

Growing through Grit and Grace

How Roshni Mahtani Cheung scaled up theAsianparent and The Parentinc with resilience and a ‘community-first’ approach.

With a presence in six markets, theAsianparent grew from being a parenting blog run by a then-not-yet-parent Roshni Mahtani Cheung into The Parentinc, an omnichannel baby and mother products company. With some 250 employees and US\$49 million raised in funding, The Parentinc has expanded through recent acquisitions, as well as organic growth. Now a mother to an eight-year-old, Mahtani Cheung reflects on how hard times during her youth helped forge resilience, and the importance of giving oneself grace.

Your family went through a sharp downturn in fortune during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. How has that experience shaped you both as a person and entrepreneur?

I grew up in an upper-middle class family in Singapore and, for a long time, I didn't think about money. That all changed during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis when I was about 15. My family practically lost everything overnight, which forced me to grow up quickly. I started working while still in school, from tutoring to giving out flyers and pamphlets at Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations. It was a huge shift going from having everything to just learning how to survive and adapt.

But that period in my life has taught me some of the most important lessons in life, the biggest of which is resilience: You can lose everything, but you can always rebuild. You can adapt, push forward, and find new ways.

Secondly, it also instilled in me the overriding need for resourcefulness. When you don't have much, you become

creative about how things get done, and that mindset shaped how I approached the building of theAsianparent.

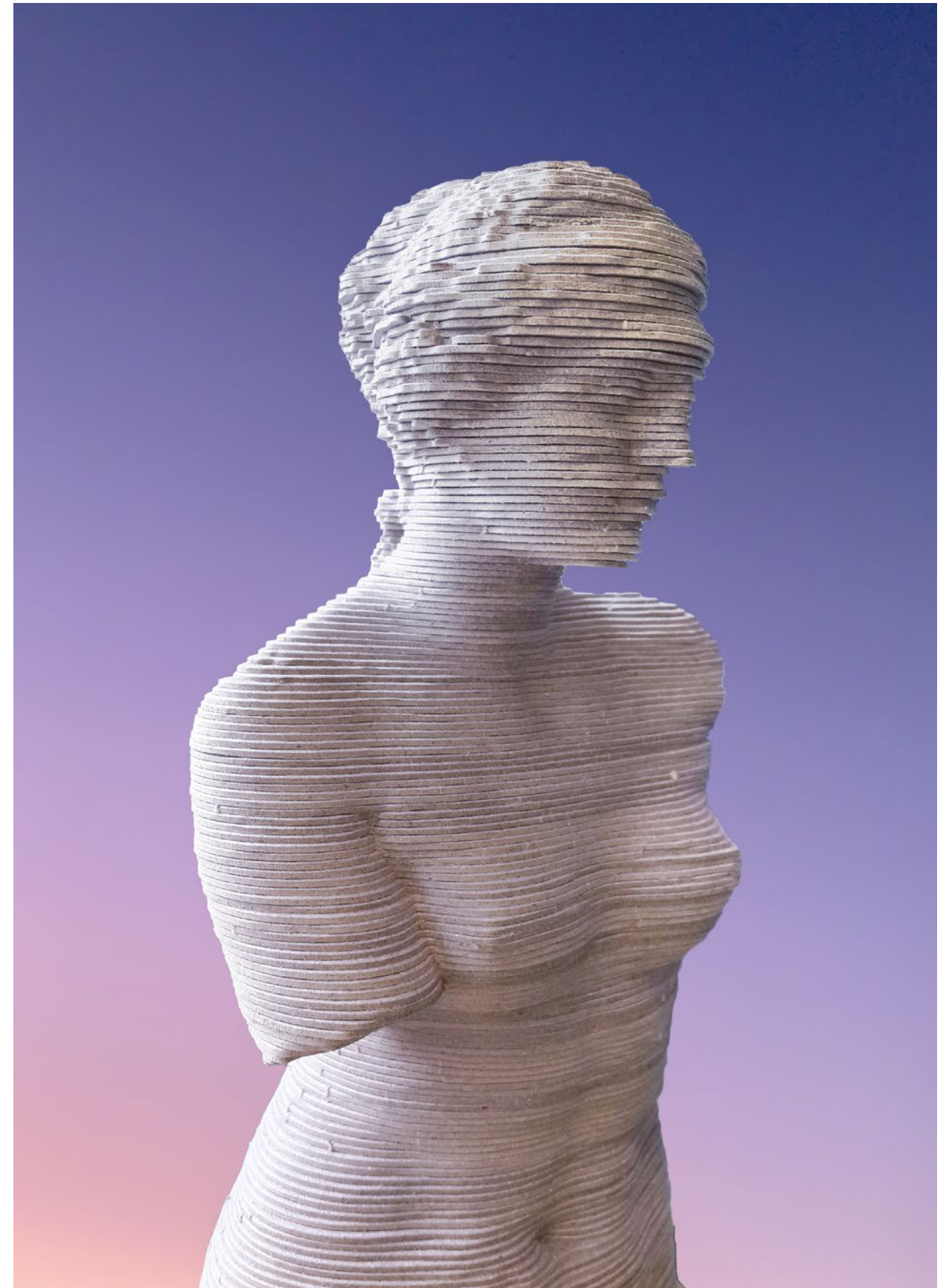
The experience made me smart about money and taught me the importance of managing it wisely, planning for uncertainty, and investing thoughtfully. I became much more conscious of how to stretch a dollar. It meant rolling up my sleeves and doing everything, including designing the logo and uploading the code for theAsianparent website.

Losing everything in my early days taught me not to take anything for granted. More importantly, it taught me that success isn't about where you start but how you respond. That's a perspective I have carried into both my life and leadership.

How did you come to establish theAsianparent, and then The Parentinc?

The idea behind theAsianparent emerged when I noticed a significant gap in parenting resources that reflected the unique needs and culture of Asian families. Most available resources were very Western-centric, and I saw an opportunity to create something more relevant for parents in our region.

I bought a domain name for US\$10 and coded my own personal blog where I shared articles and wrote parenting tips, hoping to connect with other mums. The irony? I was only 25 years old and not even a mum yet. As theAsianparent grew, it became very clear to me, and by then I had gotten married and become a mum, that content was just one small piece of the puzzle. Parents needed much more than just advice. They needed safe, affordable, and high-quality products for



themselves and their children. That insight steered us to evolve from being solely a media company to the consumer goods company we are today. We started developing our own products.

That led me to the final step of the equation. I now have a community online of 20 million mums a month from across Southeast Asia who use our platform and order our products. The next step for us is to build up our offline community, which is where our newly-acquired premium mother and baby products retailer, motherswork, comes in.’ We have successfully gone beyond digital, and created a physical space that brings people and communities together, to host workshops with the mums, and simply meet them and get feedback on our products.

Looking back, was there any non-obvious decision that turned out to have an outsized impact on your entrepreneurship journey?

One of the most non-obvious decisions that had a huge impact was my choice to focus deeply on Southeast Asia. When we first started out, we were thinking, “Let’s go after the world.” We launched in India, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan, and built platforms for Nigeria and Kenya. We even considered entering Australia and Canada. At that time, it just felt like a natural move – grow fast, enter as many markets as possible, and establish a good global footprint.

Over time, especially during the pandemic, we realised this wide expansion just wasn’t sustainable. More importantly, you can’t actually serve a market of that scale with the depth and relevance needed to be highly successful. So I made the obvious and conscious decision to pull back

and double down on Southeast Asia. That turned out to be one of the most transformative decisions that we’ve made as a company.

When we look at our FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) products under Mama’s Choice, which is our brand of skincare products for babies and pregnant women, we experienced success in Southeast Asia. We initially tried to sell through Amazon, believing that our products should resonate with mums globally, but they didn’t perform as well as we expected. Our strongest product fit was really right here in Southeast Asia where we understood the mums’ preferences, needs, and price sensitivity. We were a right fit for this region, and that was reinforced by our experience.

My belief is that having a local focus drives much stronger and more meaningful growth. People often say that the Singapore market is just too small. But choosing which markets to expand into is really crucial. Singapore’s culture is closer to Southeast Asia’s, and cultural relevance always comes first. We cannot run away from that.

How do you choose which companies to acquire? Or, in the words of Sharon Wong at motherswork, with whom should you “dance”?

I love what Sharon said because it really captures the spirit of how we work together. Choosing whom to dance with comes down to shared values and mutual respect; it’s not just about numbers and market opportunity.

When my team and I first started talking to Sharon about motherswork, what really stood out to me was not only her passion for quality, but

also her long-term vision. She wasn’t just building a retail business. She never referred to motherswork as just a retailer, but more as an offline community. She has created a legacy that’s deeply personal and meaningful, and that has really resonated with me because that’s exactly how I felt when I was building The Parentinc, theAsianparent, and Mama’s Choice. So I look for partners who are founder-led, and who care about the communities that they serve, and would still be in this domain even if they aren’t being paid. It’s really important that you can truly collaborate with your partners.

On the flip side, I’ve said no to many partnerships and acquisition opportunities where my values just didn’t align with those of the other founders or businesses. It felt purely transactional. If you can’t build something meaningful together, it’s simply not the right fit.

You have identified a market gap and developed a successful business model to address the needs of Asian parents. Given the changing macro environment, what are the main concerns you have right now?

The first one is declining birth rates. Each year, the number of people who need our services decreases. However, parents now generally have more disposable income to spend. For example, China’s birth rate has nearly halved over the last 10 to 15 years, but revenue at motherswork stores in China hasn’t declined. In fact, people are willing to spend more when you offer products that are more relevant to them. You might not be able to sell two diaper rash creams, but you can sell a diaper

rash cream along with a hair vitamin lotion for the baby’s hair. Ten years ago, parents wouldn’t have bought that hair vitamin lotion because it was considered a nice-to-have. But today, with more spending power, parents are willing to buy such nice-to-haves for their children. As a result, while the share of wallet doesn’t decrease, the extent of services you need to provide for that same wallet has increased.

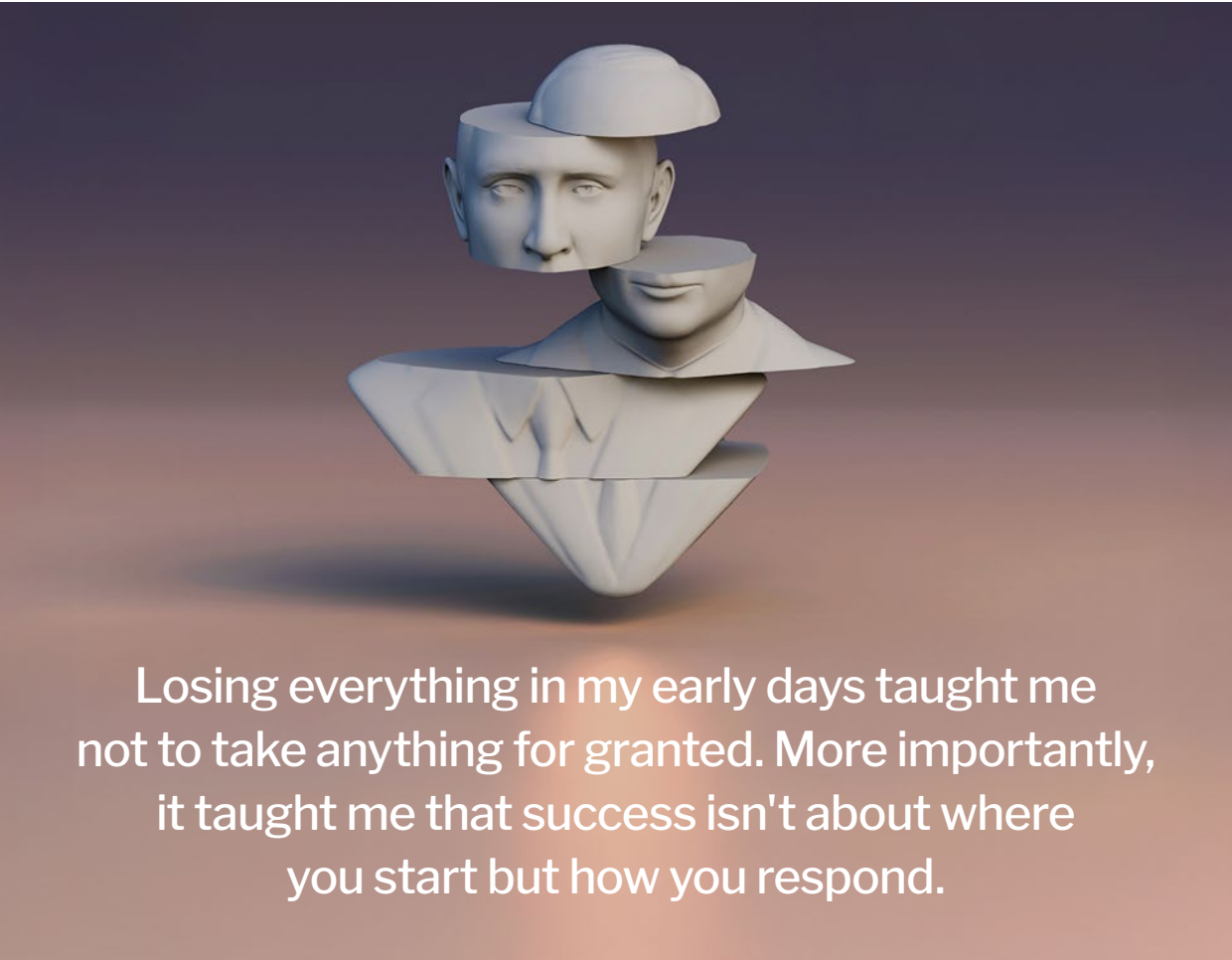
The second concern is online platforms. As an omnichannel business, we can capture sales whether people choose to buy online or in physical stores. But when you sell online, you are heavily reliant on third-party platforms. Content publishers on social media are subject to the whims of those controlling these platforms. It’s the same for e-commerce. It’s not your own storefront. You cannot lock in your rental fee for the next 10 years or go shorter for three years, or decide to buy that property. Your business model can collapse quickly if the platform decides to implement significant changes. This is something that we are very conscious of as a company, which

is why we maintain an omnichannel approach and encourage customers to buy directly from us.

What role does data play in scaling theAsianparent and the rest of the business?

Data has been absolutely critical to scaling theAsianparent and the entire business. In the early days, we didn’t have fancy tools, but we closely monitored what mums were reading, what they were asking, and what kind of content resonated with them. This instinctive ‘community-first’ approach laid the groundwork for everything that followed.

But as we grew, we knew we had to formalise our approach with data. Today, data drives nearly every decision that we make, from the content we produce to how we improve the application to the products we develop. We even created an in-house market research team to conduct surveys and conduct focus group discussions in all our markets in Southeast Asia. We get instant insights from thousands of



mums who use the poll feature on theAsianparent app to weigh in on any topic in real time and help us truly connect with their evolving needs.

Their insights helped us when we developed and launched our nipple cream. Our surveys found that most nipple creams in the market were not halal-certified. Islam is the dominant religion in Southeast Asia in terms of numbers, as well as the fastest growing religion, particularly due to the high birth rate within the Muslim community. Since nipple cream is applied during breastfeeding and can be ingested by the baby, it was surprising that no halal-certified option was available in the market. Many Muslim women were just using normal creams, which did not serve the same purpose as a nipple cream. Thanks to this insight from our mums’ community, we knew we had to make ours halal-certified.

Data has also allowed us to scale our products rapidly. We now have about 20 to 25 products that are number one on Shopee and TikTok, outperforming some of our competitors that have been selling the same product for the last 30 years. This is a tangible example of how much data has played a part in scaling everything that we do. We use it to optimise everything from ad performance to conversion rates and app engagement. Data isn’t just part of the business – it is the backbone of it.

Does artificial intelligence (AI) feature in decision-making at The Parentinc? To what extent does it feature in your operations and situation analysis? And how do you measure the return on investment (ROI) for AI?

We have adopted AI as a core principle in the company: everyone is allowed to subscribe to an AI service of their choice at the company’s expense. We use a variety of AI services in the company, such as Beautiful.ai for slides, Claude for writing, and ChatGPT for deep research. We also use Manus to create internal games and quizzes. Every month, we organise Q&As and engagement sessions for the whole team. Some months, they’re themed around *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* while other weeks, we host contests and competitions on product knowledge or changing trends. We send out the link, and everyone answers their questions and tracks the winners via leaderboards.

We don’t have any official ROI key performance indicators to track AI spending, but I notice an important thing: my team doesn’t have to work overtime. They get to go home, spend time with family, and put their kids to sleep. They have more

hours for themselves because the same tasks that once took longer can now be completed more easily with the help of an AI companion. That’s a very tangible outcome.

How has your leadership style developed from theAsianparent to The Parentinc?

In the beginning, I was a 20-something-year-old founder of a Singapore-only company, involved in everything from writing articles, managing partnerships, to offering customer support. It was all about doing the work and being in the trenches with the team.

I realised that in order for my company to grow, I needed to scale and focus on decisions that were the most important for me to still have a grip on things. So moving from a founder to a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) mindset meant that I had to learn to trust my team and empower them. I had to evolve from being the one who made all the decisions to someone who set the vision, guided the culture, and enabled others to lead. That was my biggest transformation.

What has stayed the same is that I still believe in transparency and accessibility. I came to realise that leading with openness, and sharing not just my wins but also the challenges I face, helps my team see that, ‘Hey, the CEO’s human too.’ It allows me to explain the ‘why’ behind some of the decisions that we make and allows people to be genuinely heard. That hasn’t changed and will not change, no matter how big we grow.

I’ve always cared deeply about purpose. It still drives me today, and it’s something that I try to instil throughout the organisation. For instance, I realised that one of our teams in a particular country lacked genuine understanding of parenting because there were no parents on that team! I told them they had to do two things. First, hire parents. Second, anyone who didn’t have children should babysit someone else’s kid. If you have never experienced what it’s like to hold a crying toddler throwing a tantrum, you cannot empathise with a parent. Fostering empathy like this has become a cornerstone of our team culture, helping us better understand and serve the needs of our community.

If you could ‘coach’ your younger founder self on Day One, what advice would you give yourself?

My first piece of advice would be, “You have to give yourself grace.” When I started, I thought I could control every outcome if I just worked hard enough. But I’ve come to realise that life, especially as a woman and a mother, doesn’t always

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go according to plan. I’ve experienced the heartbreak of miscarriages and break-ups. Those moments remind you that some things are simply out of your hands. So if I could coach my younger self, I would say to her, “You’re stronger than you think, and you don’t have to carry everything alone. It’s okay to feel, it’s okay to heal, and it’s okay to ask for support. There’s no shame in being vulnerable, and it’s okay to forgive yourself.”

The second piece of advice would be, “You don’t have to choose between being a great founder or CEO and being a great mum; you can be both.” I’ve learned that it’s about finding balance, and not having to take everything on all at once and all at full throttle. When I was pregnant, I barely gave myself any time to slow down. I signed a term sheet in the labour room. After giving birth, I was back at work after three days. I’m possibly the first person ever who was fired by the postnatal care lady, someone who helps mothers heal after childbirth, because I wouldn’t rest. I even breastfed during board meetings.

These stories make great anecdotes that communicate, “Look at me! I’m a superwoman!” – but it shouldn’t be

that way. Women shouldn’t feel like they have to do that. I feel deeply saddened and horrified that I did not take that much-needed downtime to look after myself and Shan, my daughter, because I felt this pressure to be the best founder/CEO/superwoman. If I could go back, I would tell myself, “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone. It’s okay to slow down while pregnant or breastfeeding because it’s not a short sprint; it’s a long journey. Taking a step back to focus on what matters most doesn’t mean you’ve abandoned your ambitions. It gives you the opportunity to return with renewed focus and strength.” If I had received this advice from someone back then, I would have felt less guilt and more comfort, and found greater confidence in balancing my roles as both a CEO and a mum.

As co-founder of the Female Founders Network, you are an active mentor to younger women. Besides sharing your experiences for the benefit of new founders, what lessons have you learnt from being a mentor?

There are about 2,000 young women who are in early-stage start-ups at the Female Founders Network. We set up meetings for them with more established founders.

I also have this other group of around 50 women who are at leadership levels. They are C-suite figures in publicly listed companies, regional general managers, and more. They helped me to realise that there’s a subset of female founders and professionals who require special support, guidance, and knowledge. That’s why these days I spend more time with slightly older leaders because their challenges are real, urgent, and often overlooked. They face unique pressures that younger women don’t. For example, they have to deal with the responsibility of caring for ageing parents while confronting societal expectations and professional biases against women in their 50s. Age is often equated with being outdated, and there’s a pervasive belief that as women get older, they’re less capable or relevant. They might be going through menopause, which affects 100 percent of women, but this issue is rarely talked about. For a female leader in her 50s, how does she transition through these physical and emotional changes? She needs the right support and resources to navigate this complex journey. ^{AM}

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