

# Top of the Class

*Excelling in whatever she touches, Central Weddings' **Yolanda Choy-Tang** seems almost too good to be true. But, as Arne Eggers discovers, she is real in every sense of the word*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILLY KAN AT RÖST PRODUCTION  
STYLING BY ANSON LAU







# The dresses

for the photo shoot are yet to be steamed and the hair and make-up team is still setting up their equipment, but as Yolanda Choy-Tang walks into the studio, she looks pretty much ready to go: wearing a black Céline denim jacket, Tory Burch flats and a structured block-striped skirt (“It’s Zara – I love to mix and match,” she says), it looks like our stylist has already dressed her. Her skin, bare any make-up, looks flawless and radiant. Tall, slim and smiling brightly, she looks every inch the yummy mummy.

Choy-Tang seems to have it all. She is a beautiful woman and an impeccable dresser, she has two adorable children and a loving husband, she is a successful businesswoman and an ambitious cook, a classically trained pianist and a well-connected social figure. Let’s face it: she’s one of those women that many people might think of as *too* perfect to bear. But spend five minutes in her company, and you’ll find it hard to dislike her. “You look great,” she tells me (which, considering it’s Monday morning, is fairly unlikely), and remarks how beautiful the make-up artist’s skin is, while, at the same time, brushing off every compliment about herself.

Despite her picture-perfect life, Choy-Tang seems genuinely grounded, and possesses a refreshingly unassuming air. Her schedule must be hectic, yet she always appears calm and in control. “It’s all about finding a good balance of career, family and spiritual health,” she explains.

In order to achieve this balance, Choy-Tang has often taken fate into her own hands. After four years of marriage, she decided to leave a high-profile role in fashion marketing to start a family with husband Hamilton, a director at a private equity firm. “I thought it was time to settle down and start a family. Hamilton and I had opposite schedules – he was travelling as much as I was.

**HAT TRICK**  
Dress by Karen Millen; shoes by Versace; headpiece by Alexandre Zouari; necklace by Vivienne Westwood

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**PREVIOUS PAGE**  
Dress by Yves Saint Laurent; necklace by Louis Vuitton

*All wedding gowns from Central Weddings & Occasions*



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*“The wedding dress is the most important dress of your life. That’s why we spend a huge amount of time with each customer”*

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The moment I left Fendi [she was working as the Asia-Pacific head of merchandising and marketing at the luxury house], I got pregnant.” But for the marketing professional it was always clear that the birth of her son Brandon (now six years old) was not going to put an end to her professional development. Seeing how many of her girlfriends quit working at the height of their careers, she wanted to make sure she kept a foot in the door. “Towards the end of the pregnancy I thought maybe it’s a good time to start a company,” she recalls. “And as soon as I gave birth I started working on this idea.”

**H**ER PLAN QUICKLY took shape: Choy-Tang approached three of her friends – Audry Ai-Morrow, Carolyn Chow and Michelle Leung Sulgar – to join her in the business, and soon the quartet opened Central Weddings & Occasions, a high-end bridal boutique. Stocking some of the most sought-after bridal designers, including the likes of Vera Wang or Monique Lhuillier, the exclusive boutique instantly became Hong Kong’s prime bridal salon, strategically filling a niche in the local wedding market. From day one, the store’s strongest asset was an extremely personalised service: “The wedding dress is the most important dress of your life. That’s why we spend a huge amount of time with each customer,” says Choy-Tang.

Bringing a set of partners into the business proved a smart move for the retailer: “I picked different people with completely different backgrounds,” she explains. “It’s important that partners have the same vision but very different skill sets.” While she leaves her co-owners to handle







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areas like finance or operations, Choy-Tang oversees strategy, business development and marketing – usually from home. “I don’t really need to be in the store. Most things can be done from home, which gives me great flexibility.”

Over the years, the business has steadily grown. In 2010, the four women opened a freestanding Vera Wang bridal boutique, located right next to the store’s showroom in The Landmark, and an expansion is on the cards for next year. “There is a huge growing demand in China so we are exploring opportunities,” says Choy-Tang.

While she might have ambitious plans for the business, family will always be first for the businesswoman: “The business is fun, but at the end of the day we have to know where our priorities are,” she says. So in spite of it all, Choy-Tang makes a point of spending a lot of time with her family, particularly after giving birth to her second child, daughter Hayley Hope, last year. While keeping a successful business afloat, she still manages a family and social life that would be fit for a Hong Kong version of *The Stepford Wives*. “I love baking,” says Choy-Tang, whose current specialties are oatmeal raisin cookies and an apple cake “that everyone loves.” A seasoned cook, she enjoys entertaining in her home on the Peak, but admits that cooking in Hong Kong might be a little less hassle than elsewhere: “Because here you have sous chefs and someone to clean up after you.”

THE AVID GOURMET MAKES sure she doesn’t pile on the pounds, though. Choy-Tang has competed at wakeboarding in the past – she won a bronze medal while competing in a women’s intermediate wakeboarding competition in Hong Kong – but she now keeps fit with long hikes and tennis, often alongside husband Hamilton. It was on a hike with friends that the Californian-born beauty met the native New Yorker. After only six months of dating, Tang proposed and six months later the couple tied the knot in San Francisco. Her dress, “a deconstructionist one-shouldered gown,” was by Dior.

Back then, Choy-Tang already had an illustrious career behind her: after graduating from Purdue University in Telecommunications Management she moved to Hong Kong to work in television,

first as a TVB TV reporter, and later as a producer. Even though TV had always been her dream, she quickly realised that it wasn’t for her. “My uncle told me that no one ever likes their first job and to learn as much as possible from it,” she laughs. She moved into fashion, setting up and heading the marketing and advertising department of Dior. Choy-Tang organised a number of memorable events and creative marketing initiatives which landed Dior in the top spot in editorial coverage year after year which coincided with stellar sales. After a stint with an internet company, she joined Fendi. “I really enjoyed fashion, and I missed it, so I decided to go back.”

Fashion is not just a professional passion: An avid shopper, Choy-Tang has an enviable wardrobe at her disposal. She enjoys many brands but her all-time favourites are Céline, Lanvin and Pucci. Her immaculate style has earned her the Most Stylish Woman award from *Harper’s Bazaar* in 2001, an honour she still deserves 10 years on.

But her real strength comes from a power that goes well beyond superficial features: a devout Christian, Choy-Tang believes that God is always looking out for her and her family. “I got into it after Brandon was born,” she recalls. “God touches you at different times in your life. For some people it’s when they really need it; for others it’s at the best time in their life.” Religion has also formed a special bond between her and some of her closest friends. “We have a group called ELP: Eat, Love and Pray. It’s a special group of girlfriends. We talk about what’s going on in our lives, and we continue to pray for each other. We are all witnesses to miracles and the power of prayer for He hears and He answers.”

“God never gives you more than you can handle,” says Choy-Tang, and by the looks of it, He has great faith in the capabilities of this uberwoman. As if she would not already have enough on her plate, she has recently taken on another ambitious project: earlier this year, her husband bought a vineyard with some friends in the Californian Sonoma Valley and apart from restoring and decorating a six-bedroom holiday home, Choy-Tang plans to learn about the art of making wine. Give it a few years and the fruits of her labour will likely end up one of California’s most distinguished drops. With her track record and list of achievements, nothing would surprise. ■

#### URBAN WARRIOR

**OPPOSITE** Dress and belt by Lanvin; bracelets by Louis Vuitton

**PREVIOUS PAGE** Dress by Gucci



## Princess Gown

#### AS THE ROYAL WEDDING IN

England is on everyone’s mind, we asked the bridal specialist what kind of dress she would have sold to Prince William’s wife to be, if Kate Middleton had travelled to Hong Kong in search of a gown. “We have predominantly American designers so I’m not sure if she could have found one since she will probably be obliged to wear a British designer,” reckons Choy-Tang. “But I would have recommended something that is very classic. A lot of brides tend to go for strapless off-the-shoulder dresses, but I think she needs something more refined. Maybe it could be a dress with shoulders covered in delicate lace, such as the Vera Wang gown Daphne (above), which was recently worn by Ivanka Trump.”