

Meet Forever 21's stylish sisters

Linda and Esther Chang, the daughters of the fast-fashion chain's founders, may be the brand's secret weapons.



SIBLING SYNERGY: Linda Chang, left, heads marketing and Esther Chang oversees the visuals department. (Ricardo DeAratanha / Los Angeles Times)

By BOOTH MOORE
Los Angeles Times Fashion Critic
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As Forever 21 continues to rocket into the 21st century, competitors are undoubtedly trying to decode the fast-fashion chain's successful formula.

Low prices? Trendy merchandise that cycles in and out of stores on a daily basis? Super-size stores modeled after the 86,000-square-foot location that recently opened in Cerritos?

Forever 21 has all that, but the real secret weapon may be a couple of women who look as if they're barely out of high school. Linda Chang, 28, and her sister Esther, 23, the Ivy League-educated daughters of Forever 21's Korean American founders Don and Jin Sook Chang, seem to have the stylish eye and marketing savvy to take the \$2-billion brand into the future and make it a competitor on a global level with European fast-fashion giants H&M, Mango and Zara.

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The Chang sisters joined the L.A.-based company a little over a year ago — Linda to run the marketing department, and Esther to spearhead visuals, including graphics, store displays and window design. Linda is the quintessential young professional in Alexander Wang boyfriend jackets and Forever 21 jeans, cooking lasagna on weekends for friends in her Hollywood apartment. Esther, the Gen Y younger sister in Forever 21 denim shorts, a TopShop flannel shirt and American Apparel knee-highs, still lives at home with mom, who is Forever 21's chief merchandising officer, and dad, who is chief executive.

If this is the first time you're reading about the sisters, it's because the company has shied away from courting the media. A reporter visiting Forever 21's downtown L.A. headquarters is admitted only to the lobby and a conference room. The building doesn't even have a sign outside.

But now the Chang sisters, best friends who are "pretty much inseparable" when they aren't traveling, are talking — and they are such perfect faces for the brand, you wonder why they haven't been out front all along.

Forever's beginnings

Don and Jin Sook Chang, who were born in South Korea and immigrated to Los Angeles in 1981, embraced the fashion business while Don was working at a gas station and noticed the best cars were driven by clothing merchants. The couple opened the first Forever 21 store in Highland Park in 1984; initially, the merchandise was similar to the clothing you'd find in the stalls in downtown's Santee Alley: cheaply made

knockoffs.

There were some lean years in Koreatown while the Changs built the business, but eventually, Linda said, the family had enough money to afford private school — Buckley and Harvard Westlake — for

the girls and a Beverly Hills estate.

By 2000 the company had 100 stores. Nonetheless, Linda and Esther weren't swimming in free clothes. "I never felt like it was a candy store," Linda said. "I was always concerned about how we could make it better."

Last year, the retailer took over several leases from bankrupt department store Mervyn's, signaling a move from specialty store to big-box retail format. One of those was in Cerritos, where the new Forever 21 store is the prototype for all openings going forward.

There, all eight of Forever 21's collections are merchandised in separate departments, each with its own visuals. Every current spring trend is covered — tribal (\$11.50 belted zigzag tunics), military (\$22.80 cropped khaki cargo jackets), florals (\$29 baby-floral print lace-up booties) and creative knits (\$27.80 crochet dresses).

And that has earned the chain some props.

Forever 21 has been name-checked recently by "American Idol" contestants and Hollywood stylists, and last week announced its first designer collaboration — a collection of graphic T-shirts with designer Brian Lichtenberg. (A favorite of Lady Gaga, Lichtenberg designed the caution-tape outfit for the singer's "Telephone" video.)

"Forever 21 offers great, trendy merchandise at low prices, and it turns very quickly," said Michael Stone, president and chief executive of brand licensing and consulting firm Beanstalk Group in New York. "The customer likes shopping there more than Wal-Mart, Target and Kohl's because of the experience. It's brightly lit, there's merchandise all over, there's a hip and cool aura."

"With the younger fashionistas, it is a must-see," said Ilse Metchek, executive director of the California Fashion Assn. "Like Bloomingdales at 59th Street, if you have nothing to do and some money is burning a hole in your pocket, you're going to Forever 21."

No doubt the recession has helped fuel the growth of Forever 21, which has 456 stores and counting. But so has social media outreach and more compelling store environments, both of which are due in no small part to Linda and Esther.

The next generation

As kids, when the Chang daughters weren't studying, they were helping out, wielding price tag guns at the company warehouse on Christmas Day and working the store cash registers during high school summers. But it wasn't apparent from the outset that they would join the family business after college.

Linda studied management as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, and worked as an investment banker at Merrill Lynch and a product planner at Pottery Barn. "I came in [to Forever 21] thinking I was going to do planning, because that was my background, but I discovered we were missing a whole marketing department," she said.

"A brand image and having our customers understand who we were, that was what was missing," she said. "We were just doing what we could to survive because we had expanded so quickly."

She hired a staff (which now numbers 20), launched a Facebook page (now at 747,000 followers), a Twitter feed (73,000 followers) and a blog, the Skinny, aimed at the Teen Vogue set. Forever 21 largely bypasses old media, reaching out to customers and fashion bloggers directly. Blog content is updated daily with DIY projects (rainbow hair streaks), video of Forever 21 shoppers (British pop star V.V. Brown) and trend features ("Pastel Pretty") highlighting Forever 21 merchandise. The company even sent a photographer to the South by Southwest music festival to document street style.

Linda is eager to shape the Forever 21 story as "a realization of the American dream founded by immigrants on really hard work" and to make headlines for things other than allegations of design theft. (Forever 21 has settled several lawsuits over alleged copyright infringement.)

"We are a retailer, and the majority of our merchandise is bought, not manufactured," she said. "When you see our stores, there's fresh new merchandise every day. We're getting more proactive, but mistakes happen, and I think it comes up more for us because of our millions of styles."

"It's the nature of fast fashion," adds Esther, speaking for a generation raised on free downloads.

If Linda is giving Forever 21 a voice, her sister is giving it a more colorful look. As head of the visuals department (the company eschews formal titles), Esther supervises 30 people, including display and graphics designers and merchandisers.

Esther majored in fashion and merchandising at Cornell University and had fashion-related internships at CosmoGirl magazine and Nordstrom. When she joined Forever 21, she assumed it would be as a member of the buying team. But she fell into visuals instead, intrigued by the challenge of adapting Forever 21 to the larger new retail footprints..

"Because we don't advertise that much, I want to distinguish our brands using interior finishes and visuals, giving the customer a sense of who we are," Esther said. Her inspirations include Japan's LaForet and Korea's Lotte stores.

For spring, Esther decked out the Cerritos store with flower murals and mannequins in picket-fenced AstroTurf "gardens" with overgrown terracotta planters. Forever 21 stores can feel sprawling and spartan, but here, the visual elements define each separate department and collection, albeit with varying degrees of success.

"We want to do more of what we did in Cerritos, only bigger and better," Esther said. Next up? Three store openings in Japan next month, and a 96,000-square-foot Times Square store opening in New York in June.

The sisters are all business and don't easily part with information about their personal lives. To hear them tell it, they work hard, stay out of trouble and save their money. They enjoy shopping (Urban Outfitters, H&M and vintage stores) and eating (Umami burgers). And on most Sundays they attend church with their parents, who are deeply religious.

Forever 21 famously has "John 3:16" printed on the bottom of every shopping bag, referring to a New Testament scripture, and Bibles are on display in the corporate offices. "It's a proclamation of my parents' faith, not them saying you all have to believe," Esther said.

Her sister agreed, adding, "I wouldn't say we're as devout as they are, but that's not to say we won't eventually get there."

For now, they have a seriousness of purpose that comes from knowing that someday the business will be theirs.

"I love it when people come out of our stores being so happy," Linda said. "You go into some places and buy one item, and come out thinking, 'Should I have gotten that?' But our customers don't have to feel that way. They can spend \$100 and get a ton of cute things. Regardless of what the press says, it's the customers who matter. If they are excited, then we are doing something right."

booth.moore@latimes.com

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