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BC BUSINESS

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair and bangs, smiling. She is wearing a dark blazer over a light-colored collared shirt. The background is a solid blue color.

ANDREA ENG

Finding a B.C.
haven for
Hong Kong money

PHARMASAVE'S
COOPERATIVE PUSH

TRUST COMPANIES'
NEW AMBITIONS

WESTERN CANADA
STEEL'S TURNAROUND

FOLK MUSIC'S
CAPITALIST VENTURE

A woman with dark hair and bangs, wearing a black fur coat, is sitting on a wooden balcony railing. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a traditional Chinese garden with a wooden structure and a circular opening. The text is overlaid on the lower left of the image.

CATCHING THE PACIFIC WAVE

Commercial realtor Andrea Eng is a woman in the right place at the right time. Her Hong Kong connections, her personal success and her Chinese heritage are raising her profile, making her a sort of high priestess of B.C.'s new religion — Asian investment.

BY ROCHELLE VAN HALM



Three in the morning might find realtor Andrea Eng on the phone, deep in conversation with a client in Hong Kong, putting the finishing touches on a multi-million-dollar property deal. The next day she could be entertaining potential buyers over lunch and in the evening attending one of the many social functions that go along with her high-profile role in Vancouver's Chinese community. At 32, Andrea Leslie Eng appears as the ultimate female success story in commercial real estate — for the most part, still a man's world. She sold \$40 million of apartment properties last year, most of it to Hong Kong interests, whose attentions she's courted for the last eight years as part of the 40-member platoon of industrial, commercial and investment brokers of Colliers Macaulay Nicolls Inc. Eng is Vancouver born, a second-generation Canadian from a Chinese family. She's a capable realtor who knows how to develop relationships with clients and how to connect them with the right investment.

When the Tudor Manor property in the West End on Vancouver's waterfront became available for redevelopment, Eng knew it wasn't right for her overseas clients. She understood that a landmark like the Tudor Manor needed a developer who appreciated its value to the community and who would be willing to work within city hall's constraints of preserving the building's facade. Her regular clients, the Hong Kong billionaires who look for cash flow from existing buildings, would not be interested. "They're not close enough to it," says Vancouver real estate lawyer Peter A. Allard, "they don't want that kind of risk." So Eng developed a new client — local developer Norm Cressey. Cressey Development Corp. has fulfilled her vision for the property, building the high-end, quality condos in the West End that Eng knew the Tudor Manor site had the potential for.

Eng also earns praise from many for staying involved even after the deal is signed. Offshore interests did buy Surfside, the property adjacent to Tudor Manor and part of the total \$13-million site. Surfside created a few difficulties of its own — the building had just undergone renovations, sewer problems had surfaced and inspectors had demands to be satisfied. "Someone had to quarterback the normal problems that are confronted on a day-to-day basis and let the purchaser know and give him a solution," says Allard. "She was excellent at that."

Little intimidates Eng, the former beauty queen. Last year, when an apartment deal was simmering slowly between an interested vendor and an eager purchaser, several problems on price, property management and financing were stalling the closing. Eng took matters in hand, drove her client to the airport and flew him to Calgary to meet the vendor. No one talked in the first meeting and little was accomplished. But later, after dinner, Eng got a handshake deal for her efforts.

But for all the deals she's played out (see *Big Deals*, page 25) there are thousands of trans-Pacific telephone calls, many at 3 a.m. from her False Creek condo, others at 7:30 a.m. from her 16th floor office in downtown Vancouver. Doing business with overseas clients means reams of Hong Kong faxes and secretaries weary from typing the listings and felicitations that keep Eng's clients informed about investment opportunities in apartment buildings, not only in Vancouver but also in Toronto, Calgary and Edmonton. She may be in contact with a client for five long years before the property comes along, but with persistence she's earned the right to the sale and that client eventually spends his millions through Eng.

Eng made more than \$200,000 last year but she didn't make it lounging. Free time doesn't exist. She sees her husband on ski weekends for "quality time." She works hard and invests her evenings in wining and dining in the style Hong Kong big money expects. And to think her dad once suggested she try industrial and commercial real estate so she'd have evenings free. But after eight years, the hard work is paying off. This year Eng will make Colliers' list of the top 10 or 15 realtors in the country, with a spectacular sales volume.

Besides selling, Eng invests a lot of time in associations that boost her contact list and her image. For the last year, she's spent nearly two days a week as president of the 450-member Vancouver chapter of the Hong Kong-Canada Business Association, the group she helped found in 1984 to promote trade. She also sits on the boards of Vancouver's Non-Partisan Association and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Garden Society. As well, she's secretary of the Chinese Cultural Centre and a member of Vancouver's Economic Advisory Commission. Her energy, involvement and generosity with time, is legend.

"Very ambitious, unbelievably hard working and dedicated," says her boss Kelly Heed, president of Colliers' western region. "I use her as the ultimate example of putting back into a community

what she takes out. I even say to her, 'Andrea, are you sure you're not doing too much?'"

She has an incredible drive to succeed — and to be seen doing it. "When there's a function in Chinatown," says one friend, "she just has to be emcee." After a spate of Andrea Eng interviews by several of the city's top magazines plus a mention in *Business Week*, some of her colleagues suspect she has a press agent. (She doesn't.) Avtar Bains is a Colliers friend of Eng's. He sold three times Eng's volume in 1987 and says, "But I don't get one per cent of the press — nor do I want it."

While Eng enjoys a high profile, it's not unlike the one her father forged for himself through 30 years of selling residential real estate from his Chinatown office. Jack L. Eng, three times honored for being among the top five in Vancouver annual sales volumes, used to take five-year-old Andrea to open houses when he was shopping new listings. "When I started, I sold two houses in one day. The builder thought I was a super salesman," recalls Jack. "From then on when they had a house, they called me first." Success — and of

course the hard work that fuels that accomplishment — runs in the Eng family. Andrea's mother, Edna May Eng, who operates Success Realty in Chinatown, boasts of selling five houses in her first month of real estate many years ago.

Dinner table conversations in the family's Shaughnessy home frequently focused on real estate, and both Andrea and younger brother Jordan, now with Knowlton Realty, grew up learning about the family business. Brought up in a traditional Chinese household, Andrea started ballet at age four, then studied piano and figure skating. By age nine she was typing to help out at Success Realty. With Chinese school in the afternoons and on Saturdays, she learned to speak Cantonese. Today her fluency helps snare deals with overseas clients.

Eng's parents sent her to private schools — Little Flower Academy and then Crofton House. Classmates who returned to Hong Kong now help her connections. Every summer and winter were highlighted with family travels — New York, Washington, D.C., California, Hawaii, Hong Kong, Mexico, Europe and South America. Back home, Eng and her brother won roles on amateur stages and she began modelling. After high school she enrolled in the University of British Columbia. As she says: "In the typical Chinese family you just go to university. Because my family had the real estate business, I went into urban land economics."

In 1977, her third year at UBC, the Chinatown Lions Club resurrected the Miss Chinatown pageant for the first time in 16 years. Eng's parents, prominent in the community, were approached to enter their beautiful daughter in the contest. Reluctant at first, Eng says she complied with her mother's wish and entered. Lovely and talented, Andrea won the title.

Miss Chinatown and her family were sent to Hong Kong where 50 reporters welcomed them. She would soon learn that the beauty business meant hard work. "There was a press conference," she recalls with fatigue, "and you feel terrible after a long plane trip, and you have to look pretty." Coached by her father, Eng made a televised speech in Cantonese. She was anticipating the end when word from Vancouver revealed that the contest sponsors were eager to enter their winner in the Miss Vancouver pageant. Andrea was horrified. "I came back two days before the pageant feeling jet-lagged and rotten and not looking forward to it." Of course she won, and with the title came the obligation to enter the Miss Canada pageant.

There she learned that the plastic image of beauty contests was as false as some contestants' smiles. "I was really honored to be in the presence of such intelligent people," she says. "That's when I

realized these things weren't that terrible." After Miss Toronto won the Miss Canada Crown Eng breathed a sigh of relief. As first runner-up she flew back to Vancouver, with \$1,900 in prize money, to what she thought would be a normal life.

A few months later, between studying for her final exams and modelling part time — her twice life-size photos decorated Anabelle's, the disco at Vancouver's Four Seasons hotel — CFTO, the owner of the Miss Canada pageant franchise, had a crown with no beauty queen. Miss Canada's marriage meant she couldn't represent the country in the Miss Universe contest. Would Andrea?

After the positive experience with the Miss Canada hopefuls, 22-year-old Eng agreed to enter, "expecting an even higher level of human being." Instead she encountered the dark side of pageantry during that hectic July in Acapulco — exploitation, ignorance and pathos. While organizers described the 83 international beauties dancing the Mexican night away, the weary contestants had to show up on the beach at 5 a.m. where a photographer shouted orders: "Okay group A, start jumping up and down; have a great time!"

The Mexican Feminist Coalition threatened to protest the pageant as local newspapers eagerly ran color photos of beauty queens basking in revealing bathing suits. Eng was quoted internationally saying, "The Mexican press only focuses on physical beauty because they don't know that the contestants also think and are talented." The media also got her race wrong; Mexican newspapers described Eng as "a real Canadian, an Eskimo."

Contestants from poor nations campaigned for the Miss Congeniality vote. "Please, please vote for me," they pleaded. "I have to go back with something or I have no future in my country; I will be in disgrace." By the time the Miss Universe crown went to Miss South Africa Eng didn't care anymore. She returned to Vancouver without regrets that beauty contests had changed her forever.

Back to real life in Vancouver, Eng held a degree in urban land economics but had no desire to sell real estate. She worked briefly at CKVU television and for a year and a half held a job in promotions for the Hyatt Regency. Burnt out from the hotel business, Eng searched for something new. Once more her father suggested real estate.

This time she conceded, although she wouldn't work for the family company. "You don't want to forever hear parents

BIG DEALS

- The southwest corner property at 41st and Granville sold to Park Georgia GavusE. It is now a two-storey office and retail complex.
- The northeast corner at 41st and Granville sold to offshore buyers.
- Property for the Johnson Building, known as the "New Chinatown" on Westminster Highway in Richmond, sold to offshore buyers who are pleased with the deal, Eng says, and plan to make more purchases.
- Barclay Woods, a 271-unit apartment complex in Burnaby, sold for \$11.5 million to offshore owners.
- \$20-\$30 million of properties along Broadway sold in the last few years.
- 1200 Burrard, now the site of a Toronto Dominion Bank and office building.

say: "This is the way this deal should be done," says Eng. Nor was she keen on selling residential, something her parents coaxed a good living from. "There's a myth in university that you should go into commercial investments," she says. "It's a more sophisticated, analytical way of doing business, compared to residential, which is more emotional." But Macaulay Nicolls Maitland (later Colliers Macaulay Nicolls Inc.) hired her in the autumn of 1980 to sell houses. Stationed in the West Vancouver office, Eng was unhappy. "I didn't know the streets in West Van!" So she started selling commercial, first warehouses in Chinatown, then strip shopping centres and small commercial buildings. Six months later head office ordered her to stop selling commercial properties.

Cocky and naive, 24-year-old Eng called company president John McLernon (now chairman of Colliers) to complain. On her way home through downtown, she stopped in to prove her point. After waiting hours, Eng was ushered in to plead her case. Determination, persistence, intelligence, her degree, her six-month track record — she promoted it all.

"She struck me as being very bright," recalls Kelly Heed, Colliers' western regional president, then vice-president of the commercial division. As Heed remembers it, Eng wasn't having that much success selling from West Vancouver. She also brought a very fancy resume. "I think she was a little upset when I told her I don't read them," says Heed. Eng had (still has) a very competitive attitude, was highly motivated and very positive — the qualities Heed looks for in young sales people. "I don't

want someone who's comfortable with taking home \$80,000 or \$100,000 a year. You want someone who wants to get to the top."

The managers agreed to let the feisty young woman try to sell commercial and industrial properties — provided she continue working out of the West Van office. "That's horse-shit! I live on South Granville, I have to go over two bridges," Eng remembers shouting. "I told him he was full of shit!" After more bitching, the company relented. After two months, she would start downtown.

On May 1, 1981, Eng was shown to her high-rise downtown office which was equipped with a desk, telephone and phone book. And that was it. "They gave me what I wanted but they didn't make it very easy for me," she recalls. Like all new sales people, Eng was on her own. Now in the big leagues, she had expected some training. Only 10- and 12-hour days lurked ahead, with weekends filled with preparation and studying. "I remember going home and crying, thinking I should have stayed where I was. I was making so much money, my splits were better. Boy was I stupid."

But luck also played a part. Launched into a booming market, Eng quickly dug up some institutional clients and finished her three-month probation by turning in sales of \$20 million. "You could do no wrong!" says Eng. "Holy smokes! Who would have imagined you could do so well." At age 25, the 1982 rookie of the year bought her own home — and was depressed for two days at reaching that great age.

Jack Eng believes his daughter's success comes from her own hard work. "She's very aggressive, very organized. She always knows exactly what she wants." Her family background also proved to be invaluable when it came to establishing rapport with overseas clients. "I was a Chinese person with some good family connections who could speak the language," says Eng. Her father takes pride in knowing many businessmen in Chinatown and Hong Kong, as well as "two of the richest Chinese in the world." Andrea's own connections and referrals, plus Colliers' dealings with the Orient's big families over a 30-year period, helped her develop her client list.

"We deal Hong Kong style," says Andrea. "It's quite different." Meal-time discussion figures heavily in business dealings so entertainment plays a key role, geared to building a trusting relationship. "We're very confidential about what we do with them," says Eng, "and there's lots of subtle innuendo." In 1983 Eng spent three months studying the way of

life of the Hong Kong investor. She returned for more observation last September. "Their sole motivation is money," says Eng. "Everyone's buzzed out making money, into getting ahead — by money or education."

While Eng understands how to work with her overseas clients, she's also had to learn to understand the rest of the Colliers team. "I've kind of had to work with her to keep the perspective of the support people around her, to continue to gain their respect," says Kelly Heed. More than occasionally, and in conversation more than out of frustration, her language is spattered with four-letter words. One of Eng's colleagues describes her as "a bit of a bull in a china shop" when she arrived at Colliers, intimidating and out to prove herself. She's still out to show her parents — particularly her goal-oriented mother — that she can succeed on her own. "When I first started it was very difficult," says Eng. "People would say, 'Oh well, your parents are helping you.'" Furiously she would deny it.

There are other family plans in Eng's future. Married in 1984 to labor lawyer Gabriel Somjen, the couple plans to have children. Eng anticipates the challenge, although she admits she's "not the perfect domestic person." "We had people over for dinner last Thursday night and I had to call my girlfriend to ask, 'How long does the chicken go in the oven for?'"

At age 32 — "middle age!" she groans — Eng feels there's no excuse to be less than good anymore. She's matured into an extremely capable realtor who understands the market she sells, as well as how her work influences property values. With an incredible drive to succeed, her ability to analyze adjacent properties and to see listings in the context of the neighborhood, Eng keeps striving to improve.

But success takes its toll. Even after a weekend of Whistler skiing with Gabriel, she looks tired. Eng and her husband spend little time with each other. "I see him when we entertain each other's clients," she says. Playing a role in the Chinese community means attending many Chinese banquets. "He's really terrific going to them all," laughs Andrea. "He says if he had only known what it was going to be all about, he's not sure he would have married me!"

"Extreme patience in dealing with an Asian clientele is essential," Eng has written on dealing with overseas Chinese. How ironic that she's so impatient with her own progress. "I'm proud of being successful in this field, that I've been able to do it on my own." Her motivation? Money isn't number one but she says it is *very* important. "The only way you gauge success in this business is by monetary success," says Eng. "It's very unlike other industries where you can get satisfaction from doing your job." ■