

# Paving the way for transformation in the landscaping industry

Building relationships, having foresight and willingness to digitalise help Mao Sheng thrive. BY CHARMAINE WEE SHIMIN, NG XIU HUI, TAN HUI LING AND TAN SUMIN

**T**HE expansion of blue and green spaces in Singapore is a boon for landscaping companies. As the country embarks on its most ambitious greening endeavour to be the first "city in nature", Mao Sheng Quanji Construction is a partner in this transformation.

Founded as a one-man operation by Choo Kim Chuan in 1983, Mao Sheng has grown from transporting-building and construction materials in its earlier days, to one of Singapore's best-known landscaping companies. It has a string of landscaping projects to its name that have won many awards, including four consecutive years of the E50 awards.

Today, Mao Sheng, which means luxuriant and flourishing in Chinese, has over 500 employees. While Mr Choo remains involved in the company's operation, his son, Choo Jun Wei, has assumed the responsibility of executive director.

## Relationship-centric culture

The company has maintained its family-like culture, as the younger Mr Choo, like his father, believes in building strong and healthy relationships with his employees.

He places emphasis in creating a nurturing and accommodating work environment, characterised by empathy and understanding.

While managing the company is his topmost priority during the Covid-19 pandemic, keeping his staff gainfully employed is a close second.

"During such (a) crisis, I see value in exercising empathy instead of cutting jobs to save costs," he said.

He also adopts this relationship-centric approach with his clients, and places great importance on maintaining the partnership and building trust.

"We are not just here to finish the job and earn their money. We are here to do it well and really solve their



Mao Sheng's executive director Choo Jun Wei says he places emphasis on creating a nurturing and accommodating work environment, characterised by empathy and understanding.

PHOTO: MAO SHENG QUANJI CONSTRUCTION PTE LTD

problems," said Mr Choo. "Of course, there are times when we miss their expectations, and when that happens, we apologise humbly."

Mao Sheng's employees are also encouraged to have a sense of ownership in their work. "My employees feel a sense of pride and passion in their work, and this can be seen by our clients," he said.

## Resilience amid Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to send shock waves through the world economy, impacting businesses including Mao Sheng.

"Many of my workers were locked down in dormitories and were not able to work. As such, we were not operating at full force during the circuit breaker. This amplifies the impact on an industry that is already facing a

chronic shortage of workers," said Mr Choo.

But the company was spared from the worst because of decisions taken earlier. With the benefit of past experiences with crises such as chickenpox and Sars, the company has built some contingencies in its operation.

Rather than housing all its foreign workers in purpose-built dormitories, Mao Sheng has put them into separate accommodations. While this is more costly, it has served the company well during the circuit breaker.

When dormitories were locked down for months to contain the spread of the virus, those who did not stay in dormitories could continue working.

Mao Sheng has also adopted a more positive approach towards this pandemic. "While working from home

was previously impossible, it has become possible now for our non-on-site employees," said Mr Choo.

"The philosophy is that we should prepare for change. When the change comes, we will not be so affected. On the other hand, if we are forced to change, it will be very stressful for us."

## Embracing technological transformation

Recognising that technological transformation forms the basis of business improvement, Mao Sheng is spearheading the industry in a new direction, one that is characterised by the use of digital platforms.

In recent years, Mao Sheng has adopted e-learning and micro-learning approaches to encourage employees to upgrade their skills. "For employ-

ees who are not familiar with smartphones, we have employed one-to-one teaching on these digital platforms. However, the most effective method is peer learning among employees as they can better connect on the same frequency," Mr Choo explained.

While there are several limitations and challenges, Mr Choo is confident that Mao Sheng is heading in the right direction: "We just need to find the right key to unlock the employees' innate inquisitiveness for digital learning."

## From sprout to tree

As a visionary leader, Mr Choo adopts a three-step approach to Mao Sheng's expansion: "The first step involves moving up a notch in the breadth of services that we offer; the second

step involves deepening our knowledge base to remain competitive; (and) the third step involves bringing our current expertise out of Singapore."

Having successfully embarked on the first two steps, the company is mulling plans for expansion.

While the current economic outlook seems challenging, Mr Choo now has a better understanding of the market, but is still trying to find the right formula to expand overseas.

As with any business, Mao Sheng has its fair share of competitors. For the company though, its clients are its biggest competitors – because through their demands and expectations, clients create healthy competition by encouraging companies in the same industry to constantly adapt to change and innovate to stay on top of the game.

"It is essentially the survival of the fittest," said Mr Choo. "Such competition helps us improve and strive to be better. Through the challenges faced during the projects that we take, we also learn and grow."



This series is part of the Enterprise 50 Educational Project between the E50 partners and the NUS Business School. Mao Sheng Quanji Construction Pte Ltd was among the winners in 2019. The annual E50 ranking is co-organised by The Business Times and KPMG, sponsored by OCBC Bank, and supported by Enterprise Singapore, Singapore Exchange and Singapore Business Federation.

