



Shifting Landscapes for Landscape Contractors

Meet Our Pioneer Gardeners

Text by Chris Low
Images as credited
Illustrations by Dika Dhaniya

This is the year 2015.

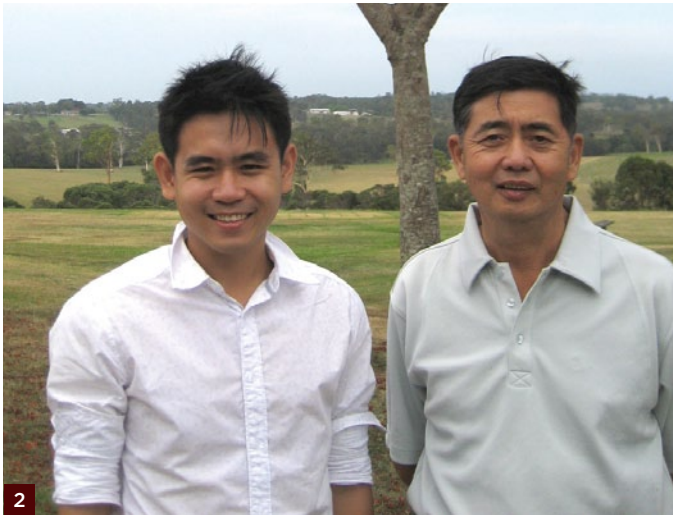
As Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence, this metropolitan city in Asia has launched a year-long retrospection of looking to the past for its history and roots and looking to the future for what it can evolve into in the next 50 years.

The make-up of this city is both hardscape and softscape. No matter the economy or politics, its intangible software is never as palpable as its physical presence for the people arriving into it for the very first time or for the millions of people that course through it daily. The lush green that shrouds the city offers a comforting silent presence, until the occasional thunderstorm. Otherwise, many have strolled in the shady greens of the Botanic Gardens, parked their cars under the wide canopies of rain trees, or walked from the bus stop to train station unscathed by the scalding sun, with little thought of how these large and extensive greens came to be.

A group of stalwarts has contributed to this island-wide green canopy and supported the government's drive to green the city that started in the 1960s. Toh Kim Bock C-E Contractor Pte Ltd, Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd, and TEHC International Pte Ltd—founded by Mr. Toh Kim Bock, Mr. Choo Kim Chuan, and Mr. Toh Eng Hock respectively—are three of Singapore's oldest and leading landscape contracting companies. Key players in planting the seeds of our gardens, these firms have matured over a shared history with the city's heritage trees and still have a strong presence in today's greening of Singapore. Their founders candidly shared their decades of experience in landscape contracting in this interview.

The companies Toh Kim Bock and Mao Sheng started out, in 1970 and early 1980s respectively, simply as suppliers of "labour" to what was formerly known as the Parks and Recreation Department (PRD), the then government authority that saw to the realisation and implementation of the greenery in our city. While the staff of PRD identified the types of trees and planned where they were to be planted, landscape contractors carried out the ground works by digging out tree holes for roadside tree planting as well as preparing for ground drainage and stormwater management. Greening of the city also involved greening the communal spaces within Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates. To carry out these laborious works, both firms relied on simply their founders, two other workmen, and a truck. Likewise, Mr. Toh Eng Hock started out modestly as a subcontractor in the late 1970s, before larger quantities of work generated over time enabled him to establish his eponymous independent landscape contracting company in 1991, renamed TEHC International in 2010.

The three founders unanimously attested to the importance of hard and honest work in building their companies. Mr. Choo Kim Chuan was keen to share that working with PRD then was Mao Sheng's iron-rice bowl. Working with the government was a sure way to keep well afloat as the volume of government projects was large and payment was always timely and fair. However, quick to qualify, he explained that even though the company has long been a "working partner" of the government, it can never rely on its past working relationship to contract new work. Like any other landscape firm, each project is contracted through a fair system of tender and proposal, which propels the company to continually plan ahead and adopt an open mind.



1. Landscape maintenance servicing at Singapore Sports Hub by TEHC involves cutting and weeding of the grass (Photo: TEHC International Pte Ltd).
2. Founder of Mao Sheng (incorporated in 1988), Mr. Choo Kim Chuan, and his son, Mr. Jeverss Choo, on a work trip in Australia (Photo: Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd).
3, 4. Early landscaping works in the early 1990s by Mao Sheng at Changi Airport Terminal 1 and 2 (Photo: Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd).
5. Mao Sheng has been maintaining the indoor gardens of Changi Airport Terminal 1 and 2 for the past 10 years. Orchid Garden is one of the many such gardens (Photo: Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd).
6. Landscape construction for the headquarters of LucasFilm Singapore, the Sandcrawler, completed in 2013 by Mao Sheng. The firm oversees its maintenance (Photo: Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd).



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Vertical greening



Rooftop greening



Waterways

Building upon his firm's ability to deliver work well and timely, Mr. Choo Kim Chuan has since grown his company into no less than 500 people on his payroll and a stable of 60 to 70 machines and vehicles. No longer mere "labourers", the responsibilities of Mao Sheng expanded to carrying out contracts in supplying and maintaining the greenery for pockets of green in Singapore's airport terminals. Greening works for the airport, as expressed by Mr. Choo Kim Chuan, were a far cry from digging tree holes. Specific plants needed to be brought in from overseas and kept lush and healthy in varied environment conditions. All this demanded extensive horticultural knowledge and care. No longer confined to only the execution of works, the company expanded to include plant nurseries that would locally supply the necessary space and environment to stock the myriad of plants we see at Changi Airport.

Mr. Jeverss Choo, Mr. Choo Kim Chuan's son who assists him in helming the company, offered his insight on how the industry has changed. Landscape works in the last 30 years dealt simply with three levels: turf, shrub, and trees. Today, they have encroached into three additional levels: vertical greening, rooftop greening, and waterways. What this indicates is that this once site-based line of work has taken on additional requirements for knowledge-based landscape works. The science of waterways and rooftop greening is a completely different field of study for Mao Sheng, but the company keeps up with environmental developments and new ways to green spaces by bringing in new expertise to its project teams.

Following the government's realignment to outsource landscape works, and with the renaming of PRD to National Parks Board (NParks) in 1996, the responsibility of the landscape contractor became a single-line workflow. This meant the entire process of executing greening works, from the preparation of tree-holes to the planting of trees, continuing to the maintenance and pruning of the trees, down to their removal and uprooting when needed. This was an opportunity for the company Toh Kim Bock to expand its services, leading to its expansion to a little over 1,000 workers in staff strength and more than 80 vehicles. To sufficiently uphold this new responsibility for the well-being of the greenery, the firm also sought to improve its horticultural knowledge by ensuring the further and continual education of its staff through courses and fieldwork. Arborists and horticultural experts were also brought in to supply the soft knowledge to what originally started as merely hard labour.

Under the direction of Mr. Toh Kim Bock and his son-in-law Mr. Kingdom Ling, the strength and focus of the company continue to lie in the public greening of the city. Mr. Toh Kim Bock enthusiastically effused that the company only works on local projects. The planting of trees, though a time-delayed process, is one subject to trends and fashionableness; species of plants and trees also experience seasons of favour and preference. In the early days, when Toh Kim Bock took on landscape works for HDB precincts, fruit trees covered more than half of the plant types. However, as Mr. Toh Kim Bock recounted, this all changed shortly in a span of 10 years, as the maintenance of matured fruit trees became more challenging as they attracted bats and



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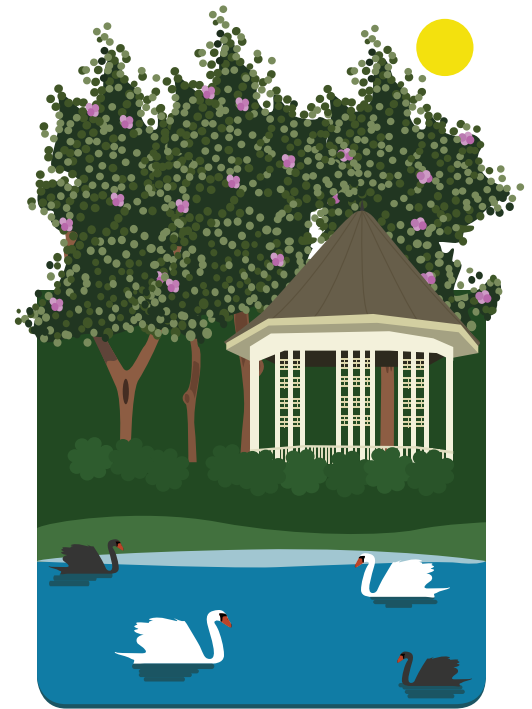
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7. Mr. Toh Kim Bock founded Toh Kim Bock in 1970. The company was later incorporated as Toh Kim Bock C-E Contractor Pte Ltd in 1986 (Photo: Toh Kim Bock C-E Contractor Pte Ltd).

8, 9. A significant project of Toh Kim Bock is the landscape maintenance for Singapore Botanic Gardens (Photo: Toh Kim Bock C-E Contractor Pte Ltd).

10. Transplanting works by Toh Kim Bock at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Photo: Toh Kim Bock C-E Contractor Pte Ltd).

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insects. Following feedback from residents, the company then found itself busy across the island, replacing these fruit trees with other species.

In recent years, as roadside trees mature, the environment changes, and hardscape builds up, the company's work scope has evolved into an "emergency call centre" for fallen trees. Providing emergency response to clear obstructions caused by fallen trees has now become part of the job demand in the field of landscape maintenance works. Apart from softscape, the company has also expanded its fleet of vehicles to include advance pruning and maintenance vehicles compliant with NParks' continual tightening of workplace safety conditions. All these changes have been welcomed by Mr. Toh Kim Bock, who explained that they have greatly helped to minimise accidents at the workplace and keep his workers as well as road users safe when pruning and maintenance works are carried out.

Public Utilities Board's Active, Beautiful, Clean (ABC) Waters programme was launched in 2006 to incorporate more waterways and realise the full potential of water infrastructure in Singapore. Closely following the city's direction, Toh Kim Bock has expanded its expertise in landscape works, by familiarising itself with the requirements of this programme. Training managers of the company and equipping them with knowledge of ABC features and construction has seen the firm involved in the construction of an ABC feature park in Nanyang Technological University.

While Toh Kim Bock gears for even more local green works in the next 50 years, TEHC International has set its sights on


expanding beyond our local shores. TEHC too started with landscape contracts commissioned by PRD. Mr. Toh Eng Hock recalled the *kampung* spirit of the times, which the company is well associated with. To carry out landscape works in the early days, one could gather the help of family members, and when extra labour was needed, look towards friends and neighbours. In the 1990s, the company direction began to shift towards more specialised landscape maintenance works. Mr. Dick Toh, Mr. Toh Eng Hock's son who works closely alongside his father, had recognised that the green maintenance of golf courses was an arduous task that required specialised knowledge in turf management. Through detailed on-site engagement and focus, TEHC managed to secure a milestone contract to renovate the entire Serapong Golf Course on Sentosa Island in 1999.

TEHC now fully manages the greens for three golf courses in Singapore. As Mr. Dick Toh patiently explained, the high maintenance of golf greens is made even more challenging in Singapore due to sudden downpours and unrelenting hot dry spells. For the grass to be at optimum playing condition, the drainage of the soil is a primary factor. Playing fields must never be water-clogged, and during rain, they need to be drained almost instantaneously to allow for uninterrupted play moments after the rain stops. At the same time, the soil needs to be sufficiently watered to keep the grass healthy and green. He shares that the art of this fine balance lies in the type and grade of soil, or specifically, sand, used. Nothing short of perfect, the composite make-up of the substrate is a calculated bag of sand imported internationally. Seeing a business opportunity in the procurement of such specific substrates, Mr. Dick Toh has transformed into a golf management expert and diversified the



core business of TEHC into the related fields of turf maintenance such as supplying quality turf as well as fertilisers and chemicals for turfing to other golf greens across the city.

Although landscape maintenance works and contracting works have long project life spans and potential for almost infinite continuity, Mr. Dick Toh observed that this field of work is not without challenges. It is saturated with household names, not to mention the constant injection of new players into the market. Rather than focusing the company's resources and expertise on solely local landscape projects, he has ambitions to further export his own turf management expertise to countries like Vietnam and Malaysia—basically anywhere where there is golf green.

Like Singapore, the three home-grown companies have accomplished much since their humble beginnings in the 1970s. It was both reassuring and heart-warming from the outset of the interview to find all three founders still actively setting broad directions and engaged in the management of the companies they founded some 30 to 40 years ago. As they enter the next 50 years, each of the firms is backed by not only years of industry knowledge and site experience, but also the confidence and drive of their next generation, set to carry on greening Singapore. 

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Mr. Chuah Hock Seong, Associate Director of Centre for Urban Greenery and Ecology and Senior Deputy Director (Streetscape East) of National Parks Board, for facilitating the interview session.



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11. Serapong Course at Sentosa Golf Club, completed in 2007, was TEHC's first golf course construction project (Photo: TEHC International Pte Ltd).

12. Founder of then Toh Eng Hock Construction, now TEHC International, Mr. Toh Eng Hock, and his son, Mr. Dick Toh, in 2012 (Photo: TEHC International Pte Ltd).

13, 14. One of TEHC's overseas projects is Laguna Lăng Cô Golf Club, Central Vietnam, completed in 2012 (Photo: TEHC International Pte Ltd).