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Book review



Title: **Born to be the Boss: How Six Entrepreneurs Made It Big in Hong Kong**
Authors: **Janet Middlemiss and Bianca Zee-Geissler** Publisher: **Self-published**

Hong Kong is regarded by the Heritage Foundation, a U.S. think tank, as the world's freest economy, and the city is a byword for entrepreneurship: just look at the recently retired Li Ka-shing, lauded for growing a humble plastic flower business into a global conglomerate.

Yet the would-be entrepreneur often encounters obstacles in Hong Kong's supposedly laissez-faire environment: high land and property prices, primitive bankruptcy laws, restrictive bank lending, a business culture that favours a few established families and a small domestic market of just over 7 million people.

According to Samson Tam, Chairman of the Hong Kong Business Angel Network, many start-ups are the brainchild

of young people with little business acumen who simply want to avoid getting stuck in a low-paying job with little upward mobility. Failure is common, he told *China Daily* last year.

That hasn't dampened enthusiasm to strike out alone. A survey by InvestHK, the investment development agency, showed a record 1,926 start-ups launched in Hong Kong in 2016, a 24 percent jump from the previous year. To celebrate the business bravery of such individuals, two public relations consultants, Janet Middlemiss and Bianca Zee-Geissler, have put together a slim guide to entrepreneurship in Hong Kong, entitled *Born to be the Boss*, by chronicling the fortunes of six go-getters.

The authors say they chose as diverse

a group as possible: both men and women from a wide range of ages and cultural and business backgrounds. Given that small- and medium-sized enterprises comprise more than 98 percent of registered businesses in Hong Kong, employing almost 1.3 million people and providing around 50 percent of private sector jobs, they have focused on smaller operations.

"Venturing out alone is not for the faint of heart," they warn, though after they have noted that 150,000 new businesses are started in Hong Kong each year. Although that figure includes shell companies and tax shelters, plus the rapid churn of restaurants and boutiques in Hong Kong, it is still a sign that small business is not an easy life.

Two of the businesses profiled have

shown staying power, despite the often-short life of start-ups. Jennifer Liu started the oddly named Sir Hudson International, which owns HABITŪ caffè and The Coffee Academics, in 2003. Canadian-born Paul Luciw launched the AsiaXPAT website way back in 1999, before the dotcom bust.

The others featured by the authors are: fashion designer Johanna Ho, and Mei Ling Ng Liu who set up the Hong Kong Match-makers dating website – both Hongkongers; a Macanese, Philip Morais of CHI Residences; and a British expatriate, Nicole Wakley of furniture outlet Tree.

Several had comfortable lives before they became entrepreneurs: Wakley was a lawyer, Ho an architect. To be sure, not all were well-off professionals: Luciw was a physical education teacher. In all cases, they were people who tried working for others, then decided to achieve their dream of owning and running their own business.

The authors explore some of their subjects' missteps, but the prose can veer into the hagiographic: "With suppliers and consumers not fully understanding the beauty of what she was trying to create...", they write of Ho. Other passages are almost humorously vague. "Needless to say, dining at HABITŪ Ristorante continues to be an experience unto itself," the chapter on Liu declares.

Nonetheless, there is valuable information within. The afterword includes a comprehensive list of resources, although strangely none are in the Mainland. China's Minister of Science and Technology, Wan Gang, has told Hong Kong's young entrepreneurs to seize opportunities on the Mainland, especially through the Belt and Road global trade strategy and Greater Bay Area initiative to foster cooperation and development with Macau and Guangdong.

Fortunately, the Hong Kong government has made innovation a priority and both public and private funding is available. A HK\$2 billion government fund established in 2016 helps support entrepreneurs while in 2017, the Alibaba Hong Kong Entrepreneurs Fund handed out HK\$10 million to six start-ups.

The authors have focused on companies that have marketed to niches – singles, expatriates. It would be interesting to read how a Hong Kong entrepreneur captured mass-market appeal in Hong Kong (or beyond) with a product or service.

Author interview: Janet Middlemiss

A career in corporate communications has enabled Janet Middlemiss to acquire a knowledge bank on what makes a successful Hong Kong businesses, but it was the growing number of Hongkongers who were setting up their own companies, rather than join the wage-slave commuter set, that helped her decide to chronicle their stories.

Middlemiss and co-author Bianca Zee-Geissler decided to focus on two types of entrepreneurs: achievers who were self-made instead of born into fortunate circumstances, and sectors that appealed to modern founders, such as food and beverage, fashion and lifestyle, and e-commerce.

"Our rationale for showcasing more current businesses that have made their mark in recent times is that these stories were likely to also be more relatable to today's self-starters and the book's target readership," Middlemiss tells *A Plus* at a book launch in Central.

She draws a distinction between business people and entrepreneurs. "Anyone can start and run a reasonably successful business, but not everyone necessarily has the natural abilities that we usually associate with entrepreneurs."

The book's title was a result of the research process and interviewing entrepreneurial role models. "It is clear that those we regard as entrepreneurs in the traditional sense are often already armed with certain

character traits from the ability to take risks, deal with uncertainty and tolerate ambiguity to having the intrinsic qualities of self-belief, passion, focus and determination," says Middlemiss.

The author offers hope to those without such lucky genetics. "There is still a place for those who have a passionate disposition and are interested in becoming their own boss." There is plenty of evidence, she adds, to suggest that even the least intrinsically well equipped can be

successful. Particularly if they are willing to invest time into improving their practical entrepreneurial knowledge, experience and skills.

Middlemiss believes that the Hong Kong government has a responsibility to help start-ups. "Given that entrepreneurs are often the lifeblood of a prosperous, healthy economy, it makes

sense for the government to work more closely with the local start-up scene to encourage innovation that creates opportunities and unleashes potential."

Middlemiss and Zee-Geissler hope *Born to be the Boss* is the first in a series of books. "We are now working on further editions that will chronicle the start-up experiences, wisdom and insights of self-made entrepreneurs," says Middlemiss. "This will include local country versions for Singapore, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia."

