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Elisa Chan, president of the Alamo Asian American Chamber of Commerce, also heads the panel working to implement San Antonio's China plan.

Leading the charge into CHINA

Successful Asian American
businesswoman gives city an
edge courting business

BY MEENA THIRUVENGADAM
EXPRESS-NEWS BUSINESS WRITER

Her Chinese name, Wan-Yu, means spotless jade. And like the gemstone, Elisa Chan is an embodiment of grace, elegance and balance.

A wife, mother and immigrant, Chan is at the helm of a successful San Antonio engineering firm and resurrected the Alamo Asian American Chamber of Commerce. She also is leading the city's charge toward China. At a time when most everyone is fighting to do business with the economic giant in the East, Chan is considered one of a few secret weapons capable of giving San Antonio an edge.

With her chameleon-like ability to adapt to change, the 40-year-old seems made for the task.

"A person like Elisa can set people at ease," said David Marquez, Bexar County's director of economic development. "She's so charming, motivated and driven."

As part of her duties with the Free Trade Alliance, Chan heads the committee working to implement San Antonio's China plan, an effort by the city, Bexar County, the Port of San Antonio (formerly Kelly USA) and the Free Trade Alliance to promote trade and investment opportunities.

For someone who grew up wanting to be a diplomat, the position is a perfect fit.

"When we talk about international trade in San Antonio, we are usually talking about Mexico and Latin America," Chan said. "But we can expand that."

The city wants to position itself as a

See CHAN/3D

Chan gives city an edge in China

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North American distribution point for Chinese manufactured goods. As part of the plan, products would be shipped from China to western Mexican ports and then trucked or transported by rail to San Antonio.

"Her connections and interests as well as her natural talents make her a valuable private player in trying to get this accomplished," Mayor Phil Hardberger said.

Chan, who makes two to four trips to China each year, says because China's economy is growing so quickly, she hopes to capitalize on opportunities for local biomedical companies, professional service providers and environmental cleanup outfits.

"Because I know the culture and so forth, I can help bridge the cultural gap," Chan said. "A lot of times with Chinese people, once they see there's a Chinese person in the game plan, they feel close. If you can provide people a comfortable environment like that, that's how business deals get done."

Born in Taiwan, raised in Brazil and educated in China and the United States, Chan has long been an ambitious globe-trotter. The daughter of a doctor and a nurse, she settled here in 1988 to pursue a master's degree in computer science at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

After graduation, Chan worked in software engineering while husband Clifford Hew, a Malaysian-born structural engineer she met in San Antonio, started a small firm of his own. Back then, a friend suggested the best way to help the business grow was for Hew to hire an American partner, someone with more Western social values, marketing skills and, according to the friend, the ability to tell jokes.

Resisting, Hew opted to bring his wife — a woman of strong beliefs and a razor-sharp sense of logic — into the business. She already was spending her evenings, weekends and vacations helping out. Hew now oversees much of the technical work, but Chan handles strategic planning, finances and network administration.

Since Chan joined Unintech Consulting Engineers Inc. in 1998, it has grown from about a half-dozen to more than 50 employees. It also is opening an office in Beijing to provide support services for its San Antonio headquarters, as well as an Austin location.



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'Because I know the culture and so forth, I can help bridge the cultural gap' with potential business partners in China, Elisa Chan says.

PROFILE

■ **Name:** Wan-Yu Elisa Chan

■ **Who is she?** One of the city's most prominent Asian American entrepreneurs and a key component of its plan to develop business ties with China.

■ **Education:** Bachelor's degree in computer software engineering from Beijing Industrial University (now Beijing University of Technology), master's in computer science from the University of Texas at San Antonio.

■ **Work:** President of Unintech

Consulting Engineers; formerly a programmer/analyst for Dee Howard and a software designer for the Human Function Brain Mapping program, a University of Texas Health Science Center project to search neurological research based on a 3-D image of the brain.

■ **Community leadership:** President of the Alamo Asian American Chamber of Commerce, president-elect of the San Antonio chapter of the Council of Engineering Companies.

"I think we've proved Clifford's friend wrong," Chan said. "We've proved we can tell the jokes and all."

Now a self-described San Antonian, Chan is among the city's most prominent Asian Americans.

She brought the once-defunct Alamo Asian American Chamber of Commerce back to life and has since recruited about 40 members. She serves on the boards of the Free Trade Alliance San Antonio, the Southwest School of Art & Craft, the Cancer Therapy and Research Center and the Hidalgo Foundation. She also is president-elect of the San Antonio chapter of the Council of Engineering Companies and a member of the city's planning commission.

She aspires to break into local politics someday.

"The Asian community

needs to get more involved," she said. "We can contribute more to making this a better place."

Although Chan works hard, she makes it a point not to take her work home. "You can work hard, have a family and balance your life," she insists.

Chan keeps a laptop computer at her North Central San Antonio house, but rarely opens it. Her free time is usually spent going to Spurs games, reading or simply hanging out with 5-year-old daughter Nikola. Otherwise, it's spent cruising the highways under the hot Texas sun in her V-8-equipped Lexus convertible.

"I just turned 40, and now is the best time of my life," Chan said. "I'm happy and very lucky."

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