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**Headline: John Cheng demonstrates the power of “we” in multiple leadership roles**

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KOH YUEN LIN

John Cheng isn't content to just mind his own business. His responsibilities as director of Cheng Yew Heng Candy Factory – his family's 72-year-old establishment and Singapore's largest and oldest rock sugar supplier and manufacturer that trades internationally and enjoys an annual turnover of \$100 million – already has him working round the clock, but that hasn't stopped him from helping others with their ventures.

Last year, he launched Innovate 360, Singapore's first incubator focused on start-ups in the food manufacturing sector. The 90,000 sq ft facility offers 360-degree support for all aspiring food innovators, from linking start-ups to mentors in the private or public sector, to sharing manufacturing facilities, laboratories, and even distribution channels.

This platform, in which the company has invested \$15 million for infrastructure development, is aimed at connecting and creating a collaborative community that will propel innovation within the food manufacturing industry. To date, it has seeded several start-ups, ranging from aquaculture and agritech, to deep tech such as cell-grown shrimp.

What's a sugar manufacturer doing investing in cell-grown shrimp? "We might predominantly be a B2B sugar manufacturer, but that doesn't limit our views," says Cheng.

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“At Innovate 360, we play the role of big brother. We also distribute their products – we started 360 because we wanted passionate people to develop products for our distribution network. Currently, we position ourselves as angel investors going in at \$50,000 to \$250,000 (per project), and of course, we hope to grow unicorns!” he says.

Still, there is more to his selection criteria than growth potential and ROI. “We look at synergistic start-ups. For example, we have a company making kombucha, one that makes sake out of tofu liquid waste, and another that ferments certain ingredients to make nutrients more easily absorbed by the body – all of which do fermentation. We also have a company

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advocating jackfruit as a meat replacement, and the cell-based shrimp company is working with it to use jackfruit fibres to construct shells for the lab-grown shrimps.”

“It is an ecosystem that we are trying to build. In the past, most of us (food manufacturers) worked in silos. By building a community and creating support systems, we hope to pool resources together. But we are only an SME without a massive R&D budget. So we tap into the larger ecosystem, such as partnering with institutes of higher learning to provide what we cannot.”

It seems that there is nothing Cheng cannot do, and he reaches for the sky with his belief in the power of synergistic relationships. Earlier this year, he was appointed chairman of Feed9b.Asia, an open innovation platform with the lofty ambition of finding sustainable solutions to feeding the world population of nine billion in 2050.

He clearly has a talent for bringing people together: Cheng is also the very active president of the Singapore Management University Business Families Alumni Group, which he co-founded in 2013.

“It is another community that I am growing, and there are many areas where many of us have come together to collaborate. Yet, it is not so much about business and networking. At the end of the day we come together as friends. We empathise with each other, learn from each other, and hope to inspire each other as well. It goes beyond just an ah siah kiah (rich kid) club!” he jokes. “People say, ‘Wow you have a family business, you ah siah kiah lah.’ But we work harder than anybody else to prove to our families that we can carry on the legacy.”

And for Cheng, continuing the family legacy perhaps does go beyond growing the sugar manufacturing business.

“Manufacturing took us to the highs of the business’ first 50 years, while trading took us to another era,” says Cheng, looking back at Cheng Yew Heng’s development through the years. “And now, we are at the beginning of a new era. Legacy is not about harping on one success story, but continuing to be relevant. In this day and age, we are stronger together, pulling resources, hunting in packs. There is always a piece of the pie for everybody.”