

From tin to property development

Selangor Dredging had to change its core business of tin mining to stay relevant to the Malaysian economy. It found its niche in property development.

BY WONG KING WAI

Selangor Dredging Bhd (SDB) started out as a tin-mining company in 1962 when the Malaysian economy was driven by rubber and tin.

But just as the Malaysian economy has evolved, SDB has had to reinvent itself as a boutique property developer.

SDB, then known as Selangor Dredging Ltd, was founded by the late Teh Kien Toh. In 1964, it was listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange and changed its name to Selangor Dredging Bhd.

In 1963/64, it was awarded a 1,200-acre mining concession in Dengkil by the Selangor state government. With tin in high demand, the dredge operated around the clock, leading to the founding of the Kampung Selangor Dredging settlement.

"Kampung Selangor Dredging came about because all the workers stayed on site," explains Teh Lip Kim, daughter of Kien Toh. "If the dredge broke down, we needed it to be attended to immediately as it had to be working at all times. At its peak, the population of the area was 1,800, which included staff and their families."

Teh explains that the land was returned to the state government in the 1980s and today, it is the site of the Paya Indah Wetlands.

The money made from tin mining was put to good use. "The company built Wisma Selangor Dredging on Jalan Ampang, which was completed in 1985," says Teh. "At the time, Jalan Tun HS Lee, not Jalan Ampang, was the city centre. In the 1990s, we went into a bit of property development and built Hotel Maya, which was completed in 1997."

In 1985, tin prices took a nose dive and SDB was forced to diversify its operations. "We were not property developers but property investors and landlords. That was not our core business in the 1980s. We invested in the manufacturing of steel wheel rims, aluminium spandrels, hardware operations and sand reclamation," says Teh.

In 2003 and 2004, the company decided to fully focus on property development, which has proved to be a good move.

As managing director, Teh has played a crucial role in steering SDB's new business. She credits her parents for helping her to become the leader she is today. "I learnt a lot from my father, who was a very prudent and conservative businessman," she says. "My mother was a very strong woman ... my dad would come home and ask my mother for advice. My mother made more decisions than him. She knew how to make the right decisions and do what was right. She was always supporting my father."

As managing director, Teh has played a crucial role in steering Selangor Dredging's new business



KENNY YAP/THE EDGE



Teh's mother, Chan Siew Mooi, gave her the confidence to believe in herself. "My mother, having brought us up with good values, would say to me 'I know you know what's right'," she says.

SDB is today known for its holistic view in developing properties and lifestyles. Besides being a developer, it is also a hotelier.

Its completed developments include its flagship Park Seven, KLCC; 20trees, Melawati; Ameera, SS2 Petaling Jaya; and Aman Sari, Puchong. Ongoing developments include Dedaun, Ampang KL; 20trees West, Melawati; and Five Stones, SS2 Petaling Jaya. Its Singapore projects include Jia, Wilkie Road, Gilstead 2, Gilstead Road; Okio, Balestier Road; and Hijauan on Cavenagh, Cavenagh Road.

SDB recently bought tenanted property in London to establish a toehold in the UK.

Teh stresses that SDB will always be a Malaysian company despite its ambitions to expand globally.

"SDB is a Malaysian company, and we know our roots are in Malaysia," she says. "Like when we started Hotel Maya, a boutique hotel — up to this day, it is a local brand. We use products that are made in Malaysia, all the furniture is made here, and even the people we employ are Malaysian. Everyone is Malaysian."

So what are Teh's future plans for SDB?

"To remain in property development and to focus on high-end niche projects in main urban centres," she says. "And to launch more projects in Singapore and expand overseas, with the UK as the first stop." ■