

THE ROAD TO IFAWPCA WITH...

Datuk Lai Foot Kong

MBJ recently caught up with Datuk Lai Foot Kong who was most gracious and giving of his time. IFAWPCA is and will always be a big and passionate part of his life.

MBJ: As an Honorary Lifetime Member of IFAWPCA, you have obviously given a great deal of yourself in various capacities such as Secretary-General, Board Member and Rapporteur throughout the years. Why did you choose IFAWPCA?

My involvement with IFAWPCA started in 1982 over a span of 35 years till now. At that IFAWPCA convention in Bangkok I started to realise what IFAWPCA was all about. The Federation comprised about 15 countries during that time. Now we have 18 countries. At the convention, I met fellow contractors, peers in regional markets and through various committee meetings I had the opportunity to participate in discussions about the construction industry.

It was an eye opener for me as I was young and new to the industry.

IFAWPCA is a powerful platform and I don't think till today there is an Association, a contracting body, similar in nature. The interaction during and subsequent to the convention was a great experience for a young member. As a member, you can exchange information and ideas with countries of different economic levels as far as construction is concerned. This is unique to IFAWPCA. Some countries are well developed like Japan, Korea, Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore compared to Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and new joined Mongolia. These countries have different levels of construction activity. The problems faced by these countries now, Malaysia has experienced before during the early stages. So we are in a



position to advise countries who are experiencing what we have faced. At the same time, we learn from countries who have more advanced construction activity levels.

MBJ: Speaking with almost 40 years of construction industry experience under your belt, why do you think it is important for young builders, engineers and the construction industry at large to attend/participate in the 44th IFAWPCA Convention in 2018?

When I attended the convention some 35 years ago, our construction level was certainly not as advanced as we are today. Our learning curve then was very steep. Our construction industry is at a different level now. We now have CIDB to guide the industry. The younger generation are now professionals either engineering or construction trained. Not like me. I am not a trained engineer so I learned the hard way. Those days, calculations during tender exercises were estimations and not as detailed as today. The tender documentation required today is sky high! Young people in the construction industry should want to make contacts with regional players and peers. This will broaden their outlook in the industry and provide an opportunity for them to learn from other countries. The networking opportunity is very valuable.

Then, Malaysian contractors hardly had the opportunity to go abroad. Nowadays, our local contractors have gone international so if you are interested in going international, this is the platform to align yourself with.

Contacts made during an IFAWPCA Convention allow you to understand a particular country even before you wish to enter that particular market. If you commence doing business and things go wrong and you want to withdraw, you will pay a heavy price. With IFAWPCA, you have the opportunity to network and ask the relevant questions while getting to know regional construction players. These people will help you understand the market you wish to enter. You will be better informed rather than going in blind and opening yourself up to enormous risk.

The construction industry is a very demanding and volatile industry. Nowadays, you hear of many people wanting to be a big contractor; joining the industry midway. The success rate is not that huge when you start in the middle. Take for example our contractors who are doing reasonably well today. They all started from the beginning not in the middle. For the young people, my advice is be very patient and start from day one if you really want to make the construction industry your career.

MBJ: Describe how the time spent serving IFAWPCA has shaped your leadership and management style?

It was in MBAM that I started to learn about leadership. MBAM is an NGO so there was an opportunity to meet many different people from different companies. The experience is very different from being a CEO managing a company where all your staff are employees. Chairing internal company meetings are very different from chairing meetings in an Association. When you join an Association, you meet many people from different companies; some who are more educated and informed than others. It was in MBAM where I sat down to engage with people that I learned how to chair committee meetings. You learn how to balance different views from various parties. In IFAWPCA, when facing members from 18 different countries, each of them are representing their own country and all have strong views. Learning how to balance various views, speaking off the cuff and keeping the peace are invaluable skills one needs to learn! Most often, one does not get the opportunity to hone these skills. I learnt these skills on the job at MBAM and IFAWPCA. To me, the exposure gained from listening, engaging and learning from others is priceless.

MBJ: What are your concerns about the construction industry in Malaysia today? Would IFAWPCA be able to support in any way?

A very important issue that's current is the workforce. You need people to execute construction jobs but also control our

construction labour force. You need quantity to develop this industry. IBS is one way to resolve the labour issue but it has its own pros and cons. For the time being, we can't run away from imported labour. I hope the construction industry has the wisdom to resolve this issue. Even advanced countries like Korea, Japan and Taiwan also import foreign labour for their construction. We are not unique but we need better control over imported labour.

Another issue I would like to highlight is the duration of completion of a multi-storey project. My personal opinion is that it's too demanding, aggressive and unrealistic. This exposes contractors to greater risk as the penalties for delay in completion is overly excessive. Some contracts even penalise the contractor to the tune of RM200,000-RM300,000 a day! Figures I believe that are just plucked from thin air! We are not facing an ideal situation.

Clients, Developers and Contractors need to re-evaluate their positions, to ask themselves if this is reasonable and beneficial to all parties. Contractors have to pay close attention to health and safety on site. Excessive penalties will lead to shortcuts from contractors under pressure, and in turn, this can lead to serious accidents on site. Long periods of SWOs (Stop Work Orders) will seriously affect a project's completion as an SWO can delay a project for a week and sometimes even for months. It is a vicious cycle and benefits no one.

MBJ: How does one learn from IFAWPCA?

If I were to view IFAWPCA as a role-model, I would pick 3 companies in 3 member countries in the region that young and seasoned contracting companies can learn from.

As a member of the IFAWPCA fraternity for many years, this is my personal selection:

In Malaysia, I would choose YTL Group. The home-grown contracting company started from humble beginnings to become a multi-business conglomerate with diversified interests, worldwide. Similarly, in Thailand, I would choose Italthai Group. Lastly, in the Philippines, it's D.M. Consortium.

These 3 conglomerates are operating in IFAWPCA member countries and are very senior members. In my mind, these companies are remarkable role models worthy of emulation by our local construction companies. Their individual journeys on how the founders built the company from a modest contracting body to a vast conglomerate across the globe are one we can learn from and use as a benchmark for innovation and strategic corporate perspicacity. ■