

Changing the world with words

SETTING up a business and making money is one of the primary goals for most entrepreneurs. Say what you like — that you're in because you love it, or love to experiment or just have some time to spare — but in the end it boils down to making money.

I came across one interesting business in Malaysia, though, that chooses to prioritise social mission over profit.

Akasaa defines itself as a social enterprise that specialises in projects that bring meaningful change to society through publication and content management. Founded and owned by Angela Yap, the company creates platforms and business models for clients who want to make profit and, at the same time, become leaders in innovative social change.

While that's a lot to factor in, Yap sums it up as a business with more action than just talk.

Her current project is a book, *Dining with Dragons* by Carol Selva Rajah, an internationally-acclaimed, Sydney-based chef originally from Malaysia.

"Chef Carol took six years to write this food memoir. She's written many award-winning books, but this is her first novel, and it may be the world's first food memoir on Malaya, Malaysia and Singapore by someone of her calibre.

"Food plays a powerful role in human memory. Food memory is a legitimate area of cultural and biological research in many

leading schools in the US and Europe," explains Yap.

She hopes the book will inspire Malaysians to remember how things were, and use these "food memories" as a way to heal as a nation. She says it is one of the first books written from the heart using food as an agent to bring about social change.

Yap seized the opportunity to partner up with Carol just as the book was just about to be printed in Australia by an Australian publisher.

"I read it, I loved it, I wanted to publish it. And we knew exactly where we wanted to drive it. Her Australian publisher relinquished the rights to us," explains Yap.

Publishing such a book here would be a good example of Akasaa's philanthropic mission, but the company has moved into a different phase of growth as it focuses on publishing and training — garnering more project with authors, books and partnerships.

In the context of Malaysians who've made a name for themselves in Australia like Carol, Yap says that they are always scouting for such talent. "Books, research and writing have a long incubation. We've taken a lot of risks banking on projects for the long term. Our longest one is a 10-year research project on the late Justice Tan Sri Eusoffe Abdoolcader (dubbed by the British press as the Legal Lion of the Commonwealth) — we're publishing a series of books on him

beginning December," says Yap.

Her job is not an easy one — having to balance between creating a positive image for her clients and partners, bringing about social change and making money. But Yap says all of this is made possible by the great team she has.

"A lot of times, how we assess, market, position and promote a book is extremely unorthodox, but if it makes strategic sense, and our gut tells us there's a market for it, why not?"

Yap is practical, determined and straightforward. Her passion has garnered her many accolades, one being the Most Successful Woman Award 2012.

Yap once worked in a bank, is a writer (her first love), a "geeky" researcher (a close second love), a former strategist for one of the Big 4 (PWC, KPMG, Deloitte and E&Y) and once signed up with the UNDP for a short stint.

"These things paid the bills. Then came all the pro bono social activism/human rights work with Amnesty (I was on the board of governors) and a few non-profits.

"Everywhere I went, people opened opportunities and doors for me, probably because I was very young and they saw how enthusiastic I was in doing everything," she recalls, the enthusiasm still very much evident despite the challenges.

Yap believes that a big part of overcoming problems is to not talk about it but learning



Yap: If it makes strategic sense, and our gut tells us there's a market for it, why not?

to meditate on it.

"Being quiet and putting aside time for introspection allows for eureka moments to happen. Solutions come when the mind is clear, and that clarity carries a momentum of its own. Then when you act, it carries gravitas," she explains.

While it's always easier to work with clients who have similar values, Yap doesn't always have that luxury.

"The test is in whether you can bring together many divided interests and make things happen," she opines.

Lastly, every business owner needs a supportive partner.

"If you want to be successful, find a partner who is supportive of your success."

— By KARINA FOO