



## It's All in the Family

Justin Ma's latest hotel, The Arca, is now open in Wong Chuk Hang. The founder and CEO of the Yulan Group reveals how his close friendship with his father, tycoon William Ma, is the cornerstone of his business *By Tara Sobti. Portraits by Affa Chan*



From far left: William and Justin Ma at The Arca hotel in Wong Chuk Hang with their beloved dog Po; Justin as a young boy on holiday with the family in Venice; the father-son duo have always been close—seen here at a friend's birthday party in Hong Kong in 1996

When the doors of The Arca swung open in May, it was immediately clear that it was the brainchild of someone obsessed with art and design. The stylish property is the latest art-filled and design-focused hotel opened by Justin Ma, founder of hospitality company the Yulan Group, who says he is creating “a new breed of hospitality experiences” with the business.

The Arca has 187 rooms with sweeping views of both Aberdeen Harbour and the mountains of Southern District. Inside, the rooms were created by local studio Design Eight Five Two and combine an earthy colour palette of greys, peach and copper with timber furniture to create raw yet cosy spaces.

“We want people to feel comforted and welcomed, and good art and design has a way of doing that. It plays a big part in creating a world-class hospitality

experience,” says 29-year-old Justin, whose love for unique getaways was fostered at a young age. “As a kid, I was lucky enough to travel around the world with my family, and my favourite part of each trip was getting to experience new hotels. I think that’s when I became passionate about becoming a hotelier.”

As the son of property magnate William Ma—chairman and chief executive of Tai Sang Land Development—Justin could have used his family name alone to gain access to the industry. However, he was determined to start from the bottom, so he studied hospitality management at the University of San Francisco. After graduating, he worked on the front desk of Hong Kong co-working space The Hive, eventually becoming its community manager. Today, he serves as head of business development at Tai Sang Land Development and is also an angel

investor in ChargeSpot, the world’s first mobile power bank rental service provider.

After founding the Yulan Group in 2019 Justin made his first solo foray into the hotel industry with boutique property The Figo in Sheung Wan a year later. “I have been very lucky to always feel a sense of belonging with my family, and this is what I wanted to provide for others with my hotels as well,” he says.

A self-proclaimed free spirit and lover of the arts, Justin uses his creative flair to set his properties apart from the rest. “I have always been interested in art and design. Incorporating art into our hotels is an important way for us to give them that unique touch,” he says. To bring Justin’s vision to life, he and his team spent the past two years choosing works by more than 40 Hong Kong artists, including illustrators and muralists Rebecca Lin and Carol Mui, as well as

pieces by international sculptors such as Elizabeth Lyons and Roberto Barni, to create a relaxed and inspiring space for guests.

Ma's father, William, is a private man who prefers to let his business acumen speak for itself, but one subject makes him light up: his children. "I am press-shy, but if it's with my son, I'll do an interview," says the father of three. "Justin has been interested in the hotel industry since he was a young boy and I have always supported him in pursuing his goals. About ten years ago, we saw an opportunity to invest in the hotel industry and he began working with me. He's done a great job so far, and his hard work and dedication make me proud, whether that's for the business or our family."

Property development runs in the Ma DNA. William's father, Ma Kam-chan, founded Tai Sang Land Development in 1973, specialising in property investment, rental and development, as well as estate management and hotel operations. When William was in his early 20s, he joined the company as a clerk, climbing the ranks to become its current chairman and CEO. Though the founder died in the Eighties, his life lessons are ones that William still holds dear. "My father is always on my mind. All the things we did together and all the memories are still with me. I learnt a lot from him and his lessons have been useful to me throughout my life," he says.

Volunteering time to the community is also important to the family: William previously served on the board of the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and the Criminal and Law Enforcement Injuries Compensation, among other initiatives. "Giving back has given me good insight into what is truly important in life. Making money brings happiness but to give back to the community is even more satisfying," he says. He is also

a member of a number of social clubs, including the Hong Kong and Macau Jockey Clubs, the Hong Kong Golf Club and the Hong Kong Gun Club. "I work hard and play hard," the 67-year old says. "I like golf, tennis, water skiing and even cooking."

From sustaining a successful business to having a healthy social life to his philanthropy, William's

drive to do it all is a trait that Justin admires—and one he inherited, too. "My father has always encouraged me to be myself and be a person of my word. I admire the way he's able to sustain a business while always making sure that our values are upheld in the company and in the family. After I started the Yulan Group, I realised this is not an easy thing to do," Justin says.

Tycoon William Ma pictured at The Arca, his son's new hotel. **Opposite page, from top:** The duo celebrating Justin's graduation from the University of San Francisco in 2018; Justin says his father has always encouraged him to be himself



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The pair's strong father-son bond is evident. "I am not only Justin's father, but I'm also one of his closest friends," William says. "We talk about everything: watches, cars, sports and movies. It's not easy to work together as father and son. When Justin joined the company, I told him that there would be a lot of conflict and arguments; after all, that's what business is like. But I learnt that the most important thing is to leave all of that in the office and never bring it home." Justin agrees: "It's natural to have some conflict—especially when working with family—but we understand and respect each other so much that we always find a healthy resolution."

As for what's next, Justin says his ambitions lie far beyond what he has already accomplished. "I always like to try and do new and unconventional things; hospitality doesn't just mean hotels. Maybe it's food and beverage establishments, serviced apartments, senior living, beach clubs or campsites," he says. "When the opportunity comes, we will definitely take it."