficult to match accessories when you want to put on your favourites all at once. Choo advises her customers to do whatever they like, but try to steer

clear of looking like a Christmas tree. The basic rules apply: If you wear a heavy necklace, lay off the dangly earrings, and vice versa. Chunky rings and bracelets could complement either the necklace or earrings.

With a unique approach towards design, Choo's philosophy of embracing imperfections that is every part of nature brings us back to her concepts of sustainable design.

"My personal draw is always towards the organic and hand-forged, as well as the asymmetrical. In short, a movement away from the symmetrical perfection of industrial production as well as the high-polish that was so popular in the '80s. Even with gemstones, I love the flawed stones with inclusions, as they are an indication of my philosophical belief that there's beauty in imperfection. Not to mention, you also don't have to worry about whether you bought a real stone!"

With more charity and corporate social responsibility projects in the pipeline, Choo is open to dialogue and collaborations to further develop sustainability in her business or businesses in general. She believes that people should "build organisations and businesses that are sustainable, and will demonstrate lasting positive impact in society".

For more general information, as well as a peek behind the scenes at her creative process, visit [www.chooyilin.com](http://www.chooyilin.com).

**CHARITIES:**

[WWW.WHATISTHESIGHT.COM/PURE](http://WWW.WHATISTHESIGHT.COM/PURE)

[WWW.AWCTHAILAND.ORG/SCHOLARSHIP.HTML](http://WWW.AWCTHAILAND.ORG/SCHOLARSHIP.HTML)

During her college years, Choo Yilin spent most of her summers alone, backpacking in Europe. She started creating jewellery as homage to her travels after graduation, as Europe had served as a major inspiration for her sense of aesthetics. That line of semi-precious jewellery sold at independent luxury boutiques. In 2007, she left her job in Singapore to move to Thailand on an expatriate adventure with her husband, where she conceived her artisan jewellery label, made the old-fashioned way. While maintaining her European sense of aesthetics, she started working with exceptional craftsmen who were trained in the ancient arts of metal-smithing and lapidary-cutting.

To underpin her business and social efforts in helping tribes people maintain and grow their traditional art forms, Choo has also co-founded a non-profit programme in Thailand, which seeks to help expatriate trailing spouses find their professional niche in a foreign place. Even if paid work is not a possibility, professional engagement through perceived meaningful volunteer work is always an option, especially when Choo is able to match the volunteers with efforts of the indigenous Thai people.

