

## FEATURE

### Accomplished Chinese Americans

#### Marilyn Hay-lit Tam

Born: Kowloon, Hong Kong, China, around 1954  
Came to the U.S.: 1969 alone as a teenager U.S.  
Citizenship: 1974

*She began her career in the 1970s as an executive trainee with May Department Store in California, and quickly rose through the ranks to become a buyer.*  
Press Release, PR Contact: Mary Janssen. 858-638-7782

Marilyn Tam has had an extraordinarily diverse life, from her beginnings in a traditional Chinese family in Hong Kong to her meteoric rise through the executive ranks of the international business world to become an influential corporate leader, speaker, consultant, author, and highly respected philanthropist.

Her long, distinguished background includes prominent executive roles at numerous of world-class companies, including Aveda, Reebok, Nike, May Department Stores, Britannia Sportswear, Miller's Outpost and in founding internet and software companies. Marilyn's wisdom and skills are drawn from managing branded consumer goods companies and also include the successful management and launch of internet based consumer and business software companies.

Marilyn's leadership as president of Reebok's Apparel and Retail Products Group was marked by remarkable achievements. At each step of the way, she has increasingly solidified her reputation as an accomplished strategist and singularly effective leader. She brought prominence and focus to the Greg Norman Golf Division and helped launch Weebok, the children's footwear and clothing division of Reebok.



In 1994, Marilyn was awarded The Reebok Human Rights Award for her humanitarian work. A founding member of the World Peace 2000 Network, she is committed to the belief that philanthropy is integral to and provides an essential balance and relevance to her work. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Us Foundation ([www.usfoundation.org](http://www.usfoundation.org)), whose mission is to facilitate global action plans and dialogue to address social, economic and environmental issues. Us Foundation is one of the partners for United Nations' Habitat-II.

She was also nominated as a candidate for the "Best Practice Award" from the United Nations' Habitat-II. She served for five years on the international board of The Reebok Human Rights Awards with former President Jimmy Carter; renowned musicians Peter Gabriel and Sting; Chairman of the Special Olympics, Rafer Johnson; along with many other distinguished members.

In her latest achievement. How to Use What You've Got to Get What You Want (April 2003, Jodere Group), [www.howTouseWhatYouveGot.com](http://www.howTouseWhatYouveGot.com) Marilyn joins her

business acumen with her goal of giving back to light the way for others who may think they do not have what they need to succeed. In this powerful book, Marilyn shares the insights and four simple principles that have made her an international success story, and, most importantly, a person at peace with herself.

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### Who is Marilyn Tam?

Listen to Marilyn in her own words: "I attended Maryknoll Convent School in Kowloon Tong, Kowloon Hong Kong from kindergarten through sixth grade learning both in English and Chinese. The first few years was very tough for me as I did not like memorization and had a hard time understanding why it was so important. It was only in fifth grade when my geography teacher showed me the wonders of the formation of the mountains, clouds and the earth that I understood the thrill of teaming. I was excited to learn and became a diligent student from then on.

I transferred to King George V School for high school but I left midway through 10th grade to go to University in the USA. I had taken my SATs and had a good score (over 1500) and decided to apply for early acceptance to universities. I was accepted by University of Oregon and left home by myself to come to America to learn.

When I was 8 or 9 growing up in Hong Kong, I would spend the summers with my aunt and uncle in the fishing village of Tai Po in the New Territories. There I would play with the village children, and the fisher kids learning and doing what they did. We would walk and play along side the river whose water was the color of the fabrics that were being dyed that day by the factories that lined the banks. The river would be yellow, or blue, or red, depending on the color of the fabrics being dyed because the excess dye and used dying bath was just emptied into the gutters which ran into the river.

We walked along to the back alleys where the hand embroidered needlepoint handbags were made. We would take pieces of

beautiful fabrics home to embroider the needlepoint background, the simple handwork for US 75cents per piece. Or we would go to the back alleys where the plastic flowers factories were and got bags of plastic leaves, stems and petals to assemble at home and then bring back for a US dollar per hundred stems.

Sometimes I would go down to the banks of the ocean bay and play with the fishermen children. I would wade in the mud with them, digging for clams which they sold in the open air market on the other side of the river. We would split newspapers and the long reeds that grew by the banks of the bay to use as wrapping and string. We ate off the street stalls, earned money doing these various pieces of work and played on the street. The air was warm, the days long and sunny, I thought life was wonderful.

Nobody talked about child labor, unfair wages, or environmental degradation, and looking back at it now, all that was definitely going on. I didn't realize the meaning of poverty and injustice until I returned to school in the city when I was 11. There I found that one of my school mate's entire family lived in a room of 200 square feet and shared a bathroom and kitchen with two other families in a government subsidized apartment building. Now that to me was sad and unfair. Here was a girl Just like me, doing her best to learn in school and having to struggle with having a place to do her homework or to get enough food to eat. It didn't seem fair that by the accident of birth she was given this difficult lot to deal with.

I resolved to make a difference for people with so much less than what I had. Sure I had my challenges, growing up in a traditional Chinese family as the second girl to be followed quickly by the birth of three brothers, I was neglected and abused. But I had enough to eat and space to study. I resolved that I would grow up to make a positive difference in the world.

With that as my mission I left home in my mid-teens and went to America by myself to go to university. I worked part time and went to

school full time. I worked at various jobs, as a fry cook, a dietary aide in a hospital, in the kitchen in a dormitory, as a teaching assistant in the Agricultural Economics department at Oregon State University and as an economics assistant to the Governor of the State of Oregon.

I made my way through graduate school and to achieve leadership in several Fortune 500 companies. As I rose to become a VP of Apparel and Accessories at Nike, as President of Reebok Apparel Products and Retail Group and CEO of Aveda, I never forgot my school mate and my mission to make a difference in lives like hers. I also kept in mind the issues of child labor and environmental degradation that I experienced first hand and I have worked to balance the benefits and challenges of economic development in my work and life."

To demonstrate her belief and to help others, Marilyn Tam wrote the following book for anyone who is willing to learn.

**Media Release**

**Excerpts from How to Use What You've Got to Get What You Want**

by Marilyn Tam

*Jodere Group, San Diego, CA (April 2003), ISBN: 1-58872-077-2. 15 Chapters. 186 pages. (Pocket size)*

Whatever qualities you have, no matter how limited or broad that they may be in your own mind, veteran corporate executive Marilyn Tam has set out to show everyday people how to use what they've got for both personal and professional success. Tam should know. Tam was born in Hong Kong, where men dominate the business landscape. Tam readily admits that she was not the highest priority in the family. She never aspired to be either a beauty queen or a trophy wife, which was the case for many women while Tam was growing up.

Early on, she recognized that what seemed to be disadvantages in her life were in fact keys to personal and professional freedom. Ultimately, she landed in the U.S. and became the vice president of Apparel and Accessories for

Nike, Inc., and president of the Reebok Apparel and Retail Group. Tam was also the co-founder of three other corporations, although her road to success has had the proverbial bumps. Tam, who now enjoys the good life in Santa Barbara, California, heads her own foundation and lectures around the world. Through her life experiences she has identified four basic principles that have helped her to realize her dreams:

**Truth:** *Tell the truth all the time. Why complicate your life by having to remember lies?*

**Partner:** *Make me your partner Find people who support your ideas and endeavors. Make them your allies.*

**Mistakes:** *Take risks, make only big mistakes. This way. you are prepared and you can learn from them. Small mistakes are things done carelessly.*

**Sword:** *Hold on to your convictions, fight for your ideas.*

According to the common wisdom, I didn't have the advantages you need to get to the top. Instead of having connections or running with the in-crowd, I grew up in a foreign country where English was my second language. Instead of getting an Ivy League education, I went to a state university. Instead of being one of the guys in a man's world, I'm a woman.

The lesson is this: If I can use what I've got to get what I want, you can too. You are good enough now. You don't have to wait for anything, anyone, or any situation before you can start making a positive change in your life. You don't have to wait until you get a new job, lose 15 pounds, move to a new house, get a new relationship, an existing situation improves, or hold out for any other reason. The time and place to begin working toward your goals is here and now.

**- Part I, Chapter 1: Inside You**

Many people go through life working and living without knowing what's most important to them, trudging along in a life of others'

expectations. They have unconsciously accepted what they have learned from family and from society as to what they should be doing. There is no consideration of whether the roles they took on are really what give them joy and inner peace. They do not look inside for the answers even when they sense something is unfulfilling about their lives. They go through life waiting for something or somebody to tell them why they exist.

Others are so busy "doing" that they do not take the time to reflect on why they do what they do. They do not pause to question why they don't feel joyful and fulfilled as they forge ahead, day after day. They go through their whole lives, never asking defining questions like these: "What is in me? What is my passion, my reason for being?"

**- Part II, Chapter 3: Finding Your Mission**

Be courageous. Embrace your life with enthusiasm and heart. You may be where you are by design or accident, but like it or not, it's where

you are. The only way to get to the other end is to go through the terrain surrounding you. When you approach the challenges you face with optimism and faith, your body will respond to match your attitude. It will be relaxed and alert, slightly leaning forward, adjusting automatically to the terrain. Your mind will be anticipating the next several turns, processing data gathered by your senses, and making sure you're as ready as possible for whatever you'll face next.

In this relaxed, confident state, you will be able to incorporate the intuition, experience, and wisdom you have learned from others along the way. Suddenly, you will find that the conditions that were so daunting before are easier to navigate. To thrive in life and in business, you need integrity, heart, intuition, and tenacity.

Regardless of the perceived or real obstacles you face, you must maintain your focus with resolve and spirit in order to achieve your goals.

**- Part III. Chapter 5: Wisdom to Live By**