

# THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE

IT COMES AS NO SURPRISE TO ONLOOKERS AND THOSE WHO KNOW TAN SRI LEONG HOY KUM WELL THAT HE IS THE UNDISPUTED MASTER OF REINVENTION, HAVING TAKEN HIS LATE FATHER'S PLASTICS MANUFACTURING BUSINESS TO A LISTING ON THE THEN KLSE IN 1992 AND A MERE TWO YEARS LATER, DIVERSIFYING INTO PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT AND TURNING MAH SING GROUP INTO A FULLY INTEGRATED PLAYER IN THE INDUSTRY. HE HAS DONE IT AGAIN, THIS TIME BRANCHING OUT INTO THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY WITH THE RECENT UNVEILING OF HOTEL RAMADA MERIDIN JOHOR BAHRU. **BY DIANA KHOO**

**I**t is my first visit to Iskandar Malaysia, the main development corridor in Johor that forms part of the government's plan to shift the southernmost state into high-developmental impact drive via the creation of an economically and socially beneficial as well as sustainable economic zone. I am here specifically to visit a new business hotel in the Medini metropolis — a 2,230-acre mixed-use development zone that makes up a small part of Iskandar Malaysia, which itself spans a staggering 547,832 acres or about three times the size of Singapore.

The Ramada Meridin Johor Bahru is currently the largest hotel in Southeast Asia under Wyndham Group's Ramada brand. Having just opened in July, the 644-key property has already been steadily drawing in guests, enjoying a decent 50% occupancy at press time with a 70:30 leisure to business ratio, the reason for which is the presence of Legoland just down the road.

"We signed the deal in 2015," says Tan Sri Leong Hoy Kum, the founder and group managing director of Mah Sing Group Bhd. Having cemented the group's position as one of Malaysia's leading property developers since 1994, Leong decided it was time for a fresh challenge. This is, after all, noth-

ing new for the group whose story began as a plastics trading firm in 1965 before diversifying into property development.

Even the company's name, Cantonese for "horse" and "star", and accompanying logo have undergone several changes. "The original logo of a horse within a star stood for my late father's dream to expand the business across Malaysia and Singapore, hence 'Ma-Sing,'" Leong explains.

In 1982, just the initials were used in a new logo with the outline of a "W" clearly seen in the mountain-like outline of an "M". "The MS stands for 'money' and 'success' while the 'W' subtly stands for 'wealth' as I have always believed a successful man is a wealthy man," Leong adds.

While Mah Sing has achieved steady and undeniable success since its formation, thinning margins in plastics manufacturing in the 1990s necessitated the need for an alternative revenue stream via the property market. Today, it is Leong's desire to create a new recurring income stream for Mah Sing that led to this foray into hospitality. "The location of our land here is better suited to a business hotel," he says. "We are near the F&B outlets and marina of Puteri Harbour and Kota Iskandar, the administrative capital of the Johor government. There are also lots of factories nearby, universities, the

Gleneagles Medini Hospital and, of course, Legoland. We chose Ramada as it is part of Wyndham, a big hospitality group."

## ROOM TO GROW

Ramada Meridin is located next to The Meridin@Medini, Mah Sing's first integrated commercial centre that comprises apartments, retail outlets and executive suites. The hotel's exterior is modest and simple, although great care has been taken to ensure it stands out. Positioned as a business traveller's hotel, the rooms are spread out over two identical 32-storey towers, leaving it to the guests to decide which wing suits their personal preferences best. Families tend to gravitate towards the west wing with its colourful walls and bright decorative accents while businessmen would likely choose the east wing with its muted palette and contemporary design. Both wings, however, have been constructed with a thoughtful approach to the environment. The walkways are naturally ventilated, courtesy of swathes of louvred windows, while wood-look tiles are practical and easy to maintain. Split-unit air conditioning for all rooms keeps electricity costs sensible — only the podium area with its common spaces is centrally cooled.



Guests will also appreciate the original black-and-white artworks that adorn each of the 644 rooms, all done by 20-year-old Hanzhen Yap, a Johorean on the autistic spectrum disorder. The east wing rooms are adorned with architectural scenes of Malaysia, from the Johor Baru skyline and the Causeway to the Muar High School and Kuching's Old Courthouse. There is also a drawing of a Houmuwu Ding bronze cauldron from the Shang Dynasty. Meanwhile, the west wing rooms, befitting their family-friendliness, feature images of regional wildlife, like the rhinoceros hornbill and a tiger shrike.

The attention to detail extends to the gym that is thoughtfully located next to a play area so junior can have fun while mum and dad sweat it out, as well as an aqua gym — Johor's first. The all-day dining room, Delish, is also a few notches above your regular business hotel resto with chef Mozart Muhamad, who is as talented and creative as his historical namesake, regularly delighting diners with his brand of fusion cuisine, as demonstrated in a broiled lobster with salted egg yolk sauce and seared salmon served with kerabu salad in a hipster-esque jar.

Leong acknowledges that Mah Sing's ever-expanding portfolio stems from his favourite pastime: Shopping — for

land. "That really is my hobby," he laughs. "Every weekend, even while on holiday, I visit property sales galleries while my wife and children go shopping. I like to learn new things and see what's the latest, be it in London, New York or Australia. There are always new concepts and good ideas to discover and learn from. Mah Sing, after all, is still evolving ... and although we are comfortable at the moment with what we are doing locally, I'd like to go international when the time is right."

#### THE JOURNEY

Considering his late father named him Hoy Kum, which means "sea of gold" in Cantonese, it is no wonder that thinking big comes naturally to Leong. "My father had big plans for me," he laughs. Born in Alor Setar in the Year of the Rooster, Leong had a peripatetic childhood, starting his primary education in Melaka before moving with his family to Kuala Lumpur when he was nine. He then studied at the famous Chung Kwok School in Batu Road before more student days followed at the Sentul Methodist Boys School (MBS).

The force of ambition was strong with this one from the get-go. "I wanted to be a professional," says Leong candidly. "The family business was still quite small then

...we were doing trading only and it wasn't easy. My father had started as a signboard maker but he also did number plates for cars, which were made of aluminium in those days. He was very innovative and shifted from aluminium to plastic. I was also the only son — I had three sisters — so my dad said, 'Why go overseas? Stay and work with the family'. But I knew without education, you cannot go far." Although his mechanical engineering was on Leong's wish list, the call of duty won and a deal was reached eventually between father and son. "I told my father, 'If you don't want me to go overseas, give me a free hand to run the business. Operations, I handle. But cheque book, you handle,'" he laughs.

#### LOOKING EAST

Fortune favours the brave but in Leong's case, it favoured the filial and the hard-working as well. There was an influx of North Asian companies setting up manufacturing plants in Malaysia at the time and Leong immediately sensed the opportunity. "I have my spidey sense," he chuckles. "I think I have good business acumen. I can sense danger and I can also smell opportunities!"

Having adopted Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Look East Policy early in

life, Leong soon found himself courting Japanese business and, in the process, travelling back and forth between Malaysia and Japan. "When you buy machinery from them, they teach you by sending you to Japan for practical training. It was a very relevant education. As a result, I became very familiar with Japan and used to spend three to six months each year there. Also, to work with the Japanese, you need to either speak their language or know their culture ... or both. They are very disciplined people; very punctual and well-mannered. Whatever they do, they plan it well beforehand. You might notice that lift doors close very fast over there. And if you don't jump on the *shinkansen* (bullet train), it will leave right on the second. It gave me a sense of urgency and punctuality. Until now, I hate staff who miss my set timings," he says half-jokingly.

"I also learnt the 5S's from them," he continues, referring to the Japanese workplace organisation method that focuses on *seiri* (sort), *seiton* (set in order), *seiso* (shine), *seiketsu* (standardise) and *shitsuke* (sustain). "It's a very good culture. In fact, it's a real culture."

In no time, Mah Sing had acquired a reputation as a specialist par excellence

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in engineering precision plastics, aided by a formidable arsenal of machinery. The group counted JVC, Sony, Panasonic, Samsung, Hitachi and even Tupperware as its clients. "We were the first outside the US to produce for them," says Leong of the latter.

## LAND AHOY

In the early 1990s, Leong's spidey sense told him he needed to diversify the group's portfolio and create a much-needed alternative revenue stream. "We worked hard [in plastics] but the margins were thin. I knew we had no choice but to transform. But I always say, if I cannot see tomorrow, then no way. Yes, I'm daring. Yes, I've got guts. But I am cautiously daring." Thankfully, Mah Sing's excellent reputation in the marketplace gave it a competitive advantage when it came to its debut in the property sector.

After handing over his mantle to his directors in the plastics division in 1993, Leong got cracking. "I started by being a one-leg kick," he jokes, using the Cantonese expression for "do everything yourself". Clocking in 12 hours a day is a doddle in the manufacturing business, so it did not surprise onlookers when Leong's fail-safe formula of "Focus, Hard Work and Determination" soon got Mah Sing's maiden project off the ground just a year later — a 1-storey link house project in Ulu Yam, Selangor, followed by what would be the first of a series of industrial integrated parks known as i-Parc.

"Why property? Because it follows almost the same production process as a plant. You have sourcing, planning, production control, quality control, sales service and customer experience. It is quite similar. So I adopted manufacturing methods and concepts and ensured quick turnaround so as to not affect cash flow," he says.

Twenty-four years on, Mah Sing is a household name in the Malaysian property scene with 47 projects in its tally. Fifteen of which have been completed, including its largest township by acreage — the 1,313-acre Meridin East in Iskandar Malaysia — Sutera Avenue in Kota Kinabalu, Southbay in Penang and Garden's Residence in Cyberjaya and 32 still in development. The accolades fol-



The Ramada Meridin Johor Bahru's all-day dining room Delish (top) and a view of its expansive swimming pool

lowed with Mah Sing featuring among the top 10 property developers in The Edge Property Excellence Awards 2017 and Best Employer Award 2017. "We've sold 39,000 houses since and we have never abandoned any project," Leong beams. "On the present state of the property sector, he acknowledges it is going through consolidation after many years of growth. "I sense that the market is reaching saturation point."

## LIVE TO GIVE

"I want to be richer so I can give more — that has always been my motivation," says the straight-talking Leong.

Not that he has been a slouch in that department but he made the "giving back" official in 2005 with the establishment of the Mah Sing Foundation, headed by his daughter Jane, whose work revolves around three pillars: Education, Health and Well-being, and Community Development.

With four full-time employees, multiple projects are conducted annually and Leong is adamant the foundation's work is "beyond presenting a mock cheque.

Our focus is to help people help themselves and our slogan is 'Reinventing Hope, Changing Lives' for a reason." Last year, the foundation raised RM6.63 million for deserving causes. At present, it operates a School-Plus programme where school allowances are given to children on a monthly basis and the team is working on a home mushroom cultivation plan in Sabah as a means of supplementing family incomes. "I believe in giving back. Whatever I've made, I've always given back along the way. I believe in this ... and in leaving behind a legacy," Leong says.

With a combined workforce of 2,500 (900, 1,200 and 400 for property, plastics and hospitality respectively), Leong, who loves to karaoke — a favourite pastime picked up while working with the Japanese — grumbles a little how he has scant time to sing with his staff now. "It's good. In Japan, when you work until you cannot find a solution anymore, you let off steam by going for Happy Hour and karaoke. It's a human thing — we sing together and tomorrow we start again."

In this light, he has thoughtfully provided for a dedicated room equipped

with a state-of-the-art karaoke system at the Mah Sing headquarters in Jalan Sungai Besi so his team can relax and let off steam when needed, in keeping with Mah Sing's credo of reinventing spaces affordably. A quick tour reveals a fully equipped gym, imaginative workspaces adorned with Superhero themes and, even more radically, a nap room that allows you to sleep on the job when necessary, as Mah Sing believes fatigue impairs productivity.

All this, in part, stems from Leong's personal belief in treating body, mind and soul as a machine. "My hobby might be working but exercise is my duty," he smiles. "I work out three to four times a week. I have a gym at home and a trainer comes by for an hour each time. I make sure to take care of my heart, my pump. I also like to swim and have a nice pool at home."

With all his three children, including son Lionel and second daughter Rachel, involved in the business' group strategy and operations, Leong looks pleased and proud, saying "I don't do operations anymore. That I leave to my CEO [Datuk Ho Hon Sang] and Lionel. I focus more on strategic thinking and set the direction for the group."

## VISION MISSION

A leader he looks up to in particular is Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing with whom he shares career similarities. "I read his book and he too had started in plastics manufacturing, making plastic flowers, before real estate, infrastructure and utilities," Leong points out. On home ground, it would be former business and political figure Tan Sri Tan Koon Swan. "He was my senior at MBS Sentul, together with [Tan Sri] Azman Hashim, and I admired him even as a schoolboy.

"Life was tough when I was young and my childhood was quite routine. I'd wake up at 7am, go to school, come home to makan and then help out at my father's shop until 5pm. At six, makan again, revision at 7pm and sleep by 10pm. On the weekends, I'd help my mum who did a small trading business to supplement the family income. I never had holidays then but in those days, to have a good meal itself would make you very happy."

Regrets? As the Sinatra song goes, Leong has too few to mention save for the lack of reading along the way. "I should have, would have loved to read more, much more," he sighs. "But in those days, I'd get home at 2am and had to be back at the factory at 8am. There really wasn't time. But now, I tell my children to share whatever they read with me. Learning is, after all, a lifelong process."

So, what's next for the transformative leader with the spidey sense for business? Leong lets on that he is seeking other business ventures but will only say that he is keen on wellness and education. And on what advice he would share with wannabe moguls, in the property sector or otherwise, he thinks for a moment before answering, straight-talking as ever: "As long as you are disciplined, productive and have good planning coupled with good cash-flow management and never ever give up, you will be okay." Sounds pretty sensible to us. **E**