

HD City & Country: TheEdge Outstanding **Property** Personality Award 2014: Winner - A man for all seasons

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Datuk Tan **Chin** Nam, founder Tan & Tan Developments Bhd and IGB Corp Bhd

Much of what we now know as **property** industry practice has to do with Datuk Tan **Chin** Nam. His efforts made him the worthy recipient of this year's The Edge Malaysia's Outstanding **Property** Personality Award.

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He and his late brother, Kim Yeow, founded Tan & Tan Developments Bhd in 1971 and IGB Corp Bhd. In 2002, Tan & Tan was acquired by IGB to consolidate its position in the **property** development industry.

Today, IGB is known for the 50-acre Mid Valley City development which comprises Mid Valley Megamall, The Gardens Mall, office towers, hotels and serviced residences. It also invests in and manages a diverse portfolio of long-term **commercial**, retail, **residential** and hospitality assets in Asia, Australia, the US and Europe.

Chin Nam has left an indelible mark on Malaysia's **property** industry, having pioneered a number of firsts. Desa Kudalari in Kuala Lumpur was the first condominium in the country, and Sierramas in Sungai Buloh, the first gated development. At the other end of the spectrum, **Chin** Nam built Kampung Kongo in Cheras, Malaysia's first low-cost housing development. He also oversaw the development of the iconic Mid Valley City, built Renaissance **Hotel** and Gleneagles Hospital, all in Kuala Lumpur. In Australia, he had a hand in the restoration and redevelopment projects of Queen Victoria Building and Capitol Theatre in Sydney, and the Como **Hotel** in Melbourne.

Some of his other contributions to the country's **property** development industry include his role in forming the Housing Developers Association (HDA) in the 1970s, which in 2000 was renamed the Real **Estate** and Housing Developers' Association (Rehda). He was president of the HDA from 1974 to 1978.

Chin Nam also introduced Fiabci, the International Real **Estate** Federation, to Malaysia, using it as a vehicle to gather building industry professionals such as architects, surveyors and engineers, to raise professional standards.

He retired from active involvement in the family business at 70. He kept himself busy with chess and horse racing. His love for "the royal game" started in his youth and he found it to be good exercise for the development of mind and character. **Chin** Nam was also involved in promoting the game in Malaysia.

His other love, horse racing, started with a win at the races in 1948. The appeal? Trying to beat the odds. He eventually teamed up with renowned Australian horse trainer Bart Cummings and they won four Melbourne Cup's, Australia's premier horse racing event.

His **property** business legacy, meanwhile, remains in the family. His daughter, Tan Lei Cheng, heads Goldis Bhd and nephew, Datuk Seri Robert Tan, leads IGB.

Now 88, **Chin** Nam enjoys meeting with friends and associates while keeping abreast of goings-on in the world. Despite Parkinson's disease, his wit and affability shine through as he speaks to The Edge about his vocation.

"Failure is more common"

Born on March 18, 1926 in Kuala Lumpur, he was the sixth of 12 children. He attributes much of who he is today to his mother, Choo Moh Hooi, who sent him to Victoria Institution to learn English. He became the first in his family to do so and credits his ability to converse and write in English as one of the reasons for his success.

As someone who has achieved a lifetime's work, he is the first to point out his failures, which he regards as the mother of success. Each defeat is a lesson and the man who perseveres wins in the end, he says.

"You should not talk about your successes. You fail more than you succeed," he instructs.

He recalls a childhood of struggle albeit a relatively happy one. Financial constraints precluded the completion of his studies at Victoria Institution and he soon embarked on a career as a trader of perishable and other goods.

His ability to relate to people from all walks of life throughout his career would lay the foundations of his future vocation. **Chin** Nam would remember people's names and details by making it a habit to jot on their business cards when, where and why he met them, plus any other observations he may have had. Business is based on human relations, he says, "so if a business person seeks to be successful, he or she must master the art of building strong relations with people."

Dealing with the ebb and flow of humanity has made him a strong believer in the use of common sense, of which he says there are two distinct but crucially related stages: "Understanding reality rightly, and then acting correctly. This usually means obtaining the relevant information and working hard."

It was in 1959 that he first had the chance to be involved in **property** development. He invested in a project called Petaling Garden. It was also when Tan became a campradore at Bangkok Bank, acting as middleman between the bank and the **Chinese** business community, personally guaranteeing loan **transactions** and foreign exchange deals in return for a commission.

However, he soon realised that while he could make a lot of money from his role, he stood to lose a lot too. After nearly 10 years, at the tail-end of his career with Bangkok Bank, an opportunity arose that would lead him down the path to become a **property** developer.

Finding Shangri-La

In 1968, **Chin** Nam and his business partners bought a piece of land in Singapore to develop the Shangri-La **Hotel**. Initially, the plan was to build rental properties or a standard development of the time. However, Singapore architect Heah Hock Heng, suggested the building of a modern five-star **hotel** instead. The idea caught on.

Chin Nam and his team, which included Robert Kuok, flew to the US to meet the chairman and CEO of Westin Hotels at the time, Edward "Eddie" Carlson. They negotiated an agreement to build the Shangri-La in Singapore.

It was during the construction period that he learnt the intricacies of **property** development and how detailed it can be. "The architect is one-twentieth of the whole process," he says. "By right, you need to design the whole scheme first, not the envelope. I was the first to employ a landscape consultant and many other consultants and engineers."

Consultants? He explains that if expertise is required for the job, then it should be used. Trust the expert to do his or her job to the best of their ability. The money that **Chin** Nam has invested in this way has been returned to him many-fold.

Chin Nam credits Bill Keithen, who was involved in the Shangri-La development, as one of the men who guided him in the essentials of building a **hotel**. Keithen, who was with Westin Hotels and later became Dean of the Cornell School of **Hotel** Administration, would become a good friend.

Building a brand

Building a five-star **hotel** would equip **Chin** Nam to build the first condominium in Kuala Lumpur, Desa Kudalari. The condo, completed in 1983, had many people questioning its reason for being in the early days. Was **Chin** Nam ahead of his time?

Back in the day, people were used to living in houses with plenty of land. Ironically, it was for this very reason that **Chin** Nam decided to build a condominium. The landed gentry in the tropics were finding it a bother to take care of the garden, manage staff and deal with mosquitoes. Moreover, there was security to consider.

He thought, if he had these problems, there would also be others in the same predicament. Moreover, his travels to Hawaii had revealed to him that city dwellers will pay for the conveniences a condo provides — the swimming pool, gymnasium, tennis courts and landscaped spaces. Not least, they would pay for security.

“Using the knowledge I had acquired, I persevered along with my late brother, Kim Yeow,” **Chin** Nam recalls. “It was difficult because there were no laws on condominiums then; there was no landscaping industry, there were no building management companies. So I ended up having to create something that didn’t exist.”

At the time, **Chin** Nam had wanted to use facing bricks, which have aesthetic features, for Desa Kudalari. However, nobody made them locally, and importing them was prohibitive because they were highly taxed. Solution? He worked with local brick manufacturers to make some.

If he was unable to find someone to make what he wanted, he would start a **company** to build what he needed. Something as simple as a fitted kitchen, now commonplace, then did not exist. To get a white fridge was near impossible, he recalls.

But building the Shangri-La in Singapore had taught him well. **Chin** Nam created a private Garden of Eden for Desa Kudalari that nobody had seen in apartments before. Today, buyers expect their condos to come with lush, open spaces.

From building the country’s first condominium, Tan & Tan established a brand for providing a holistic ownership experience, complete with good security, landscaping and after-sales management. The attention to these seemingly unimportant details — the ‘soft’ infrastructure — would become integral to **Chin** Nam’s philosophy on **property** development, ever raising the bar higher.

Playing to lose

Much of **Chin** Nam’s exploits, successes and failures are well documented in his memoir, Never Say I Assume, published in 2006. The title is his favourite refrain because “it makes an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me’,” he offers.

“I always say, don’t assume. Research and hard work are what you need. And being able to foresee the future as much as you can,” he says.

He writes in his book how, in 1948, he had imported the region’s first electric laundry machine assuming that hotels would welcome this service. They didn’t. A simple call or a casual dinner chat, he says, would have disabused him of his assumption. Laziness was the reason for that bad investment, he adds.

Despite his now limited mobility, **Chin** Nam has never stopped enjoying learning and constantly wants to better himself.

“I respect those who are better than me,” he says. “I like to lose, I like competition. I like to learn from people who are better than me.” In chess, a particular passion, “I play with people who can beat me.”

Regrets? “I would have liked to have continued working to improve and develop a strong framework of development to raise the industry higher.”

He drops this priceless, commonsensical pearl of wisdom for the new generation of developers: “Never assume, don’t borrow short term and don’t overestimate the demand.”

CO ipog : IGB Corporation Bhd

IN ihotel : Hotel Construction | i501 : Building Construction | iconst : Construction | icre : Real Estate/Construction | i85 : Real Estate Transactions | ireest : Real Estate

RE malay : Malaysia | austr : Australia | kuala : Kuala Lumpur | victor : Victoria (Australia) | apacz : Asia Pacific | asiaz : Asia | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | devgcoz : Emerging Market Countries | dvpcoz : Developing Economies | seasiaz : Southeast Asia

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