

spa professional

georgieYAM

Dragonfly Therapeutic Retreats

writer **Karen Fong**

It's been 10 years since Georgie Yam, a Hong Kong-born, London-trained and formerly Singapore-based hairdresser, started up Dragonfly Therapeutic Retreat in China. After getting into the industry almost by accident, the entrepreneur has learned the ways of working in China and shares his experiences of developing a business in a young and not yet fully developed industry (in the world's fastest growing economy no less).

being a fan of spas and being able to run one are two entirely different things. But Georgie Yam, already a successful hairdresser in Singapore, was keen to branch out and explore this area of interest. After two successful collaborations with the Grand Hyatt and Marriott in the Lion City, he found himself in Shanghai, where China posed a whole new set of possibilities and potential difficulties.

"Visiting spas in China, I felt there was a huge gap between high-end spas, and the small local establishments. There was also a real lack of choice for foreigners. Either they had to pay a fortune, or they would have to explore the local spas which often

lacked in ambience and sometimes hygiene." It was this opportunity that inspired the creation of Dragonfly – a mid-range retreat that specifically targets expats and travellers. "The spa industry in its local form – the sauna – is very big in China," Georgie explains "But this isn't something foreigners would be comfortable visiting, it's a very local concept. It's almost impossible to compete with these bathhouses that offer everything from restaurants to Jacuzzi facilities to thermal baths. That's why you need to go another route. My aim was to create five-star service at three-star pricing. An affordable indulgence that people would recommend to friends and family."

It took six months for Georgie to conceptualise and set up the first Dragonfly Retreat in the former French Concession. "It was a very difficult process at first, especially since I'm not a local. The government really wanted to make sure we were setting up a legitimate business so they would watch us every day," he remembers.

Back then Georgie was basically a one-man show, handling marketing and promotions on his own. Now with a team of over 1,000, he advocates a work environment where his employees are "VIP members". Eschewing secretive business practise, he encourages employees to move up the ranks. "I believe that as long as your staff are happy, they will work harder to keep the customers happy."

While there is great potential in attracting a percentage of the 1.3 billion population of the country, Georgie is

adamant that Dragonfly will not 'localize' in order to do so. Customers are expected to abide by their rules. That means no shouting, and no smoking – a stark contrast to the atmosphere in the saunas and bathhouses. "There is a lot of potential in the local Chinese market, and we definitely want to expand," says Georgie, "But we want to be careful where we enter the market and how."

Dragonfly has also had to fend off would-be copycats. "We've had competitors calling us, pretending to be media and asking for the floor plan. Or people asking for the towels or robes – without even doing a treatment." He fears that for an industry based on attention to detail, the rush for success will ruin it. "I don't like to see small beauty salons throw in two beds and a fountain and call it a spa. It damages the industry."

At the same time, he emphasises that there is good growth in the China spa industry and that local operators are learning to adjust to international clients. With the development of the China Spa Association, of which he is a member, he hopes that these improvements will continue.

Having just opened the brand's first ever sleep therapy centre in Hong Kong, and with plans for further development on the island, Georgie is still involved in constantly developing his brand. "I believe that one must always show respect and trust." He says, "As the company grows, my role actually shrinks, and I have to 'set it free'. As a chain operator, being able to do this is important, and I am very proud of what we have achieved so far."

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