I AM LIKE THE KARUNG GUNI OF TEAK

Tales from An Island After A Timber Boom

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I AM LIKE THE KARUNG GUNI OF TEAK!

TALES FROM AN ISLAND
AFTER A TIMBER BOOM

CONCEPTUALIZED BY LUCY DAVIS IN COLLABORATION WITH KEE YA TING
EDITED BY JASON WEE AND KENNETH TAY
INTRODUCTION

A PORTRAIT OF A SINGAPORE TIMBER PATRIARCHY AND A PLACE IN THE HEART OF AN ENTREPOT ECONOMY

“I am like the karung guni of teak,” says Allen Oei of his status and stature.

Allen Oei Soo Chwe left home at 14 and worked himself up to become one of entrepot Singapore’s most successful traders and legendary timber connoisseurs. In the first section of this exhibition book, excerpts of interviews with the charismatic Mr Oei are placed alongside photographs from his personal album. The scenes depict his early working life in various regional logging stations.

The second section combines the perspectives of Allen Oei with those of his university educated son, Simon, with whom he started his most recent venture NatureWood. Stories of both father and son are included in the second half of this book.

Like the Singapore timber industry itself, the heady boom years for Sungei Kadut have long passed. The ongoing, catastrophic environmental consequences of the regional timber trade are well known and documented elsewhere in this exhibition. In the intensely globalised and connected 21st century, regional forest nations no longer require Singaporean middlemen to route their dwindling supplies to consumers in Europe, America, Australia, China, India, and Japan. Speculations suggest that the Sungei Kadut estate will possibly last another decade before being closed and the land reallocated. But Simon Oei is upbeat about Nature Wood, the company he started with his father in 2001, embracing both the financial and ecological challenges ahead.

Allen Oei still travels regularly around the region to advise on the upgrading of machinery for both sawmills and finished products. NatureWood continues to have considerable connections and partnerships with factories in Borneo. A series of photos from Borneo donated by Allen and Simon Oei are also included in the second half of this book.

Together these narratives portray a series of fragmented histories of wood—one of the most compelling materials with which this island city was built and with whose troubled legacy we are complicit.
Allen Oei was born in 1947. He grew up in Singapore after his father, Oei Kim Leong moved the family from Surabaya, Java before the Japanese Occupation. Allen is one of eight children and the only one to be English educated.

Allen has been working with timber as a log selector grader and trader in Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Burma since the late 1960’s.

While Allen’s father had studied in China, Allen was English-language educated. Life at home with a father who he describes as rather temperamental was a challenge for Allen and he left at the age of 14.

Allen Oei attended Queenstown Technical School from 1960-64 and became a favourite of both his teachers and his principal for whom he helped sell coffee tables and chairs.

I was lucky... the first time I touched teak I was 13 years old... I redid table chairs and everything I repair, so the principle was very happy.

Allen was a member of the aeromodelling and rocketry club and enjoyed making planes and architectural drawings. He would use the money he earned from selling furniture to fund his club. But he says that the furniture industry was not for him:

After I came into the timber export business, I believe that furniture is the worst thing to do. Like fashion change, when you come out with a new design, people copy. In our dialect, we say “you die more”. You die even more.

After Allen left school he spent three years working for the Singapore government timber board, monitoring the activities of Singapore-based timber factories. During this time, gangs controlled many of the fledgling industrial areas in Singapore.

In those days, you don’t pay some money, you cannot set up business... I did not know it was such a corrupted world. When we came out of the school and watched for the government, we wanted to be the hero, we catch this guy, we catch that guy for our boss. The factories don’t like us, I have to go every factory, what, I nearly get hammered by three factories... They cut the tyre on my scooter. There was also once I got robbed take my watch, my money, waylay me... and then they say “from here to go home ah, how much you need?” I said $10, then give me back $10!

At one time, they say waylay me 5 person to one. Using the timber they want to whack me. I said you want to whack me for what? I’m doing my job. If anything we can talk. Maybe I know how to cheat a bit but. I thought I was the only one corrupted! The last inspector was already corrupted, we are not corrupted. So, we don’t know so we just send in report. Sawmill get close, suspension. Then of course the boss very angry...
In 1980, Allen Oei set up his first family timber company, called Linggua Trading Company Pte. Ltd. with the blessing of several logging companies and buyers. By that time, Allen was already such an institution in the regional timber industry that logging offered supplies of logs up front with payment only after Allen was able to sell them. The buyers likewise agreed to paid first and received the logs and timber later. He closed it just before the first Iraq war, decision he calls a second instinctive move. By the 1990's Allen Oei was able to leverage the significant contacts he had developed in Burma as an advisor to Singapore businessman Tony Chew of Asia Resources. Tony Chew is the chairman of this business federation and sits on the board of several independent and government-linked Singaporean corporations.

Parallel to this process, Allen Oei is a highly sought after consultant involved in training industry employees in techniques of grading and cutting timber in Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma.


While working with the government Allen met a Danish trader from P. Bork International A/S, a timber company seeking to set up a factory in Singapore. He worked for Bork for nearly a decade from 1970-79. His hands-on experiences with logging and log grading throughout the region came from that time.

The boss really tested me, which means if my logs come into the factory, and more than 10% are [faulty] rejected, I have to [leave]. But if the [bad logs were] within, lets say 5-10%, he [would] reward me.

In 1979, what Allen calls an instinctive feeling led him to leave Bork and start out alone.

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When asked if he spent time with Dad at work when he was growing up, Simon replied:

I don’t remember this photo being taken! The only time I went to my Dad’s factories was when I was a teenager. He asked me to paint the ends of the wood to protect from getting cracked. I used blue paint as we use colours to indicate which wood belongs to which buyer. But… after less than 2 hours I told him it was impossible. I said “I’m tired, I really cannot do it!”… I was so hot! The sun was terrible.

Then, just before my Dad close a company when I was 24 he asked me to join him. I told him, “No, you go ahead and close your company… I just go my way, and you go your way”. At the time I wanted to work in IT. I had a dream of Shenton Way, an aircon office. I didn’t want to work in sawdust of Sungei Kadut where the men are are rough and then you are not able to wear long-sleeved and tie. Then the age of 29. I come to realize there are too many people in IT. You throw a rock you will hit someone working in IT. I wanted to learn how to do business. I talked to my Dad.

Simon Oei, born in 1971, has had a very different upbringing to his father. He studied computer science at NUS and worked for Hewlett Packard and Microsoft as a programmer and then a network engineer before finally joining his father’s business at the age of 29.

But with my Dad, if you join him and want to take over the business, he expects you to start from ground zero: paint the ends; carry the wood; flip the wood; turn the wood. There’s no such thing as immediately sit in the office… Well I worked like mad dog. I’m not allowed to have any workers. One man show. Container come, you do everything. I do the forklift. I drive the fork… even scoring, packing, wrapping, wrapping… My weight dropped from 68 kilo to 55 kilo. But after 4–5 years I realized that timber is actually not so bad. I fell in love with wood. And then I really have passion for this industry.

So when my Dad said, “Okay, I think you can do your own business. Let’s close this timber business and you can do your computer thing.” I said “No way, I’m very happy with where I am! Let’s invite more investors to pump in more cash so that we can make the company grow.” So we did that. And that is why I am still here today…
When I started working in the timber industry in the 1970s, I went up to every state in Malaysia. In Indonesia I also covered all parts, Port Moresby, Ambon, Sumatra all corners. Kalimantan I also visit, Borneo, Sabah. The only place I have not been is in the Philippines.

I worked with tough people. We started from the plantation, it's all the feuds there were owned by gangsters. They tried to kill my many times!

I went to Indonesia in '71. '71 still very bad, every time we have army with us. Four army, two in front, with helmet and machine gun. Because at that time, after Sukarno fell, it was very dangerous for Chinese. They would throw my passport in the fire. They won't let you to die. They would throw you inside the water. A lot of the villagers wanted to kill me. Pull the coconut tree to obstruct us because they didn’t want us to chop their forest.

Also in Indo once I wanted to sack a worker for stealing and ended up in a fight with a village chief. I said to him, “Outside you are the village chief, here I am the chief. I never even say You steal, I said He steal. I respect you. You respect me. If not, I leave and go back.”

That night, they invited me to a big party in my house and I thought he was going to kill me that night. It was to honor me to the house for a party!
The first time I was sent out to Indonesia was to Pontianak. I spent four weeks in such beautiful country with nice weather. I stayed in a bumboat for four weeks grading the logs. Sit on the boat. Wash on the boat. Shit on these boat, because the rivers lead into the forest. These are ramin logs that they threw down into the water—very creamy white. They were so fast, I had to wear a swimming costume, stand on the log, barefoot and grade from there.

The first, I kept falling into the water. If it’s a new log, not so slippery. If it’s about three weeks or to a month, the algae starts then it’s very difficult to step on it. But I managed. I train myself until even small log, I can stand on it and turn the logs with my feet. All my raft of logs would be tied up and later the vessel will come and pick up the logs.


Allen Oei:
The IFA [Industries et Forest Asiatiques] boss was very happy with an Indonesian colleague of mine who knew how to play with the Indonesian documents. Because the man was the one doing all the loading [of logs onto the boat]. He got them and still getting the same document from the government. The French guy looked him, said, “We make a lot of money from you. But... you know what? We steal the timber.”

A lot of people steal timber from the forest reserve... They open the load, they are afraid the people will hire themselves. But they steal from even ten kilometers inside. A lot of rustling. So the police come, the guys block all the road... Or they come from the forest. That’s why sometimes they tear the forest. To evade the... you know.
Allen Oei

The first time I saw the forest I cried.

… I was very agile in my younger days.

Every week, I make a trip to the forest. I have to select trees not from the lorry but from the forest. When I reach the forest, first the logs are trimmed. The sawyers are also very smart. They can hide the defects and cut it. But buying standing tree is still the best because you can see the logs clearly. When the logs fall, the sawyers will send me in and I come back again. I need to go up to the forest standing behind the back of the truck and then go… twenty miles inside the forest. Come out, my face full of dust…

After a while, they know what I want and they will help me. But also lucky, they see that my job is so tough, such a young guy and so then they help me preselect. But I must trust them also.

The marks I am making here are the American system. They clip the number to the hammer. The hammer two sides, one is the clip, one is the nail. The Chinese… the Asian don’t do that because we are too busy. The French are doing log by log, doing number by number before they sell. They make sure everything is in proper order. The Chinese don’t care. This one anyhow, gasak*.

(*gasak—Malay Singlish for doing something haphazardly)

Allen Oei, on floating ramin logs Banjarmasin 1972–78.


Allen Oei grading meranti logs in forest 1970’s.

Allen Oei:
There was no telephone or radio—only morse code in the forest. I was in the forest for 10 days when my father passed away. They couldn’t reach me. I only found out when I got out again.

Allen Oei:
To get to Samarinda, it takes a long way. You would go to Balikpapan. After Balikpapan, you have to take this lousy taxi full of people. All cargo inside the taxi. So I have to buy the ticket for front seat. Then from there we take the speedboat up to the forest. About 6 hours... 48 horsepower per hour. Until there, your whole back won’t break. First time I go there, I cannot even wake up...

Log grading barefoot in the water, Tanjung Sengatta, East Kalimantan 1972–78.

**Allen Oei:**

There are very few ladies [in the timber industry]... they are not as strong; [to do this work you] must go to the log yard. It is very dry and all the earth flying about everywhere. During the rainy season, you must wear boots as it is flooded everywhere. We have to climb up the logs to inspect. And they will not bring it out for you to see. Sometimes, they will pile it up. And they will hide the bad ones inside and make it difficult for you to see. Furthermore, usually in one parcel, there are 40 to 50 logs, and in a day we have to look at 100 parcels. Sometimes, though (with the lack of timber) there are very few parcels to inspect. ... And the people are very rough.

There was this one Taiwanese girl though I am never like her [at drinking]; my liver might die... she went out when I drank, I sold foods to ‘@’ (sold foods with begging); she drank all the alcohol in the plane. That was the only time I stopped.

These are all ebony logs in this photo. We had to go up to the mountain and these aborigine guys [indigenous people], are always close to the rocky mountains. I cannot climb up. These aborigines, their legs have hand fingers like monkeys. So, they put me at the back of the key chair. Then the sky is about 1000 feet high, they also like that, talk talk talk like monkey. But I cannot fall. He cannot fall... if he die, I die.

These are all in the forest. This is how these logs are felled. They let it rot for one year, two years, three years. Until all the sapwood, all the outer layer all finish.

In the meantime, were you all worried about people taking your logs away?

**Allen Oei:**


There was this one Taiwanese girl though I can never beat her [at drinking]; my liver almost died... the worst was when I drank half bottles of whisky with the loggers. [In another incident] on their way to Sabah, they drank all the alcohol on the plane! But now I stopped.
Allen Oei:
This is my first employer, the Danish company Bork... in Kranji. The most beautiful factory in Singapore... you know the Europeans, they dare to spend money. The logs in the picture are meranti logs. We only buy big logs. We buy one metre and up. Our logs, anyhow, must be one metre because we split them four. All the time I was dealing Malaysian and Indonesian logs, white meranti, yellow, rosewood, sometimes other species. ... I made a lot of money off rosewood. My daughter Rosalynd was born during that time.

Allen Oei:
Actually this Danish company very good. They bring people in every year to teach us management, politics, accounts. Then in 1975, my Danish boss sent me to Burma. Bork had good contacts with the Burmese since 1960s; they were like the master to the Burmese government. When Bork came to the Burmese even girdling the tree according to the British system so that the sap would dry up and you can float the logs down rivers to the sea. We called those logs dry logs. But for veneer, non-dry green logs are better—when you slice it you can see the vein. We used empty oil drums to float the green logs in the water.
The global demand for timber rose considerably after World War Two. For Singapore, however, the timber boom years started two decades later, in the late 1960s, and lasted until the 1990s. A supply-side boost to the industry came in 1967 when Indonesian General Suharto’s New Order government backed by the IMF and the World Bank, offered lucrative forest concessions and investment arrangements to foreign companies. The move was intended to address Indonesia’s national debt as well as to raise Indonesia’s position as a Southeast Asian timber exporter vis-a-vis the Philippines and Malaysia. A flood of foreign investment followed, marking the beginnings of a profitable but environmentally devastating carve-up of Indonesia’s forests, first by logging companies and later by agribusinesses such as palm oil and paper pulp. By 1978 Singapore was the seventh most important investor in the Indonesian forest sector, behind South Korea, Japan, the US, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

By the second half of the 1970s timber also was Singapore’s 4th largest export industry with exports hitting the $1 billion dollar mark in May 1980. Traditionally, timber processing activities were concentrated in three regions: the southeast, around the Kallang river (the earliest site for Singapore’s timber industry); the southwest, with newer plywood industries along the Jurong river, and Kranji in the northwest where newer factories, some run by foreign investors had appeared in the 1970s. Singapore’s earlier timber industries, like many of the island’s raw material-processing factories were traditionally situated next to the sea or along rivers to facilitate smoother offloading of materials directly from the ships.

The government started encouraging timber industries to move northwest, to Sungei Kadut, an area adjacent to existing Kranji factories in the mid-70s as part of an industrial zoning exercise. During Singapore’s colonial occupation, Sungei Kadut (which means sackcloth river in Malay) was a site of some of last indigenous forest reserves. By the late 1970s, however, the aspirations of a growing state included transforming the forest reserves into a state of the art industrial estate. The industrial transformation of the site was simultaneous with the end of river transport and storage of timber in Singapore. An expanding and successful land infrastructure made it more convenient to transport the logs from Singapore’s main container ports at Keppel and Jurong to the new sawmills and factories by road.

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By 1979 the Singaporean government demanded that all remaining timber industries move to Sungei Kadut. Allen Oei was already familiar with Sungei Kadut from his tenure at P. Bork A/S International who had constructed a factory in the area. As evidenced by the following newspaper clippings, the move was not without its difficulties. Timber merchants and sawmill owners were concerned by what they feared would be higher rentals and disruptions to their businesses associated with the move. Nonetheless, Sungei Kadut became for better or worse the central location for timber merchants, sawmills, flooring and furniture enterprises. Sungei Kadut is a site where many a fortune has been made in an industry that, while volatile, was still immensely profitable for Singaporean merchants until the 1990s.
The following newspaper clippings are reproduced with kind permission of Singapore Press Holdings.
A largely unregulated and environmentally catastrophic plunder of regional forests through most of the 20th century ultimately contributed to a downturn in Singapore’s timber fortunes by the late 1990’s. The downturn was exacerbated by a series of regional and world political and economic crises, the development of sophisticated, industrial timber processing, and the expansion of the export and communication capacities of regional forest nations that reduced the need for Singaporean middlemen.

Today, the factories and streets of Sungei Kadut estate feel like they belong to a different era—a time when the raw materials that used to build this island’s city and economy were more tangible and present in the landscape. Many of the last remaining timber companies are closing. Those with connections are relocating to Indonesia, Malaysia and Burma.

However, Allen and Simon Oei are still positive about their own future as suggested by the comments of father and son accompanying the second half of this book. The photographs depict scenes from Nature Wood’s warehouse at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4 in early April 2014, with a small detour to Burma from whence a final shipment of logs had just arrived.

**Allen Oei:**

My wife scolded me at first about trying to bring my son into this business.

> *We do know how already said timber dying industry. Where got some more timber for your son to do?*

I said, “Kid!” Because in the late 90’s the [Indonesian] government finally allowed private individuals to cut wood. Before that, only princes were not allowed to cut trees. So from 1997 onwards, I became the trainer and master for these [new private companies]. I was the master for 45 years altogether.

I started NatureWood without a single cent. I told my wife to put all my money to invest for my son. That time, Simon cried! He wondered how this would start. But I brought Simon to Surabaya and showed them to the locals and tell them to help him. So Simon came in at just right time, when every factory is running very smoothly already. Everything just take off without any energy. We just sit on the 747!
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[In the early days] The whole world market [was] in my fingers, any company wants to close down, I can take everything. I can take up any rubbish. I can still sell away the reject at no loss. My boss liked me because I never let my company lose money. Even with the rejects, the company can still sell it and make money.

So in the 80’s, Indonesia stopped export of whole logs. Must be square. Then post ‘89 they only export finished products. When they changed to square logs there was a lot of wastage. The leftover round bits they will just throw away. So I offered to remove the extra wood for free and they were happy. I sold the leftovers to this US guy who made wooden handles for penknives.

I am like the karung guni of teak!

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Today we also try and use as much of the tree as we possibly can. In my Dad’s time a lot of the teak logs we use now would have been discarded. Indonesian architects are becoming good at using every part of the wood— even if it has holes in it. American buyers also appreciate wood that is not perfect. Unfortunately many Asian and some European buyers still prefer smooth and “clean”, without defects. The buyers have to accept that we can’t get the high grade teak anymore. As in the past it was possible to buy 200 to 300 year old logs today we have to buy teak that is only 30 years old— less wood and more possible defects.

LEFT SPREAD

Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.
Si e Oei: The Sungei Kadut that you see today used to be famous for its timber people. All the Singapore Timber Association bosses, all the big bosses, made their money in the ‘70s–’80s, in the boom years. Then the ‘90s was the slowdown. The Iraq war came. After that, in the ‘90s, the Internet era. From then it was totally down down down down.

As a Singaporean, I feel that we should actually move out of this country, at least, and work in Malaysia as a bare minimum. Singaporeans today need to work on two countries at least, perhaps more. When I started this business in 2000, I stocked everything in Singapore. Now we stocking in Malaysia, Myanmar, Indonesia.
Allen Oei: All over Asia they believe in the wood god—like the Dutch king. In every forest we must pray. They (the kapala/or headman in Burma or even the surveyor) can cut tree or not—yes, of course, you can be allowed to cut the tree with the spirit. They are not allowed to touch the tree. They cannot. You even try to cut it, you’re sick.

In the factory during the seventh month, we will pray and every month we will give thanks. We have special lamps for good energy like this one [points to lamp in ceiling] and the fengshui master will tell you how to make your business smoother. This one, even my Christian boss believes… I was a Christian in my school day. Then I married my wife. My wife a Buddhist. So 40 years being a Buddhist. Last year, she said, let’s go. So we’re a Christian. We disposed all our idols and everything.

Sim On Oei: All the Chinese believe in five elements. Metal, wood, earth and air. I believe that wood, no matter how many generations down the road will be still an element that we need. Maybe floor, maybe furniture, maybe any parts of it. It will still be useful. That’s what I believe in, and therefore, even though they say it is a “sunset industry”, I carry on.

Sim On Oei: We are the third generation of timber traders. We have to fight a different fight. The Chinese are coming in. The Burmese are coming in. The Indonesians are coming in and selling the timber for a low price. It’s very difficult. We actually encourage foreign companies to have an office here. That’s part of the Singapore plan. But a lot of the so-called intermediate parties (like agents, traders) are being cut out. I’m okay because I’m fully prepared.

Sim On Oei: We Chinese, believe in the five elements. Metal, wood, earth and air. I believe that wood, no matter how many generations down the road will be still an element that we need. Maybe floor, maybe furniture, maybe any parts of it. It will still be useful. That’s what I believe in, and therefore, even though they say it is a “sunset industry”, I carry on.
Allen Oei:
I still think I have one extrasight though. I always can tell when there is a downturn. I don’t know how to explain.

Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.
Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Crayon specifically for marking wood.
“Squirrel Brand Crayons for Timber, Made in the People’s Republic of China” (translation by Lai Chee Kien)
Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Teak is also known throughout the world. Even the poorest guy in Indonesia, the poorest guy on the road in Myanmar, they will say, if I get married I must have a teak marriage box or teak bed. In fact, the whole world everybody loves teak.

Simon Oei:

It’s just, my Dad could buy wood for $100 and sell it for $3000-$5000 because Europeans did not know the price. And the distance was so great, it took such a long time to travel. They’re still in the past. Imagine merchants were the big guys, the rich guys, but this has changed. And today, everything is easy. You can check the internet everything can be googled. You can check prices on Alibaba.com and also check who is selling to who.
Times have changed when it comes to labour. In the 1960s, we still have many Singaporeans. The Chinese as well as the Thais are generally better labourers for the timber industry. They have a lot of strength and in the old days they use the hand saws. But they are getting old. We are getting more Malaysians. In the old days, Malaysians are very hardworking. They can work 24 hours a day. But now, until the 1970s when the old labourers made it rich and they became lazy. By this time, there were already no more Singaporeans. Now we are getting Chinese and Burmese. They are very hardworking. When they first came, they were doing $900 a month. When they became sick, I stopped them. If they want $3000 a month, I give them $3000. If they want $4000, I give them $4000. Nowadays, they are very healthy because they are getting paid well. They are very responsible and they are very united. If one machine is spoilt, you will not be able to get a worker to take the blame. I like everything to be fast, and everybody to be like me. These days though I have learnt to be calmer, after I become a Christian, I pray more.


Allen Oei: There are also generational issues... I feel every parent has this problem. Nowadays, children are more educated and they want their ways. The children try to change. I say...you still have to listen to me from me and not just default. The above son was taking over my job (you did a good job). All the rich man sons...I made him [the deceased] stand beside the saw, but difficult to, I force the practice and they don’t.

Si m Oei: When I was a child, my Dad was often not home. He spent most of the time overseas. Because Dad spent little time at home, Dad’s father was very important to me. For Dad, being away has never been an issue as he helps. Nowadays, you try, but the job is difficult. The director who is taking over my job...it is difficult. The director is also different. He says, “You still have to learn...”

Si m Oei: When I was a child, my Dad was often not home. He spent most of the time overseas because the plane was not frequent at that time. Nowadays, you try, but you can’t do it. He says, “You still have to...”

Allen Oei: There are also generational issues... I think every parent has this problem. Nowadays, children are more educated and they want their ways. The children try to change. I say...you still have to listen to me from me and not just default. The above son was taking over my job (you did a good job). All the rich man sons...I made him [the deceased] stand beside the saw, but difficult to, I force the practice and they don’t.

Allen Oei:
You can get killed! It’s the small logs people get killed by. Because people are not so careful with small logs… And they are not so visible. Most accidents I seen are small logs and tree branches.


Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.

Allen Oei:
In the timber industry, those who are in this business, they all know Allen Oei. And I am not an easy guy to work with. I every time want my buyer to buy timber wood. I think buyer buy some natural and, with some defects. I think buyer want to, they want “natural” looking wood with marks. These are the buyers that I don’t like. Most of the buyers that I don’t enjoy working with.

The key to my success is that I make sure my suppliers make money first. Then my buyer makes money. If these two don’t make money, how I make money? This is how I look at it.

Simon Oei:
A lot of Singaporean architects are asking for FSC [Forest Stewardship Council] certified, sustainable wood. But Singapore is a no-forest country. There is no Forestry Department or equivalent. And Singaporean Trades Association, is a marketing company type of organisation, a business. The next best, so-called department is the AVA [The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority]. But they are not foresters. As long as you don’t put on the form that you have wood that is CITES [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species] listed, then they simply won’t know what you have. For example, it looks the same, but the form is “rubber”. It simply the same, to be honest. So, they import as rubber wood. For Singaporeans, they only look at paper. Rubber wooded!
Main photograph left to right:
Brothers Zhang Bao Li and Zhang Bao Dong, Ah Zhong, Wong Shao Guo
and Chen Gang Jie at Allen & Simon Oei’s Nature Wood Warehouse
at 31 Sungei Kadut Street 4.
Photographs by Kee Ya Ting, April 2014.
Si m Oei: The government and the NGOs are putting in a lot of effort to make sure everything is legal. The architects and the builders are saying that there needs to be type of paper. But paper, being paper, I can print it right? It can be faked, it can be real. Of course I don't do this kind of thing. But it's possible. And it's difficult to make sure things are legal here in Singapore because there is so much illegal wood around. In the future, there are issues with legality here really with the country of origin. As Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar you need to inform the government that the wood is being legally harvested and taxes are paid. The government will also have to make sure, whether to inspect or get the tax money back packet. We can't do anything about that. That is up to them.

Because there is so many expertise here, Singapore can make things legal. Exporting it out of Singapore is legal. We practically don't need anything to inspect it. In Europe and the USA, I think for the first time Europe has the European Timber Regulation (EUTR). For us, it really all about how to do the legal thing. The AVA would only spot-check you. So the importer here to do the due diligence. Which means you have to make sure that you know what you are importing.

Allen & Simon Oei: I have taught people in more than 30 over companies in Indonesia. They don't even know how to cut teak. When I was there, they were selling to the Japanese. Beautiful傻瓜wood! Wow! I said, Wah! $50 straight away I give them $800, then I teach him how to cut. They hire, give them. Then I teach them to cut, they all dare not. Their father give them the factory, the young men don't know what to do! I said to the father and the son, I give you the machine, I give you the logs, I give you the expert from Singapore. I bring in 3 experts. I buy the logs from you!


Si m Oei: In the past, I would guess that the industry was 100 percent, or 80–90 percent illegal. But things are changing. More industry people are educated. People start to know and want to know what they are buying. If you understand the industry you can tell whether it is legal. It’s very simple, just visit the factory. You should know already.

I feel that I have a purpose in this area, I want to fully bring more standards to the industry. That’s why I joined the Singapore Timber Association and the US National Wood Floor Association. I went to take courses in the USA on inspection. Some of these things are taught in regional schools: how to cut a tree down, how to source the forest, how to grade timber, something recycling, how to laminate, how to install and train people. I think there is one expertise in the industry. Bringing in standards, and making the raw material to the fullest — these are the key things that I am advocating!
A

Before 1990—only invited agents could enter Burma, and when the government gave
us something, the whole world would know. My Danish boss was an appointed agent
so I could go in with him.

After 1990 I was also able to go in many times, I had networks, the people know you
and the people trust me. Before 1990 the logging was slower. After 1990s, it was
a lot faster. They use trucks. They use bulldozers. They use chainsaws. Last time,
they cannot even use chainsaws. Last time they use military.

One time when they come shopping to Singapore, your pocket must have at least three
hundred dollars to half-a-million dollars… the whole family would come to shop.

And then all our companies we would pool together, we have more than six
Singapore companies working with Burma.

PLACES THE LOGS LEFT BEHIND:

SNAPSHOTS FROM
THE BURMA TIMBER TRADE, APRIL 2013

On the 31st of March 2013, the Burmese government imposed a ban
on the export of logs from the country. There is considerable speculation
amongst environmental groups and Burma-watchers as to whether such
a sanction will be effective in curbing the devastation of remaining
forest reserves.

The following photographs are snapshots taken by a Nature Wood
distributor. They show a government Myanmar Timber Enterprise
(MTE) log depot, situated by Nature Wood’s own, award-winning
partner factory.

The logs at Allen and Simon Oei’s Sungei Kadut warehouse originated
from depots and warehouses such as these. The logs reached Singapore
before the ban.

Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) log depot/grading station.
Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.

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Singapore companies working with Burma.
No matter how poor the Burmese workers were in those days, they were contented… but the Indonesians, they got a taste of the beautiful life. Burma may be the same as Indonesia in the next 10 years cause they just opened up… you will see! When the country opens up, the government has to keep up the pace, give the people more education and work and then increase their salary, and then they will be like Singapore and Malaysia.

When I visit [in Burma], my European boss asked, ‘How many presents do you bring?’ I bring more presents than him like Tiger balm and lighter for even custom officers. They don’t even have Nescafe. Sometimes, I bring them other things like Pokémon and all the stuff like they do not have.

Our agent was earning as low as $10 until 1990. When I employed my manager, I was still paying them $50 and they were smiling. That’s why I say I gave them God, I gave them a real job. I really pity them when the army asks them to build the road, they are asked to make big rocks into small rocks. Even the army asks them, ‘This road is for you to build so when next time your house will be more money. Even the children have to go out to build the roads…’

I think the government has to do a lot. It’s quite difficult, because all the money has been siphoned out. I’m sorry I was one of them, I helped them… I do regret stealing logs out, but never mind, we need to eat and we need to survive. European people keep telling me not to take, but I always tell them “You don’t buy la!” But they have to buy also, they have to eat also. I always believe in the supply demand balance pan.

Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.
There will be ecological problems though... unless they try to end the illegal felling near to China, which is the biggest. They tried many times but cannot, there is still too much going to China rather than coming down. I hope they can stop that. If they don’t, we are in trouble, and our supply will be drying. I once flew helicopter over the area by the border and everywhere was bare. They don’t log the endangered species, logging is still selective, mainly teak, rosewood and of course, there are new plantations.

For the Chinese government, they shot many Chinese smugglers during the past 8-9 years and tax $150 for every cubic metre found. The Chinese government helped the Myanmar government to replant trees with this money.

You know it’s nearly impossible to stop log export from Myanmar right now. Number one: the factories are not ready, they are all run down factories, apart from my partner’s factory. My partner has the best factory and has won the Best Factory Award.

Number two: there are so many logs lying around depots throughout the whole of Myanmar.

Photo courtesy of Allen Oei/Simon Oei, April 2014.
A L L E N  O E I:

In my time the real logging is this: they really mark the tree, give the number, and when you fell, the area must point the same number that you put A, B, C, D. Even parts – A, B, C, D. So when you sell, there is a record. And then there is a system, say the forest marking. Then they will mark the tree. And the numbers are all around. And what species, they will have different color paint. So they will mark on the map… they will mark the trees all have number and they have to pass it to the forester. The forester will approve. Then they will charge you the royalty when they come up in auctions. That was in the old days. Today, nobody practice here. But I think in French, in the Ivory Coast, France, especially the English and American log, they do follow the system. They don’t… we still follow the system… we do it in computer. [laughs] We don’t do it actually… but we just bluff the forester.

A L L E N  O E I:

I don’t worry about the log export ban too much as we have five factories in Myanmar. One is our own, and the other four are affiliated. One is our our partner. My students work in all these factories. In fact, I have taught in so many factories. Embarkon is also here. But in Jerry logs, we don’t care too much. We only have one affiliated and doing quite well. And we have constant source of supply.
Many people were afraid when they see me go into the tender room. I’m the only one that immediately knows the quality and price. It’s like wine. It’s the colour, it’s the texture, the annual rings and the cut can also reveal the colour and texture.

So from the outside you watch and you see the inside… through every layer. To check a tree you can quickly have an impression that it is good already. Do you check three times you find a hollow sound. Cut out and you find a bad one. Knock all away until you find a hollow sound like the drum sound. This is how we inspect… but all through experience…

Sometimes, to find out if it is rotten and hollow inside, we use the hammer and you know, if it’s a good log, the sound remain the same. But if you knock then you find a hollow sound, “tok tok tok tok khoark...” then die… that means you have a bad one… Knock all away until you find a hollow sound like the drum sound. This is how we inspect… but all through experience…

The heart is not always at the centre. You would expect that, but it’s not. The tree can grow like this but it doesn’t. That’s why in plantations we plant trees side by side, very close to each other so they grow straight. Not all the trees are intended to grow into big trees. Some are called “thinning posts”; they are just there to make the tree grow straight. Later when the trees are bigger we cut the “thinning posts”.

Close up of an end of one of the last logs imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei. Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.
Rig & Spread

Close up of one of the last log imported to Singapore from Burma before the 31 March 2014 export ban. Donated to our project by Allen & Simon Oei. Photograph by Lucy Davis, April 2014.

Allen Oei:

Here is a secret of our short tragic poem: Singapore has taken service of worm shit from the heart of the tree. They can find worm hole in the tree.

If you find worm shit in the heart, you can find worm hole in the tree.