



80 years of EVOLVING with the nation

Lea Hin Company (Private) Limited

LEA HIN GROUP

For 80 years, Lea Hin Group has grown side by side with Singapore, from lighting up people's daily lives in the early years, to supplying materials for construction as Singapore's infrastructure grew in the post-war period, and equipping Singapore homes with appliances as the economy prospered and consumer demand increased up to the new millennium and beyond. Guided by the values and vision of its founder, the business has always steered its growth to meet the needs of the nation and as such the Lea Hin story is inextricably woven into that of Singapore's.

Its story starts as a classic tale of a young immigrant who left his home in search of a better future. The company's founder, Mr Woo Kai Lea, arrived in Singapore from Ningbo, China at the age of 11 and worked as a carpentry apprentice. Over the years, he toiled to make a living and gradually, with ambition and hard work, he carved out a niche for himself by founding Lea Hin in 1935. His foresight enabled him to sell a range of kerosene lanterns and other kerosene-related products to meet the

need for dependable lighting before the days of constant electricity supply from the national grid. Households required kerosene stoves to prepare daily meals, industrial sites without the capabilities of a generator needed kerosene-fuelled lighting to run their operations, and kerosene lanterns were essential to guide fishermen navigating the sea at night. This high demand led to the eventual launch of Lea Hin's own brands of kerosene pressure lanterns, "Butterfly" and "Tingkwong", supplying to Singapore and other developing markets overseas.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Woo Kai Lea had already established Lea Hin's business presence across the region, in countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

However, with the outbreak of World War II, optimism for the growing business turned to despair. As Singapore painstakingly pushed through the hardships and devastation of war to rebuild itself, Woo Kai Lea was determined to do his part to help get the nation and his

business back on track. Standing firmly by his belief in the principles of gratitude, patriotism and integrity, he was extremely active in charity locally, though much of it was on an anonymous basis. He frequently made donations back to his motherland, China, for building infrastructure and life supplies. He was a well-known philanthropist in the business circles back then.

As Singapore focussed steadily on nation-building in the lead up to the country's independence, Woo Kai Lea identified yet another opportunity to contribute, and steered Lea Hin towards the production of quality steel casement windows ("Star" brand) to supply the construction of buildings and houses. Supply was extended to the Malaysia market, which was also going through rapid development at the time. Business continued to flourish with the opening of an office and a factory manufacturing mantles in Hong Kong for the Group's kerosene lamps in the 1950s, extending Lea Hin's reach into markets in Hong Kong and China.

Lea Hin's office on South Bridge Road, Singapore, 1935



As Lea Hin continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Woo Kai Lea remained committed to Singapore's development as a newly independent nation. The demand for materials soared as the Singapore government put in place its plan for nationwide housing for all Singaporeans through its Housing Development Board, and Lea Hin once again stepped in and became one of the major suppliers of steel casement windows, window grilles and roller shutters for HDB projects, later succeeded by their new aluminium windows and grilles, which are still the standard today. With that, the business proved itself to be reliable in serving the needs of the nation and was well on its way to becoming a trusted brand in the construction industry.

Woo Kai Lea's dedication to growing the business through organic means, focussing primarily on the needs of the nation rather than directly on profit, earned him the goodwill of his peers and led him to forge strong ties with his partners. His shrewd foresight also garnered their respect and he established a reputation as an astute businessman, having made inroads into Southeast Asian markets as early as the late 1930s. Later, as the business proceeded into the 1960s and 1970s, Woo Kai Lea looked to extending its reach, opening full trading offices in Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines and Laos, and stretching beyond Asia as far as Africa and the Middle East, markets which they remain strong in until today.

When tragedy struck in the late 1970s with Woo Kai Lea falling ill, his son, Woo Siew Hin, dropped out of university to prepare



Woo Kai Lea



Woo Siew Hin at the Singapore Trade Mission and Exhibition in Nigeria, 1977



The manual application process of industrial powder coatings in the early days.

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As Lea Hin's management looked to the future, Singapore continued to develop rapidly and mass construction led to a sustained demand in construction materials in the 1980s. Noticing that the wet paint coating of Lea Hin's stoves could be further improved in quality, the team had searched for a solution, which ultimately led to the discovery of environment-friendly electro-static powder coatings. In 1981, with technological know-how from Europe, Woo Siew Hin took Lea Hin into new uncharted territory and established the Oxyplast Powder Coatings business in this part of Asia to supply "clean and green" powder coatings to the construction, manufacturing and home appliances industries both locally and in Malaysia, China, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia.

Over the years, Lea Hin has continued to evolve to cater to Singapore's nation-building needs, every step of the way. Adding to its range of innovative kerosene products, aluminium frames and grilles and its powder coatings business, Lea Hin today focusses on supplying electrical appliances to meet growing consumer demand. Thus "Farfalla" (the Italian word for Butterfly), was created. A range of household products, from refrigerators to freezers, kitchen appliances and lifestyle items like wine chillers, are marketed under the newer "Farfalla" brand, present in Singapore as well as in other parts of Southeast Asia.

So what is next for this foresighted company? Recognising the limitations of the manufacturing industry on the Group's global growth in the modern era, Lea Hin is turning its attention towards the services industry, specifically the hospitality sector.

Under the stewardship of Woo Siew Hin, Lea Hin looks forward to opening a brand new chapter in its story as it grooms the third generation of the Woo family for leadership, and the Group remains committed to serving the land it calls Home. As Woo Siew Hin puts it: "The market is very competitive here but being a home-grown Singaporean brand, ultimately we want to stay strong on home-ground, even as we continue to expand overseas." And so, as it continues to grow alongside the nation through the best and worst of times, Lea Hin will always put the needs of the nation first. ■



Aluminium Window Frame



Lea Hin's traditional kerosene and gas products line-up

to take on leadership of the company. But just six months later, Siew Hin was left with the enormous responsibility of heading the company when his father passed away. At only 22 years of age, and with little experience, he knew that gaining credibility and leading the enterprise forward would be an immense challenge. But with the goodwill built by his father with the company's customers and partners, and with the guidance of his trusted seniors, Siew Hin was provided the support and time needed for him to step up and continue the Lea Hin legacy globally, while his elder sister Woo Siew Wai helmed the Hong Kong operations and watched over the African and Middle Eastern markets.