

Chocolate Princess



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What an awkward title, right? I've been called that in private and public in Austria since I was a child, always "the chocolate princess". My parents have started our small family business, first a pastry shop and then a chocolate factory, the year I was born. So quite literally I grew up among all things sweet and tasty, and most of the days I would wear chocolate somewhere on my face anyway.

Yet, however cute that title may once have been when I was a child, it has changed its significance when I grew older. And it has followed me all the way to China, when I came here on my own to start our very first Chocolate Theatre (apart from the original in Austria) a little over a year ago.





When we first started talking about this project a few years back it was clear from the beginning that one of our family members had to go and live in Shanghai for quite a while. I was a happy volunteer, since I had grown to love the Chinese when I had been an exchange student many years ago.

So we visited the construction site as a family, negotiated with the companies involved, got everything ready and finally started the construction site. I then moved to Shanghai as the new general manager of Zotter Chocolates. I remember I felt so good and happy - a new life had begun!

And immediately my nickname followed suit. I was 25, the "daughter of the big boss", obviously a laowai girl, and bore an arguable resemblance to "princess Sisi of Austria" (a trilogy about a famous Austrian Empress, was laden with Kitsch and clichés, that unfortunately everyone on the construction site had seen). It took them a week to call me "princess" whenever they were talking about me, oh what a formidable new boss for them! A hilarious situation, really, if I hadn't had to work with them on a professional basis. My food science and biotechnology

background? The fact that I was the only person on the entire site that had ever even seen the original Chocolate Theatre in Austria? Not really relevant. My only saving grace was the fact that I was related to the boss and had the power to sign off on stuff. That would eliminate all direct opposition, but it wouldn't wipe the benevolent smile off of people's faces whenever I contributed a suggestion. But I guess these sentiments must be understood...I was young and different and impossible to predict, after all.



As the "princess" I wasn't really expected to do anything, people had their own ways of doing business after all and would rather not anyone change that. It was a struggle in the beginning...my Chinese hadn't fully returned yet, using a translator was always a compromise and in general I felt like I wasn't really being taken seriously at all.

But then...everything changed. Not immediately, and it took some hard work and persistence to really make myself be included. But people started to trust my ability to understand and solve their problems, trust that they could talk to me about solutions and that I really had the pull

to go through with my decisions. I guess it was a learning process for both sides. And slowly I started to realize how open Shanghai actually is as a working environment for a woman. The issues I had encountered were mainly due to my age and being a foreigner, but as soon as I had ascertained my proficiency in the fields that mattered, the animosities vanished and we enjoyed working together. It's still not normal for a woman to be working in construction, but apart from that the environment here is way more open than I had anticipated.

In my later experience, running the business I had built, this perception hasn't changed. In Shanghai the women are tough, and they are used to getting their way. This might be because of the local culture, or because everyone had been made equal in the beginnings of the People's Republic. Still, of course, just because it is more open doesn't mean that there aren't still some obstacles that remain.

Today when someone calls me a "chocolate princess" I can finally wear it with pride, because I feel that I have built something for myself. It rings with a sense of achievement instead of just sounding of heritage, which was the reason why it always made me feel awkward back home. I have come to love working here, since I am granted a great deal of independence. The sense of deciding one's own fate in city where so many things are possible is just fascinating!

