Striking the Right Balance

As is the case with many women, Jessica Tien’s life is a balancing act. She’s a driven business woman but also an involved mother who takes the time to pursue her personal interests. Throughout the years, she’s become more adept at prioritizing the things that make her happy—which include rekindling a relationship with Chicago Booth.

“In our life, I think we benefit from our ‘tribe,’ those mutually inspiring people who are part of our rich circle of communities,” Tien, ’91, said. “I hadn’t had much to do with Booth for many years because I had left Chicago and thought there was nothing connecting me to the school. But I bumped into Booth alums in China and learned that your school runs in your veins and that you can find your tribe—even long distance.”

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Tien recently made her first gift to the Annual Fund, but only after reconnecting with the school by meeting alumni, attending Harper Lectures, visiting campus, and participating in Innovation Labs and Booth Women Connect.

“I’m still learning about philanthropy, how does the Annual Fund work, how do I pay back what I’ve gotten from Booth,” she said. “I admire what the school is trying to do educationally and I have fun every time I get close to a Booth person or activity—it enriches me. I’m still at the stage of exploring, but I am starting to learn how we can collectively make a difference.”

Realizing a Childhood Dream

As a little girl growing up in Taiwan, Tien knew she’d come to the United States someday. Like many of her Chinese contemporaries, she pursued her post-graduate education in the United States. After receiving her degree in finance from the highly respected National Taiwan University, Tien started researching schools for her MBA, and in 1989, landed at Chicago Booth.

“I thought I wanted to do equity analysis, so Chicago, Wharton, and one or two other schools became obvious choices to me at that point in time,” she said. “Chicago was definitely leading the pack in those industries and was my dream school.”

She was not disappointed.

“My education was inspiring and practical from the standpoint of preparing me to formally enter the work force,” she said. “I met interesting classmates who broadened my horizons with their varied experiences, and there was a definite pursuit of excellence going on. The depth of the
school's offerings was impressive. At the time I was here, there were thought leaders like Eugene Fama, Gary Becker, and Bob Lucas—Nobel-level professors from whom I took classes, so that was amazing."

**From the US to China and Back Again**

Tien began her career as a transfer pricing economist at Deloitte. The job led her to move to San Francisco, where she met her husband, Jeff Gao. After working in the United States for 12 years and establishing a family with two daughters, the couple decided to pursue their goal of gaining global experience by moving to China.

"I had never worked in Asia. We wanted to participate in China's tremendous growth and have our girls get to know China and their heritage," she said.

The couple took on their respective job searches and eventually found the right opportunities. Tien joined Ernst and Young as a partner to build their new transfer pricing practice, and Gao led aspects of Cisco's Asia Pacific business development team.

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"It was a very interesting assignment," she said. "But we always knew we would return. We wanted the girls to receive a proper American education and establish their roots in the United States. After seven years, our overseas adventure came to an end, and I sought the next challenge for my career."

Tien returned to lead Ernst and Young's San Francisco tax team. After a few years in that role, she began pursuing her next goal, to focus on her advisory practice. She recently joined DLA Piper law firm's Palo Alto office as a principal economist to advise clients in tax planning in response to the new tax legislation.

Throughout Tien's career in the United States and China, she has been conscientious about work-life balance and the choices to be made.

"I believe that life comes first and work has to fit in. I have walked away from assignments that were not making sense for my family. However, everyone is making choices to balance, so that is just part of life. My advice is to build skill sets that will continue to be valued. Drive your career with a full understanding of your value proposition. Pace yourself when pursuing desired progress. Employ realistic alternatives, and things will work out."

**Pursuing Passions**

Another driver for Tien and her husband to move the family back to the United States was their love of music. Gao returned to the San Francisco Conservatory of Music to receive his master's degree in music composition, while Tien sings in a professional choir.

"I've always loved singing, but I gave it up for 30 years," she said. "From college until a few years ago, it was not really practical for me to give it much focus. But when I saw how my daughters were blossoming as they pursue various forms of art, I recognized that I didn't want to be a Tiger mom, driving them to pursue my unrealized dream. I have a passion, and the time to renew my interest is now."

It is also important for Tien to mentor women and Asian professionals.

"I've benefitted from many mentors throughout my life. I believe in paying it forward, and I get more energized if I stay engaged," she said. "The Bay Area has a vibrant Asian community with lots of talents in the finance professions. But I observe systematic biases that might be holding some people back. My help and effort in opening doors, connecting people, and helping them think through some issues, could be meaningful."

Through music, mentoring, and becoming involved again with Booth, Tien feels she's improved her life.

"I'm utilizing my limited free time. You can't abandon your personal happiness," she said. "Even as I become busier, I'm reminded that life is rich."