



Offshoot of a passion

Henry Bong's love for the arts sees the birth of a treasure trove called Pucuk Rebong

By Lim Yin Foong

In the heart of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown is an old pre-war shophouse whose interior is painted red, blue, yellow and white — the colours of the Malaysian flag.

The three-storey shophouse is filled with antiques and memorabilia, art and crafts. Peranakan gilded wood carvings hang from the ceiling, while contemporary art adorns the building's many walls. Heavy martaban jars stand next to huge cabinets filled with Chinese ceramics, Asian textiles, and other works of art. Upstairs on the first floor, a whole room is devoted to works of art from the Malay archipelago and other parts of the Muslim world.

The shophouse is a veritable treasure trove of Malaysian history, dating back to pre-Islamic days. It is the result of one man's passion for the arts, a collection built over 30 years.

Henry Bong's love of the arts is evident as he walks around the shophouse, unfolding fragile antique textiles, unwrapping pieces of Kelantanese silver, and pointing out notable pieces in his collection such as a rare letter written by the last White Rajah of Sarawak.

It is this passion that has led the 40-something collector to leave his banking career of nearly 19 years to start his own business in antiques and artwork. For the shophouse is not just a museum for Bong's collection; it is also the home of his new venture, Pucuk Rebong, which is being incorporated as a private limited company.

Bong is also starting out with a difference, by selling items from his personal collection.

"Someone said: 'You're going back to your first love,' and I said,

'Yes, and I am divorcing her at the same time, to build her and make her even stronger.' Sometimes you have to part with a bit of yourself and share it to make it even stronger," he explains.

"I want to share the ownership and enjoyment of these works of art. You must love art, and you must have the ability to expand that art and share it, and one sure way of doing that is to do it as a lucrative business."

Setting up Pucuk Rebong was not an overnight decision, Bong says. "I have always expressed a desire to do something like this, and I soon became impatient to have it ready for next year's mega event (Sukom '98). I finally decided after Christmas dinner last year that I was going to do it.

"My friends thought I was crazy, but I immediately signed the lease on the shophouse and, by January, I had resigned from the bank. There has been no looking back since then," he smiles.

Pucuk Rebong, describes Bong, is a museum-cum-gallery-cum-tourism information centre, offering an eclectic mix of artworks and antiques. It is Malaysia in a nutshell, he says.

To Bong, Pucuk Rebong represents his commitment to promote Malaysia as an emerging and important art centre of the region, to both locals and visitors alike.

"It is my chance to offer, in my personal capacity, the artistic and cultural soul of Malaysia.

"If you look at Malaysia's per capita production capacity of crafts, antiquities and art compared to many other countries in the region, we have one of the rarest within Asia. Not many people realize that," he explains.

Pucuk Rebong, Bong says, captures the Malay soul and how it



Bong surrounded by part of his wide collection of antiques and memorabilia, art and crafts: "I want to share the ownership and enjoyment of these works of art."

transgresses into the other cultures, from Peranakan (Chinese and Malay) to colonial (English and Malay). It also features other Asian artifacts which are significant to Malaysia's history and development, from Martaban jars traded in the Malay archipelago in the early days, to Japanese ceramics representing the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

"When you look at that, you realize that we have a very rich heritage, but not many people would be able to tell you that within one shophouse.

"This is what I will do," Bong adds determinedly.

Besides showcasing antiques and artworks, the shophouse holds a reference section on artworks and tourism information — Bong is working closely with the relevant authorities to impart relevant information to tourists, and to make tickets for the performing arts more readily available. On the

second floor, he plans to have a private museum to display the rare, historical pieces from his collection.

Bong's approach with Pucuk Rebong is one that marries his skills in marketing with his love for the arts. With his banking experience, he aims to provide professional and reliable service to both individuals and corporations looking to build their antique and artwork collections. At the same time, he is also able to offer the collector his network of art dealers and craftsmen, and his experienced eye for antiques and artworks, culled over many years of collecting.

"We can counsel, advise as well as influence an ability to appreciate and acquire art, not just for art's sake, but as an investment, for personal or national interest," he explains.

Besides dealing in antiques and artwork, Bong aims to be a con-

sultant in helping clients build their personal or corporate collections, and work with them in interior design to showcase their collections.

"We can harness ideas from these artworks, and find practical uses for some of them. They could be decorative pieces, investment generators, or even fun and wearable trendsetting pieces," he says, adding that he also supplies architectural interior design finishing materials.

Bong's entrance into the art market is timely; as Malaysians become more affluent, it is a natural progression that they start looking at artwork and collecting.

"There will be a time, beyond the Honda Accords and BMWs, when you walk into a penthouse or a bungalow, and you realize that your home reflects your bare soul. You need to collect something to show your character and identity, as a true projection of your self and your taste," he says.

Bong feels that, furthermore, the Malaysian society is heading towards the direction where art is seen as an alternative investment, after their investments in shares and property. "What I am saying is that here are things you can definitely afford to start and build

a collection with."

Bong, who describes himself as a Malaysian, a Peranakan of Chinese descent from Sarawak, comes from a family of art enthusiasts. His father, he says, was a collector of sorts.

"He did not have a large collection, but it was enough for me to learn to appreciate the finer things," he says, adding that he began collecting at the age of 10.

Although he preferred the arts, Bong had to study the sciences as his father had the traditional mindset that art did not pay, he says.

He eventually trained in agriculture, and began a banking career when he joined Bank Pertanian where he worked for five years and travelled around the country. "It gave me the opportunity to appreciate Malaysia and her beauty, before I saw anything else of the world," he says.

Bong then moved on to the Hong Leong group, and subsequently worked for Citibank, Maybank in Singapore, and Bank of America, also in the republic island. He finally returned to Malaysia in 1995 and joined Pacific Bank Bhd. In the last three banks, he headed the business development and retail banking areas.



To succeed, Bong says:

"You must have a passion for what you are doing, and confidence that you can do it. You also have to have guts, and the ability and appetite to take calculated risks. Just do it, and never regret your actions."

Then over a fateful Christmas dinner, he decided to strike out on his own. "I have always recognized that I must be my own boss, so today, I am," he quietly declares.

And how does that feel? "Like a real big challenge, and it feels like I have really attained *merdeka*.

"I'm free, I'm independent, and I am able to do what I want. It is an opportunity for me to dabble in things that I really enjoy working with," Bong says.

Pucuk Rebong, he says, is just the beginning of his ventures. He is also looking at other businesses, such as consultancy services in marketing communications, public relations, advertising and promotions, and creative marketing.

He adds, however, that one must always be conscious of integrating one's clients' needs into one's plans. "You can never be aloof and forget your customers because, without them, you're nothing. This is what I have learnt from my years in banking."

Bong believes that his years in banking stand him in good stead.

"The banks have trained me, and provided me with very good exposure to the various business aspects, from networking to learning how to size up risk.

"They have developed me to this stage where I can apply my skills in marketing communications and organization to my own business venture."

He has learnt a lot as well in the past three months of setting up Pucuk Rebong: "I think we never stop learning. You can't learn everything, so you have to bite into it, and pray and hope that it works." ■

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