

THE SPIRIT OF HIGH SOCIETY

# HONG KONG T A T A M E R

*NO LIMITS*  
The Grand  
Excesses of the  
Maharajahs

*Summertime*  
*ETIQUETTE*  
From the  
Hamptons  
to Henley

*Exclusive*  
*SOIREES*  
With Stella  
McCartney,  
LV Cup &  
the Cannes  
Festival

HOW THE  
DAZZLING  
DESIGNER  
TURNED HER  
HOBBY INTO  
HOT ROCK  
LUXURY

*Michelle Ong*

JULY 2007 HK\$45



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**GRAND  
ENTRANCE**

Silk-chiffon gown  
and fur stole  
from Versace;  
white-and-grey  
diamond drop  
Silk Mist earrings  
in 18k white gold;  
rose-cut  
diamond Flirt  
brooch in  
platinum both  
from Carnet



*Bucking the family tradition of entering the medical profession, Michelle Ong created a luxury business out of her hobby. Olivia Toth talks to the woman who, with Carnet, has succeeded in blurring the lines between high jewellery and art*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN DAVIES  
STYLING BY TINA LEUNG

# Michelle ONG

THERE'S A FAMILIAR TALE IN ASIA ABOUT a talented woman who meanders down the avenue of creative design, produces a collection of clothing or jewellery to sate a creative streak, has a family, and continues her hobby on the side, flanked by a successful husband. The End. Not so for Michelle Ong, who has parlayed what was, by her own admission, "a hobby" into Carnet, a lauded enterprise that has seen her recognised among peers such as cult contemporary jeweller Joel Arthur Rosenthal. But don't expect this straight talker to play up her talents. Even as Ong dishes out compliments, she counterbalances them with blunt asides: "I don't mince words, you know. Ask anyone who knows me." This direct approach has almost certainly contributed to her success. But it is the intricate, otherworldly designs of her whimsical jewellery pieces that have

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

Pompadour diamond necklace from Carnet; Dress by John Galliano from Joyce

**COVER PHOTO**

Michelle Ong photographed by Sean Davies; Eiffel Tower diamond earrings from Carnet; Gown by Dolce & Gabbana

LOCATION: PREMIER SUITE AND CAPRICE RESTAURANT AT FOUR SEASONS HOTEL HONG KONG



A full-page photograph of Michelle Yeh standing in a restaurant hallway. She is wearing a long, shimmering silver wrap-around halterneck gown with a ruffled hem and a small crystal-beaded clutch. The hallway has a checkered floor and is lit with warm, golden light. In the background, there are restaurant tables with white tablecloths and glassware. To the left, a large, ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The overall atmosphere is elegant and sophisticated.

“I AM VERY LUCKY IN HAVING TWO SUPPORTIVE PARTNERS. DAVID HAS ALWAYS ENCOURAGED ME IN MY CAREER, AND AVI TAKES CARE OF THE BUSINESS AT CARNET”

**LUMINARY**  
Michelle glides into view wearing a wrap-around halterneck gown from Ralph Lauren, crystal-beaded clutch from Jimmy Choo, and rose-cut Mazarin diamond studs in platinum from Carnet



really caused a furore among the cognoscenti. When it comes to her creations, Ong – who is also a devoted wife and mother – refuses to be swayed from her single-minded vision of beauty.

“I have always believed in what I do,” she says. “I’ve always ridden between two worlds, Asian and Western, and I like to think that – largely through travel – I’ve grown more open-minded.” Ong makes no bones about her ascent in an industry that she entered almost by accident. She began on her career path as an apprentice to Siu Man-cheuk, Hong Kong’s first diamond importer. “I’d just come back from university, and my parents said, ‘What would you like to get into?’ and they suggested my coming to [work for] him,” she remembers. Ong’s parents, both doctors, “had no expectations of me being good at a science subject. I was lucky,” she chuckles. Being around her mother and her parents’ social circle had instilled in Ong a sense of wonder when it came to personal adornment of the bejewelled kind: “My parents entertained a great deal, and my mother put so much effort into hosting parties, where I often saw guests wearing fine jewellery.” Ong also credits her “very independent” mother with passing on a healthy sense of self: “She taught me it’s important to be passionate about the things you do.”

Interestingly, the question “Were you creative as a child?” elicits a fair few “ums” and “ahs,” which clearly aren’t for effect. “I always liked beautiful things and was very sensitive to nice objects,” Ong states, after some consideration. “I didn’t go for any formal [design] training.” Anchored by the two men in her life, her cardiac surgeon husband David Cheung, and her business partner Avi Nagar, Ong’s prolific professional life spans more than two decades. “I am very lucky in having two supportive partners,” she says. “David has always encouraged me in my career; and Avi takes care of the business at Carnet, leaving me free to design and be creative.” While she recounts her first forays into jewellery design as a benevolent accident, Ong’s momentum once on this path belies a steely sense of purpose. “It was part and parcel of my drive for self-expression. I wanted to do things my way,” she says of a career that came about because she could never find the right jewellery to wear to parties. “I began to design pieces and to have them made. Then, friends asked me to create jewels for them, and the business evolved from there.”

Cue a chance meeting 20 years ago with

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
Eiffel Tower diamond earrings from Carnet; Gown by Dolce & Gabbana

Israeli gem dealer Nagar at a Diamond Importers Association dinner. Theirs is a partnership as rare in its longevity as in the unique qualities each brings to the business. “It is very simple: we respect each other’s differences, and we value the partnership above all,” says Nagar, who is at the *Hong Kong Tatler* photo shoot at the Four Seasons Hotel to support Ong and supervise their precious quarry. “What is most important is that we respect each other’s areas of expertise: neither of us is interested in encroaching on the other’s territory. We each love what we do.” Evidently, Nagar’s nous for business and Ong’s creative flair make for a winning combination. “[With us] there is a great synergy; a stimulating coming together of ideas, attitudes and cultural backgrounds,” she states unequivocally. One gets the feeling that Ong would not put up with a situation that was anything less than perfect. “I’m very principled and adamant about how things should be done,” she says, conceding that motherhood has tamed her somewhat. “As a mother, I think I’ve learned to be a little more tolerant. There is certainly more juggling, being a mother of three, but it doesn’t affect my work; there is no time or place for designing – it just happens.”

**E**VEN A CONVERSATION about how she met husband David Cheung, who hails from the Garden Bakery dynasty, is infused with a brazen confidence. Very much a woman of her own mind, Ong relates how, despite his being based in the UK and a consultant cardiac surgeon at Leicester University when they met and then married 21 years ago, when it came to choosing a base for the newlyweds, she won the day. “I thought, ‘What am I going to do there?’ I didn’t see myself having a career over there.” Fast-forward to today, and the couple’s children are themselves nearing young adulthood. On the verge of leaving to the UK for the half-term break of twins Amanda and Jennifer, who are studying for their GCSEs at boarding school, Ong beams. Her son Adrian has just been offered a provisional place to read law at Cambridge. And it is here that the worlds of Ong, as creative director of Carnet and as dedicated mother, collide most spectacularly. His autumn


**“BEING A MOTHER OF THREE DOESN’T AFFECT MY WORK; THERE IS NO TIME OR PLACE FOR DESIGNING – IT JUST HAPPENS”**



**SUITE  
SUCCESS**  
Strapless satin  
dress from  
Blugirl; diamond  
Cascade earrings  
and diamond  
Last Waltz watch  
in 18k white gold  
from Carnet

**OPPOSITE  
PAGE**  
Diamond  
Cascade earrings  
from Carnet



A photograph of Michelle Ong, the designer of the Carnet jewelry collection, sitting in the driver's seat of a Bentley Flying Spur. She is wearing a light-colored coat and a large, ornate diamond brooch. The car's interior is illuminated, and the background shows a blurred cityscape at night.

“ONG’S POWER IGNORES THE RULES OF MACHINES, OF NUMBERS, OF TODAY, BRINGING US BEAUTY SO NEAR IT IS HERE IN OUR HAND”  
— JOEL ARTHUR ROSENTHAL

move would be around the time that Ong’s latest triumph, Carnet’s new store at Bergdorf Goodman in New York, is slated to open. “If my son goes to university, I have to see that he comes first... But wait till he gets his grades,” she winks. A second home in London sees the family based there during school breaks. “I enjoy the different stages of my children’s lives. They are inspiring.”

Also inspiring is the almost preternatural assurance that keeps Ong focused in her creative labours. In Rosenthal’s words, at the exhibition *Exquisite Jewels: the Art of Carnet by Michelle Ong*, “Ong’s power ignores the rules of machines, of numbers, of today, bringing us beauty so near it is here in our hand.” Indeed, the designer appears coolly restrained in the face of comparisons with her peers. “I really don’t think about things like that. I concentrate on designing jewellery in my own way – my jewellery is an intensely personal expression of myself.” As is the creative process: “I work spontaneously, with no set pattern, no formula.” Inviting parallels with Cartier’s original creative muse, director of high jewellery Jeanne Toussaint, Ong’s personal style and the identity of Carnet are inextricably enmeshed. “There is a mystery to the creative process, which I try not to analyse or question,” she says, crediting the artisans who execute the gems that take shape in her mind’s eye. “I have an idea for a jewel, and then I work closely with my craftsmen to give life and form to the vision.”

**I**T WAS A CREATIVE SPARK THAT THE producers of *The Da Vinci Code* recognised when they approached Ong to design the jewellery for the film. Her modern take on vintage, Asian-inspired themes brought Ong sharply into the spotlight, giving her the leverage to bring the film’s global premiere to Hong Kong to raise funds for The Nature Conservancy. Channelling her drive into philanthropy is her other trademark, and Ong hasn’t let that particular coup be her last. For the annual gala of the Hong Kong Girl Guides Association, of which she is executive vice-president, Ong has snared this December’s local premiere of Nicole Kidman’s eagerly awaited fantasy epic, *The Golden Compass*. Ong admits to devouring *Northern Lights* from the trilogy by Philip Pullman on which the film is based. “After [*The Da Vinci Code*] the agents here are quite happy to work with me,” she says. “They know that they’re going to get the sort of PR that they want.” And then there’s the January 2008 fundraising gala for the Hong Kong Philharmonic, which will see Ong bring acclaimed violinist Yundi Li to play with the orchestra. Her quest for new challenges keeps her going: “It’s not a good thing, by the way, but you cannot help it ... so it kills you,” she smiles. Luckily, in Michelle Ong’s world, whimsy is never far behind. “Inspiration can be just a line, a silhouette, or a fleeting image. I can look at the sky and see a cloud, which turns into a jewel.” ■

**PASSION AND DRIVE**

Enscorced in a Bentley Flying Spur, Michelle wears a cashmere coat from Celine with diamond Marquise earrings in platinum, and diamond Floating Clouds brooch in 18k white gold, both from Carnet