

# Along for the Ride

Life as the wife of a young tech millionaire wasn't and still isn't all smooth sailing. CHLOE TONG tells ZARA ZHUANG. But with family at the centre, she has high hopes for the legacy and values her children will inherit

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WRAP TOP AND PANTS, BOTH FROM  
**DIANE VON FURSTENBERG**

**A**T 8AM ON this Tuesday morning, Chloe Tong is sunshine personified. The 27-year-old wife of Grab co-founder and group CEO Anthony Tan flits about her apartment with airy ease and introduces herself sans a hint of sluggishness. Even before we arrive for the cover shoot (via Grab, of course — what else?), Tong's children have been up and about: Emmanuel, aged two-and-half, is zipping around the dining room while 10-month-old Elizabeth in her floral headband beams at us from atop her high chair. And when the toddler begins to fuss a little, his mother coaxes him: "If you're a good boy, after school today I'll get you ice cream when I'm done."

"We're morning people," Tong explains. "The whole house is like this at 7am."

While they're finding a new rhythm for the family following the arrival of Elizabeth, they've also been spending more time in Jakarta. Indonesia is new frontiers for Grab, which holds 62 percent of the nation's ride-hailing market and is on track to secure US\$3 billion in funding by the end of the year.

None of this is as easy as it seems. "I think people forget how young we are," Tong says. "It's not even that it's a multi-billion-dollar business — Anthony has to serve thousands of Grabbers [employees] and millions of drivers, customers and agents. And being his pillar of support and sounding board can be daunting and overwhelming at times."

For Tong and Tan, there isn't even time to enjoy an entire movie in one sitting; they are

forced to split a film into three instalments viewed over the course of a month. "They're very atypical kind of 27-year-old problems — and blessings too. I think having clear rules and being rooted in the same values that we started out with have allowed both of us to fly."

Though she has never held an official role at the Southeast Asian ride-hailing behemoth, Tong is the proverbial woman behind the man. "We believe in this concept of one tiger, one mountain," she explains. "If he decides on something but I'm against it, not in the slightest will I object or be upset, because the company is his." She'll support him in whatever way it takes for him to succeed at work, but at home, she's the boss, she declares. "He gets to focus 100 percent on the kids and work, so that's how we both serve each other."

### Code: Love

Tong was an early witness to Grab's journey: She met Tan four years ago through a mutual friend while she was an executive at The Edge Media Group, the business and financial media company owned by her father Datuk Dr Tong Kooi Ong. Grab had launched as MyTeksi in 2012 in Malaysia. By pretending to be a foodie like Tong, even though he wasn't one at all, Tan pursued her, although his fledgling start-up left him little time for romance.

"Every time he wanted to meet for dinner it'd be 9 or 9.30pm, and the sceptic in me was like, 'Uh, I'm not seeing you past 9pm,'" Tong recounts with a grin. Tan had tried explaining to her the concept of his app, "but I just thought it was excuses after excuses".

Eventually, Tan won her over and Tong soon

JUMPER, FROM BOTTEGA VENETA





JUMPER AND SKIRT, BOTH FROM  
BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

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adopted Grab as her mission, contributing to it in her personal capacity. The couple found themselves flying across continents as he worked to expand the business (Tong covered her own airfare because the start-up could only afford to send its CEO). Together they compiled presentation decks and stayed up till the small hours of the morning rehearsing pitches, with Tong standing in for an interviewer or potential investor asking questions.

Budget airlines, long-haul flights in economy class, and rundown hotels with faulty elevators came with the territory. “It was tough coming from the life I had, but those were really some of the best times, roughing it out and going through it half laughing and half crying, thinking, ‘This is crazy, what are we doing?’” Tong reminisces. “We still talk about it to this day!”

As the manager of her beau’s schedule, in 2015 Tong was handed the unusual responsibility of blocking out a timeslot for her own marriage proposal, pencilled in as a 10-minute interview during the launch of Grab’s Cecil Court research and development centre. And the couple celebrated their nuptials with the Grab community: A promo code, GrabLove, entitled passengers to \$15 off per ride on June 27 and 28 that year.

These days, the family of four can often

be found by the beach (the grown-ups jog, pushing a double stroller), on the tennis court before Sunday morning church (Tan and Tong take turns lobbying while the kids eat their breakfast courtside), or at one of the company’s offices (the children head there for dinner with both parents, and Tan dives back into work afterwards). Date nights are more of meetings, but that’s a scene Tong had grown accustomed to as a child.

A good part of her childhood was spent accompanying her father to his business meetings. “Time with him was always with other people, so I got used to that. When you’re a kid with your dad, it’s OK if you fall asleep halfway through on the chairs in a Chinese restaurant,” she recalls with a laugh. Now she dines with Tan and his business associates, partners, investors and Grab employees, and “I have to stay awake.”

### **Leading By Example**

As an 8-year-old, Tong would climb into her father’s office chair and proclaim to her mother, “I’m going to be sitting here one day.” That same drive saw her, after moving with her family from Kuala Lumpur to Vancouver at 10 and enrolling in boarding school at 12, take up roles as sports captain and then head girl, and sign up for a host of activities from horseback riding to heli-skiing to flying trapeze.

She graduated from the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business at 20, and later moved to The Edge in Malaysia. For about two years, she learned the business by her father's side and supported him in the various projects he was working on, including the 2013 launch of the pull-out edGY, aimed at Gen Y professionals.

The low point in what Tong describes as a wholesome upbringing was the passing of her mother, Carol, in 2008. "She was the rock in our family," Tong says. "You ask me where I learned graciousness and supportiveness, and just being able to put my husband and kids first — it is 100 percent from my mum."

What also took a heavy toll on the family was the 2015 fallout following The Edge's reportage of the 1MDB scandal: Arrests of the newspaper's executives on charges of sedition; a 2-month publishing suspension; and allegations that her father, Datuk Tong, was betting against the ringgit. "I felt angry, aggrieved and wronged," she recalls. "But of course, in every bad storm, you see others' true characters."

In particular, her father's fortitude throughout the ordeal left a deep impression on her: "I learned three lessons from my dad: Always do what is right, even if it doesn't pay off; leave a legacy of values to your children, because that multiplies through the generations; and live life with purpose and integrity, because integrity

cannot be taken away from you or bought."

Raising her children with those ideals in mind is her focus. "What we say to our kids doesn't really matter. It's what we show and do."

For her children, that legacy will include stories of the positive impact Grab has brought about, from the single-mother driver who could finally afford to send her children to school, to drivers who have gone on to procure a fleet of motorcycles to rent out.

"We take Grab all the time, and when we meet drivers and hear some of these stories, Anthony and I just cry in the car," Tong says. "It makes everything worth it."

She may have once aspired to be an activewear designer, but Tong is perfectly content with her choice to devote herself to her family. "I wanted it all, just like many women do. Of course, I've had those dreams, but I think I add the most value where I am right now."

"I get front row seats to the fastest-growing Internet business in Southeast Asia, but I also get to be a wife and a mother, and I get to learn," she continues. "And what I've learned is that it was never about being a CEO or having a high-powered job."

"Whenever I look back on the decision, I am reminded it was a very conscious decision. And I'm happy I made it because, despite the plans I had for myself, I think God actually had bigger ones for me." ■

T-SHIRT, FROM **CK CALVIN KLEIN**;  
BANGLES, FROM **HERMÈS**

