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# Banyan Tree's Ho is now more jackfruit than durian

Maverick entrepreneur whose life is filled with ironies is more grounded, but has his zest intact



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How could one life be so filled with contradictions!

Born in Hong Kong, raised in Thailand in his early years, educated in Taiwan, the United States and Singapore.

Nine years to get his first degree after being dropped from Stanford University for student activism and held in solitary confinement in Singapore for alleged communist sympathies. Yet, asked to be the founding chairman of Singapore Management University (SMU). A former Internal Security Act detainee who was subsequently offered a People's Action Party ticket to stand in the 1984 elections and recognised with the highest of government awards.

The plain-speaking journalist for the Far Eastern Economic Review who, in later years, would be chairman of government broadcaster Mediacorp.

"My life is filled with ironies," acknowledges lifetime maverick Ho Kwon Ping, now best known as the entrepreneur behind successful global resort chain Banyan Tree Holdings and the public intellectual who believes that the Singapore leadership would benefit from drawing from a wider talent pool than it currently sees to do. It is a personality that has captivated Singaporeans for four decades.

Last month, his book *Asking Why* appeared in Singapore bookstores, and a Straits Times Book Club event that featured him registered a record attendance of more than 350 people.

I met him at his sumptuous resort-like Singapore villa on the day he turned 66 and found him as feisty as ever. Going by Japanese standards of longevity – which is about where Singapore is roughly at – he figures he has just reached advanced middle age.

The backpacker who once hitchhiked to Europe, slept in the crypt of Egyptian pyramids and was inspired by the Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara to undertake his own motorcycle journey in South-east Asia has lived a full life.

And, while significantly more grounded now, he still has his zest intact.

Looking back, he says he started life as a banana – yellow on the outside and white inside – a reference to his ethnic and early cultural moorings.

Then, as the consummate iconoclast, he grew into something of a prickly durian, he says.

Now that he is a grandfather and mellowing, I suggest it might perhaps be getting time to consider himself to be more of a mango – yellow outside and inside, smooth of skin and sweet as well.

Mr Ho recalls in mock horror and says he is not sure the description is apt. "Mangoes are too sticky sweet," he says, taken aback a little. "Perhaps you can call me a jackfruit instead."

Banyan Tree gets its name from Banyan Tree Bay in Hong Kong's Lamma Island, where he lived for three years with his new bride Claire Chiang as a modestly paid journalist with the Far Eastern Economic Review in the 1970s.

But it also stands for the tree that for centuries has provided shelter and shade for weary travellers across continents.

Chancing upon a disused tin mine in Thailand, Mr Ho and his brother – an architect who designs his properties – launched the first Banyan Tree resort in Laguna Phuket. Thereafter, he became one of the earliest resort owners in places as distant as Bintan, Indonesia and the Maldives, developing "integrated resorts", he says, long before the Singapore Government found the term useful for its own purposes.

These days, the group, which carries a reputation for social

responsibility and respect for the environment, runs several resorts and hotels, including in Cuba and Mexico.

Its last annual report spoke of aiming to grow exponentially as "we expand our brands worldwide at an unprecedented pace".

Where is all this business coming from? Mr Ho says strategic alliances struck up with AccorHotels and China's Vanke group last year will prove transformational for Banyan Tree. What is more, the macroeconomic environment is most promising, as the world segues into "rainbow tourism".

"Historically, it's always been one way, one colour – white people travelling to exotic Asia," he says. "British officers travelling to Punjab... The grand tour... That was the colonial period. Then, we had (Vietnam and) the American period. Now, for the first time in world history, people of all colours are travelling in all directions."

With 1.5 billion Chinese, 600 million in South-east Asia and rising prosperity in South Asia, home to another 1.5 billion, the Asian market is huge in itself.

Within this demographic, one country he cannot stop enthusing about is Vietnam for its growth potential, where he says a series of Banyan Tree properties are coming up and he got his casino licences without paying a cent in speed money.

"Once GDP per capita reaches a certain level, tourism really booms and it doesn't become a luxury any more," he says.

## Fast facts

### THE CHAIRMAN

Ho Kwon Ping is founding executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, chairman of Singapore Management University and a non-executive director of Diageo Plc. He is 66.

Mr Ho was educated in Tunghai University in Taiwan, Stanford University in California, and the University of Singapore, where he earned his BA degree.

He worked as a broadcast and financial journalist and was the economics editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review. He joined the family business in 1981. In 1994, after the success of rehabilitating an abandoned tin mine

"That's what I mean when I say completely unprecedented."

Banyan Tree lays claim to pioneering the exclusive pool-in-villa tourism concept, and I am curious to know what is the Next Big Thing in luxury tourism and how changes in consumer preferences and technology are affecting the trade.

Mr Ho says the segmentation of the tourism market will continue. "The New Big Thing is experiential travel," he says.

"It is not just about going to a five-star hotel but enriching lives, seeing and experiencing the world around you. People want to interact with other people."

"This is why I am never afraid of virtual reality replacing things. This plays to my instincts as well... I know the excitement of backpacking and hitchhiking."

The sub-brand Banyan Tree Escape, he says, plays to these trends with experiential offerings tied to local communities, with guests getting the opportunity to move out of the resort to enjoy the farms and villages around the properties.

"I found luxury to be a very brittle concept," he says, when I mention that "luxury without guilt" would probably be an appropriate way to describe the Banyan Tree brand.

"We got into luxury only because it was the easiest sector to enter.

We always wanted to make Banyan Tree more accessible and that's what the other brands are for."

The Angsana brand, he says, is larger than the typical Banyan Tree facility. Cassia offers apartment-style living, and Dhawa is pitched to a much more youthful, millennial price point.

In his mid-60s, Mr Ho still sets a scorching pace, travelling out of Singapore once a week.

Still, succession plans are in motion. A lot of the hotel operations have been decentralised and his older son is in charge of Thai Wah, the family food business listed in Thailand.

He says it has taken an effort to distance himself and have others run things, the reason he purposely avoids attending some meetings for fear he might be tempted to take charge of the proceedings.

Talking of SMU – the institution he nurtured from conception – brings a special gleam to his eyes. SMU, he says, is the university that is best positioned for providing talent for the workplace of the future.

"The need is to train people how to think, not what you think," he says.

"Our whole pedagogy is so different from other universities. We have just 45 to a class. Classrooms are designed to promote interaction. Our students are more articulate, more problem-solving and better able to work with other people."

If and when Mr Ho writes his autobiography, it promises to be a fascinating read. Meanwhile, glimpses of his rich and varied life are available in the lengthy introduction he wrote to *Asking Why*, a collection of his published works and speeches.

I mention to him that his descriptions of backward Lamma Island in the '70s reminded me of the way Ernest Hemingway romanced the French capital in *A Moveable Feast*, his memoirs as a young expatriate writer and journalist in the Paris of the 1920s.

The book also has snatches of his ardent pursuit of his girlfriend Claire, now his wife of four decades.

Once, away from home and missing her, he sent an impassioned love note over the telex at her then workplace, the French Embassy. Unknown to him, a copy had routinely gone to the ambassador and another to the Quai d'Orsay.

The next time the envoy saw him, Mr Ho thought there was a special look in his eye, the diplomat probably thinking that the young Chinese-Singaporean had some French instincts in him after all.

He refuses to discuss the contents of that note, saying he is banned from doing so.

All that he will say is that it had passages from the love poetry of Pablo Neruda and its celebration of the human body. I tried to prod his memory with a line from Neruda's *Every Day You Play*: "I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees." Mr Ho looked away and changed the subject.

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, who is behind global resort chain Banyan Tree Holdings, says experiential travel is set to be the New Big Thing, where it is not just about going to five-star hotels but about enriching lives and experiencing the world. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

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