

# Go west, young lady

Lina Hu immigrated to the U.S. with little money and speaking no English. Today, the company she started 15 years ago has \$30 million in annual sales



Clipper  
Corporation  
founder Lina  
Hu. Photo by  
Tom Sanders  
(tomsander-  
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## by Carley Dryden

Lina Hu likes to tell a story.

It's told in a heavy accent, about a Chinese girl chasing the American dream.

She had no money. She knew no English. She had few friends. She moved to the land of opportunity, with hope and a dream for success.

She couldn't land a job as a dishwasher and now her company has sales of \$30 million a year. The Manhattan Beach Strand resident opened Clipper Corporation in 1994. The company supplies uniforms, kitchenware and serveware to major corporations, including Denny's, Walmart, Burger King, Home Depot, UPS, TGI Friday's and California Pizza Kitchen.

"If there's a need and there's volume, she can get it made," said Barry Barnett, Hu's first customer.

## A 50 percent chance

Hu grew up the fourth of six children to an engineer father and schoolteacher mother in a rural area in northwestern China. In those days, education was frowned upon, so her father had been forced to move from Beijing.

The family was dirt poor. Their mother would often shut off the lights to save electricity. Hu would save her candy money for flashlight batteries so she could study at

night. She was a top student through middle and high school. After years of spending her afternoons after school sitting at the train station watching trains speed off into the sunset, she finally got to board one. When she was 16, she took a 72 hour train ride to Shanghai University. After receiving her master's degree in business in 1986, Lu spent the next six years moving up from secretary to office manager in a private company in southern China. But she yearned to learn English and travel the world.

In 1992, she told her friend that she wanted to move to America.

The friend asked: "Do you speak English?"

"No," Hu replied.

"Well do you know how to do Chinese acupuncture?"

"No."

"Do you know how to be a Chinese chef?"

"No."

"What makes you think you can survive?" her friend finally asked.

"My philosophy was if you try, you may have a 50 percent chance to fail, 50 percent to succeed. If you don't even try, you 100 percent fail," Hu said.

Soon, Hu was living on the floor of a friend's apartment in New Hampshire. She was 28, jobless and had spent nearly all of her life savings — \$2,000 American dollars — on

the trip. Hu visited Chinese restaurants, figuring she could at least get a job as a waitress. They didn't return her calls.

"I tried to become a dishwasher. I couldn't even get that job because I had not washed dishes before," Hu said.

## The idea

Spending so much time walking around restaurants while applying for jobs gave Hu her first entrepreneurial idea. If the restaurants weren't going to hire her, would they at least buy supplies from her? For the next two years, she called over 300 companies promising high quality products from China at a low price. In 1996, Burger King became the first company to grant her an appointment.

Hu, by then living in Pasadena, met Barry Barnett through a mutual friend at a dinner. He was the vice president of purchasing for Burger King. At the dinner, Hu mentioned her goal and explained that she couldn't get anyone to call her back. A week later, Barnett got a call from the mutual friend, urging him to call Hu back because she had been "driving him crazy" finding out if Barnett was interested.

Barnett gave Hu the specifications for the Burger King baseball hats and visors they needed. She borrowed money from a friend to fly from LA to China and visit the factories,

convincing them to give her free samples of the products. She returned to Barnett with "dynamite" samples, he said, at low price. A \$250,000-a-year contract made Burger King Clipper's first customer.

Barnett said Hu's follow-through landed her the job.

"It was absolutely animalistic tenacity on her part. She drove me down crazy," he said, half joking. "The only way I could get her to stop calling me was to do business with her."

## Clipper Corporation

After hearing positive feedback from Burger King — who soon had Hu supplying shirts, ties, pants, plastic trays, utensils and frying baskets — other restaurant companies contacted Hu. Home Depot needed orange aprons, the 1,300 Denny's restaurant wanted sauté pans for scrambling eggs. California Pizza Kitchens needed knifeware.

Now Hu has over 50 employees at her Carson headquarters. Three years ago Hu acquired the facilities of a competitor in Georgia who went bankrupt.

She still works with the Chinese factories, who took a chance on her more than 10 years ago, when she couldn't afford to pay them for the samples.

"A lot of people will not take risks. They are afraid," Hu said. "You have to believe in yourself first before someone else will believe in you."

She named her company Clipper after the first ship to carry merchandise from Asia to the United States.

"It represents my style. No matter what obstacles, we always move forward, reach our destination and deliver what we promised," she said.

In 2005 and again in 2006, Hu won Burger King's "Supplier of the Year" award. She is the first vendor in 30 years to win the award two years in a row.

With clients in Australia and Latin America, as well as the U.S. Hu believes she's just starting.

"We've got a long way to go. We can go to \$300 million," she said. **B**



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