

## Two's Company with Wen Ken Group's Fu Siang Jeen and Fu Shou Jeen

## TIES THAT BIND

A close family bond helps the two brothers work harmoniously to modernise Wen Ken Group, known for its Three Legs Cooling Water drink



Venessa Lee

Tradition is in the DNA of Wen Ken Group, which turns 81 years old this year.

Specialising in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), health supplements and commodities as well as over-the-counter medication, the company's signature product is Three Legs Cooling Water. The popular drink is said to relieve "heatiness" and was originally sold to hard-labouring coolies in 1930s Singapore.

Behind today's Wen Ken Group, which had four founding families, are a pair of third-generation brothers whose family culture is similarly traditional.

Yet Mr Fu Siang Jeen, 44, and Mr Fu Shou Jeen, 43, have modernised the firm, determined not only to sidestep but also to soar above possible pitfalls associated with family-run businesses.

Managing director Fu Siang Jeen entered the company at the request of his father Fu Weng Leng.

Shortly after graduating from university in the late 1990s, where he studied philosophy and psychology, Mr Fu Siang Jeen became a business development executive at Wen Ken Group.

In 2009, he took over as managing director, a post held by his father and grandfather. In contrast, Mr Fu Shou Jeen's route into the family business was circuitous. After a 10-year career as an auditor and management consultant in multinational corporations, he agreed to come on board only when his father asked him to, shortly before he died of liver cancer.

Mr Fu Shou Jeen, the executive director of Wen Ken Group, says his motivation was from family loyalty, but adds: "A sense of duty only goes so far. One also has to find satisfaction in the job."

The two siblings have a younger brother who works in banking. All three brothers are married and have two children each.

Their late grandfather Foo Yew Ming came to Singapore from China's Fujian province as an orphaned teenager seeking new opportunities.

After working as an assistant at a medical hall, he realised that lowly paid workers typically self-medicated themselves because they could not afford to pay a physician's fees.

Together with three other partners - Mr Chan Seng Koon, Mr Foo Yin and Mr Chong Tang Seong - he started producing cooling water for "heatiness", as well as powders to be ingested for headaches and skin treatments for infections that were common among plantation workers, using ingredients from TCM.

The partners started out by selling their products out of suitcases. After World War II ended, business

had blossomed enough for them to start a factory in Johor Baru.

The company still has this plant in Malaysia as well as three other factories in its biggest market, Indonesia. It is looking to expand to Indochina this year, with plans to open another factory in Cambodia or Vietnam, says Mr Fu Siang Jeen.

With the three kneeling legs in its logo representing humility, parity and diligence, the Three Legs Cooling Water drink comes in its original flavour (70 cents for a 200ml bottle), as well as three flavours launched last year for the company's 80th anniversary: lime, guava and lychee (\$1.30 for 200ml).

By far the company's best-selling product, it is sold not only locally and regionally, but also in the Middle East and Japan. Mr Fu Siang Jeen estimates that a million bottles of the drink are consumed every day.

Stories about their grandfather with whom they lived with as children, were passed down to the brothers from their aunts, who used to work and sleep in the family's factory in Singapore, which has since closed.

Their father had six younger sisters, three of whom were unmarried and lived in their family home in the Mountbatten area, together with the three brothers and their parents.

The three siblings shared a room as children and moved out only after they got married.

Bonding as teenagers over mixed tapes and the Bee Gees in the same space helped them learn about "give and take", says Mr Fu Siang Jeen, who applies this approach to work with his brother.

Their family ties, both immediate and extended, have remained strong through the years, although emotions were not discussed.

Eating supper at 9pm as a family when the brothers were children was a regular occurrence after their stern grandfather insisted on eating at 6pm daily. Family members pushed the car out of the driveway to go for supper to avoid waking the patriarch, who slept at 7pm.

Now, at least once a week, about 10 members of the family meet for breakfast. Up to about 30 family members, including cousins, aunts and uncles, travelled together to places such as Bintan and Taiwan in recent years.

Their close family bond helps explain how Mr Fu Siang Jeen got into the family business.

After graduating from National University of Singapore in 1997, he found it hard to find a job as the Asian financial crisis was under way.

He was at the final stages of interviews for a human resources job, when his father asked him to join Wen Ken. Mr Fu Weng Leng conveyed this desire through his employee, Mr Cheong Wing Kit, 59, who supported this request and is now a director with the company.

Mr Fu Siang Jeen says: "It wasn't that big a sacrifice for me because it's the family business. I would like to give it a chance. It was different for Shou Jeen, who already had a career."

He does not know precisely why his father asked him to join the company,



Brothers Fu Siang Jeen and Fu Shou Jeen are the only third-generation members from the founders' families holding key roles in Wen Ken Group. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN



Mr Fu Shou Jeen (back row left) and Mr Fu Siang Jeen (first row centre) with their parents, Mr Fu Weng Leng and Madam Leow Fie Yin, and brother Tong Jeen. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FU SIANG JEEN

a topic that had not been broached.

He says: "We never talked about it. By asking through a third party, it's probably his way of giving me a choice."

Their mother, housewife Leow Fie Yin, 74, however, says her late husband had talked to her about Mr Fu Siang Jeen joining the business after he finished secondary school. It was part of Chinese custom for an eldest son, she adds.

Mr Fu Shou Jeen says: "We're a traditional Chinese family. At the time, a lot of feelings were not said expressly."

He remembers his father making his actions count more than words when it came to caring for the family, such as when his father made porridge for his ailing mother.

But when it came to the second son, his father was more indirect.

After leaving Nanyang Technological University armed with a degree in accountancy, Mr Fu Shou Jeen worked in global firms such as Siemens and Roche as a consultant.

In 2007, the late Mr Fu asked him to join the business, but Mr Fu Shou Jeen declined as he was enjoying his job in management consultancy.

Mr Fu Weng Leng had liver cancer in 2009. He died at 67 years old, within a year of his diagnosis.

Madam Leow says he knew his illness was progressing rapidly and wanted Mr Fu Shou Jeen to help his elder brother in the business.

Mr Fu Shou Jeen agreed when his father asked him a second time before he died.

"I think he may have changed his mind because he saw that my brother was the only one from the third generation who was in charge," says Mr Fu Shou Jeen.

"During the first two years, it was very difficult for me because I was used to an MNC culture, which was performance-based and had SOPs (standard operating procedures) for almost everything. There were no fixed SOPs then. That was one thing that we improved along the way."

He says he now finds satisfaction in "servant-leadership", where he helps grow the company to better not only himself, but also the staff.

While their father had many fellow second-generation employees

in the business who came from the other founding families, the brothers are the only third-generation scions left in key roles.

Over the years, due to members of the other families wanting to cash out their shares, the Fu family now holds the majority share in the privately owned company.

Mr Fu Siang Jeen is mindful of the business' origins while adopting more corporate governance and practices, such as flexi-work arrangements which are taken up by about 20 per cent of its employees.

"We try to preserve the harmony of the different founding families by having them as directors. Even though their shareholdings have reduced, they have a voice in decision-making at the board level," he says.

Other changes that the brothers have implemented over the years include having more stringent criteria for members of the founding families hoping to join the company to avoid an "entitlement mentality", he adds.

Mr Chris Lim, 45, group business director at Wen Ken Group who is based in Kuala Lumpur, says he would not have joined the company if he practised nepotism, stereotypical of some family businesses.

A former chief financial officer at a pharmaceutical company, Mr Lim says that branding and paying attention to staff strengths and weaknesses are modern ways in which Wen Ken Group keeps abreast of the times. The company is rebranding later this year and has been using Instagram to reach out to younger consumers.

"They also understand their own strengths. Siang Jeen is more people-oriented and is in charge of departments such as marketing, HR and product management," says Mr Lim.

"Shou Jeen is more numbers-driven and is in charge of finances and manufacturing."

At the end of the day, amid challenges such as a legal dispute over licensing in Indonesia which lasted several years, family ties still count.

"We have a sense of togetherness," says Mr Fu Shou Jeen simply.

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## Running on Three Legs

Brothers Fu Siang Jeen (right) and Fu Shou Jeen, third-generation owners of the popular cooling drink, tell Venessa Lee that they aim to avoid the pitfalls of a family-run business.



Fu Siang Jeen on Fu Shou Jeen

Fu Shou Jeen on Fu Siang Jeen

## He distils my ideas

## We build consensus together

Mr Fu Siang Jeen says his younger brother, the executive director of Wen Ken Group, has different strengths from him.

"Shou Jeen is a systematic person. He would have a certain plan that he would execute. It complements me because I have a lot of ideas and he will distil them for me," says Mr Fu Siang Jeen.

"I don't exactly see myself as being the managing director who makes all the calls. I see us as making decisions collectively."

Mr Fu Siang Jeen is responsible for, among other things, new product development.

Some of the projects he has headed are the company's pe pa gao, a tonic treating coughs and throat ailments, which was launched about eight years ago. They made its formulation less sweet to appeal to more health-conscious consumers today.

One example of how the brothers worked together was when Mr Fu Siang Jeen wanted more than three flavours for the flavoured Three Legs Cooling Water drinks introduced last year. Mr Fu Shou Jeen ultimately persuaded him that three were enough, based on their budget and projected sales.

Mr Fu Shou Jeen says he and his elder brother try to be open-minded and humble to avoid letting disagreements fester.

They walk in and out of each other's offices freely in the Wen Ken Group headquarters in Alexandra Road to discuss ideas.

"When we want to achieve a certain objective, we always go back to why we are embarking on a particular endeavour," says Mr Fu Shou Jeen.

"We decide who is going to be held accountable for the results and that person will make the call."

For example, when they decided to expand to Indochina, Mr Fu Shou Jeen felt it would be the additional engine of growth to drive the company forward.

But his brother "wanted to see more justification" and they went on a trade-related trip to talk to Singapore businesses in Cambodia and Laos to gather feedback.

The trip cemented their decision and was a way to build consensus, says Mr Fu Shou Jeen.