

THE INTERVIEW MEI XU, CHESAPEAKE BAY CANDLE CO-FOUNDER

# An entrepreneur lights her own way

Path that started in China results in a million-dollar firm

By Hanah Cho

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Mei Xu took several detours to become a founder of a multimillion-dollar candle and home decor company in Maryland.

Xu grew up in China and was swept up with other college students in the government's push to "re-educate" them after the Tiananmen Square uprising in 1989, the year she graduated with a degree in American studies. She was sent to work in a metal and mineral warehouse despite having been trained to become a diplomat since age 12. She quit after a month.

She then came to the U.S. to study journalism at the University of Maryland. But she never ended up practicing that craft, either. Instead, Xu and her husband, David Wang, founded Pacific Trade International and its signature brand, Chesapeake Bay Candle, in 1994.

Their story would come to mirror the stereotypical startup making it big — they crafted the company's first candle in the basement of their then-Annapolis home and went on to build a global enterprise with annual sales of about \$70 million in the U.S. and abroad.

Chesapeake Bay Candle products are sold at high-end retailers such as Nordstrom and Bloomingdale's, as well as Target, Kohl's and Pier 1. The company was named as one of the fastest-growing private companies by Inc. magazine in the early part of this decade.

Xu expanded in 2007 by creating Blissliving Home, a lifestyle brand that designs and sells bedding, bath and home decor products online and at select retailers in the U.S. as well as at namesake boutiques in China. This year, her company announced plans to open a manufacturing plant in Glen Burnie.

The Baltimore Sun recently sat down with Xu in her Rockville office to talk about how she got started, plans for the Chesapeake Bay Candle and Blissliving Home brands and her affinity for Maryland.

**QUESTION:** How did you go from earning a master's degree in journalism to becoming an entrepreneur?

**ANSWER:** I ended up working for a company that deals with medical equipment in New York. I was on 72nd and Broadway, and it was so close to Bloomingdale's. I literally window-shopped there every night. I felt there was an imbalance between contemporary fashion and home.

In fashion, you have minimalist Donna Karan, Calvin Klein. People in New York dress that way. You go to the home section in the early '90s, and it's still very much dominated by the classic European look, very ornate.

I tell my husband there is an opportunity for home products that we could get into. He's the entrepreneur of the two of us. I'm more of a design person.



KARL MERTON FERRON/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Chesapeake Bay Candle/Blissliving Home President Mei Xu at the company's headquarters in Rockville. She is hoping to open a manufacturing plant in Glen Burnie.

He said since you're not very happy with your job and neither am I, we have nothing to lose. We are two crazy kids, basically we don't have any obligations. No mortgage, no children. We just quit.

**Q:** Why candles?

**A:** We asked our friends who went to work not only in foreign diplomacy but also foreign trade in China. They gave us lots of ideas. One idea was some candles that are round with designs.

We just started with that product. Quickly we realized that we need fragrances. This is something that's seasonal, that people buy for holidays, and they put them at home and don't use them. We go to the stores and we saw all

these jar candles, really hokey, village-looking products. We say, surely we could make it more contemporary for someone who lives in a contemporary home. That's how we started making candles in the basement of our home in Annapolis at that time.

It was because we lived so close to the Chesapeake Bay that we decided to call it Chesapeake Bay Candle.

**Q:** Once you created your first Chesapeake Bay Candle collection, what did you do?

**A:** I took it to Bloomingdale's. They bought it right away. And Nordstrom.

My orders started to come in, but I can't possibly manufacture them in the basement. I told my

sister, you've got to help me. I can't convince the factories in China to produce 300 of this and 300 of that. They are used to large orders. My sister, just like I did, gave up her job. Our family put some money together and before we know it, we ran a factory.

That was '94. Our first year, we probably did about \$500,000 [in sales]. The second year, we did over \$2 million. The third year, we did more than \$5 million.

**Q:** In May, Pacific Trade announced plans to open its first domestic plant in Glen Burnie. What's the latest news?

**A:** I hope [to open] late this year. I'm counting on it. I've made boxes to say "Made in the USA." It would be a real disappointment if

we can't.

**Q:** With factories in China and Vietnam, why bring some of the production to Maryland now?

**A:** Maryland is so dear to my heart. I never moved out of Maryland for the last 20 years. Maryland has this very low-key, cultured and diverse international group.

Why now? Because more and more, we find that retailers and we don't know how to predict sales. So, we could say pumpkin spice will sell 3,000 pieces this week, and the customers could shock you and it's 6,000 pieces. Your inventory is completely depleted. The time to bring things from Vietnam and China to here even at a very realistic time is six weeks. Here, it's going to cut it to a week.

**Q:** What kind of impact has the recession had on your business?

**A:** Coming from a culture where it's more about preserving wealth or preserving cash than spending it, we have always been very self-sufficient financially. That really gives us a very unique position where a lot of our competitors rely on borrowing money and, at that time, it dried up.

The recession, if anything, has built up some of the stronger companies and maybe some of the less strong ones cannot survive.

It also consolidated the retail business, which is probably a setback for us. So we lost a few accounts, like Linens 'n Things and Mervyn's.

**Q:** Tell us about Blissliving Home.

**A:** I want to make bedding exciting again. I'm sick of the white bedding everyone is using. Why can't you put passion in your bedroom? You spend half of your life in your bed.

So this is what inspired the whole brand. I'm determined to create a brand that communicates a global touch for the modern home.

I am about a modern person. A modern person is not about how advanced you are in your knowledge of the world. It's how open-minded you are. You don't look at countries as baggages of culture. ... There are more similarities and more genuinely beautiful things that you can share without the baggage of religion, history or conflict.

To me, it's like every culture offers some of those genuine inspirational design pieces. And rather than taking on a real genuine aspect of it and interpreting it the way it is, why can't we make it more modern by maybe oversizing it or cropping it or making it in different colors.

**Q:** Where do you see Blissliving Home headed?

**A:** I think our business is more of a boutique-branded business. It's harder to grow that way to be honest with you. It would be easier to grow very fast and go out and say, "I could do this version for \$99," but we haven't really done that. We feel we have a long way to go to find the full scope of what other things we could bring.

We're going to bring lounge wear. We want to do some furnishing. The first thing will be furniture. Then we want to do rugs. [hanah.cho@baltisun.com](http://hanah.cho@baltisun.com)  
[twitter.com/hanahcho](http://twitter.com/hanahcho)

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