

# Options

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## Building an empire

Pat Liew, founder of BritishIndia, on the lifestyle  
giant's philosophy and growth





# Building an EMPIRE

Pat Liew, the dynamic founder of lifestyle giant BritishIndia, talks to **Audrey Simon** about the philosophy behind the brand and her plans for its expansion



SAMUEL SAAC CHUA/THE EDGE SINGAPORE

As soon as I stepped into the BritishIndia boutique at Great World City, Pat Liew gave me the once-over. Not in a sneering way that Wilhelmina Slater of *Ugly Betty* does week after week on TV. Instead, Liew, founder of the hip lifestyle store was just assessing me with her assistant to guess my size and the type of clothes that will fit me.

Liew explained: "I can dress anybody. Give me the most awkward shape and I can find something for them." She has earned this bragging right — Liew has been in the retail industry for more than 30 years. And to prove that there is something in her store for me, Liew and her assistant began a discussion about size, shape and cut, occasionally turning to look at me. I felt like a candidate in one of those *Extreme Makeover* shows on TV.

In less than 15 minutes, the clothes were gathered and hung in the spacious changing room for me. (Just for the record, they fitted me very well and I didn't leave without making a purchase.) Indeed, the boutique gives one a sense of generous space. This 30,000 sq ft boutique at Great World City is BritishIndia's flagship store and was opened only a few months ago.

Just before the interview with *Options*, Liew took me on a tour of the store. This petite Malaysian, who will not reveal her exact age, said: "I'm in my 50s". She looks at least a decade younger — she is svelte (as a result of yoga) and dressed stylishly in a grey top, black trousers, a silver belt and simple jewellery to complete her look.

Like a new proud homeowner, Liew started our tour at the men's section, located at the front of the store. Liew explained that it was planned this way to cater to the way a man shops — and that

is to get in there and buy something and leave. Here, Liew pointed out the various ensembles a man can find, from the linen collection to the adventure wear. This line applies to the women's collection as well.

The homewares section is well-stocked with everything you need for the home, from dining sets and tableware, to bed linen, curtains and more. There's even a very inviting hammock that Liew later sat on for the cover shots. The store is tastefully decorated with carefully selected furniture and framed pictures of wildlife, which are all painted by her staff. Liew is one to encourage the talents of her team and she hopes to one day relinquish some of her duties that take her away from home about five to eight times a year to visit her stores and factories in China and India.

Looking around, I cannot help but ask if the lines that she carries at BritishIndia are a reflection of what she likes. "I mix work with everything," Liew said. "I do yoga, so I started a yoga line. The Adventure line was started when I went to Nepal for a holiday and couldn't find clothes that were suitable for Nepal, so I came back and started the collection."

This extends to finding the perfect bed-sheets and now BritishIndia has sheets with a 550 thread count. The horse riding gear collection was started because Liew's 21-year-old daughter is very much into the sport. As if anticipating my question, Liew quickly added that her daughter was not ready to take over the reins of the business while her husband loves to travel — he had just returned from Patagonia, South America.

Liew lamented that she wished she could devote more time to travelling but that would have to wait. Now that the flagship store in Singapore is opened, mak-

ing it the fifth in Singapore, she will start on renovating the Tanglin store. There are already 12 stores in Malaysia with franchisees in Thailand and the Philippines.

For 40 minutes, Liew spoke to *Options* about the birth of BritishIndia and her expansion plans.

**Options: You had always been in retail. How did it all start?**

**Pat Liew:** I have been in retail for 37 years. This was started during my student days in London and, like all students, I wanted a Saturday job. I worked at Jeans Junction — a boutique that sold High Street 60s fashion. It was a very hip place that started selling jeans and that evolved to street fashion.

So the Saturday job soon became full time and I was with them for the next three to four years. Then I came back to Malaysia and worked with a retail store and stayed with them for 15 years. Then there was a change in management and I thought that was the right time to start BritishIndia.

**What lessons and experiences did you take with you when you started BritishIndia?**

You should say what lessons I haven't learnt. There's a saying that goes something like 'the best punishment for your enemy is to ask them to join the rag trade'. It is a tough business and we have to push the boundaries.

We are not just retailers, we also design our own products, take care of production, deliveries — it is the whole retail operation. It is tougher for us as most people will just buy a line, while we have to create our own line and sell it.

**But you survived all these years, when**

**most retail companies have come and gone. One day the label is here, the next it is gone. How do you do it?**

To me, it is about doing things you believe in and if you keep doing what everybody is doing then you will have a problem because you will always be looking at others for inspiration. At the end of the day, the core values such as doing what you love should always be there.

I remember when I worked as a buyer, I had a budget to buy items for Christmas. With our hot weather, I found them totally unsuitable. So, I decided to start my own line that is sensitive to our culture and lifestyle.

**You founded BritishIndia in 1994. What was the deciding factor? Was it borne out of frustration of not finding the clothes you want?**

Oh yes, it was one of the reasons. We live in the tropics and people are selling something that is totally western and sometimes [the fabric] may not be suitable.

A reporter once asked me if my linen collection was better than another branded linen collection and I asked, 'What context are you looking at? If you are talking about the tropical climate then, yes, we are.'

Our linen collection can be washed and worn. In non-tropical countries, linen clothes are dry cleaned all the time and because the material is so sensitive, you might ruin it. So, these are the kind of things we look at — what is good for this environment and what is good for this climate.

**Why the name BritishIndia?**

I love anything Indian... I love the food and I love the culture and I just love the country. It is an interesting place because





The brand also carries a bedding line

Some of the artwork that adorns the BritishIndia stores are painted by the staff



BritishIndia at Great World City is the brand's fifth and flagship store in Singapore

there is so much culture, so much colour and so much variety that you are never ever bored. India is a place that constantly surprises you.

**And British? Where did that come from?**

It is a good combination.

**People have said to me that the brand is targetted at [Westerners]. What is your take on this?**

It wasn't meant to be. But somehow, the first people that got attracted to us were the expatriates. Maybe we take it for granted that we are an Asian brand and don't see it the way the expatriates see it: a clothing line that is exotic, unusual and suitable for this climate. Now, we have more and more locals coming into our stores, especially in Malaysia. This is even changing

in Singapore, where we see young professionals coming in. You can dress a grandson to a grandfather here.

**You have clothes, homewares and even a yoga clothing line. Will you take the natural route to expansion, that is, to go into resorts?**

Oh yes. It is all part and parcel of the business. There are so many things I want to do. But I always believe that if you want to do something you must really put in the effort to do it properly or don't bother. Of course, these are my dreams — whether it comes true or not I don't know. I would like to go into the food business and the other is resorts. If we find a piece of land we will do it. Or maybe get into an adventure travel business...

**The official statement about BritishIn-**

**dia is putting the Eastern influence into Western clothes and lifestyle. What is your personal statement when it comes to describing the clothes?**

Serious dressing should be effortless. It's about luxury and comfort merging together. We design for men and women who are in a hurry. I think of myself and that's the formula. I am always connecting what I wear, what I need, what I want. It's not just about fashion, it's always been about living in the clothes.

We always have a clear vision to develop a tasteful quality product that is affordable to a discerning group, which means taking risks and never losing sight of our conviction. We like to make an Asian brand look better, to raise the taste level on the home front too.

We aim to produce timeless clothing, the kind you could wear year after year. The

classic shape, natural fabrics and style are about careful evolution and longevity. Our design team and I share a commitment to quality and to develop design intelligently. We match the best base fabric we can possibly find with enduring values and good workmanship. It is an evolutionary process. You enrich what you have already done and think of ways to make it better.

**You already have stores in Malaysia and Singapore with franchisees in Thailand and the Philippines? Any plans to open more stores in other countries?**

Well, definitely in a country that is not too cold. So, we are looking at certain parts of Australia and the Middle East. We also get a lot of enquiries from Europe but we are saying 'maybe' to those in resort areas with a warmer climate. Now that we have built a big corporate office in Malaysia, we are ready for expansion.

**How involved are you in the design of the collection? Do you give your own input?**

The last four to five years, I have been doing a lot more managing of the company. But I'm putting in some people to take care of that, so hopefully, I don't have to run the company and can be more involved in the fashion part. It is not just about designing clothes; for me, it is solving problems — I have to think for every shape, every size and every colour.

If you come to our stores and you can't find something that fits you, then there's something wrong. As long you have the budget, we can find something for you.

**Will you ever retire?**

And do what? Maybe I will do less but I will continue doing what I enjoy. ■

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