



Female Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

PropertyInsight
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SHENG TAI INTERNATIONAL SDN BHD

The world is Sheng Tai International's Dato' Leong Sir Ley oyster as she promotes properties to investors from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Dubai – with Seattle being next in the pipeline

BY YVONNE YOONG

Success certainly agrees with Dato' Leong Sir Ley, President and CEO of Sheng Tai International Sdn Bhd. Armed with positivity and a smiling demeanour, the Founder behind this successful, ever-growing profitable business centred around promoting properties is a picture of poise and elegance – her shiny locks testimony to her grooming sense spilling over to reflect how she runs her business with classy panache and style.

“Would you like coffee, tea, wine or champagne,” she chirps as she greets the *Property Insight* small entourage comprising videographer, photographer and myself as we step into her plush corner office that looks like something taken from the printed pages of an interior design magazine.



Sir Ley and her leadership team

The interesting silhouette of an ergonomic feature lighting adds volumes of interest to the overall space that has peppered within its recesses and nook and crannies, an assortment of interesting decorative items that pique interest. There is even a wine cooler showcasing all types of wines.

Sir Ley, who settled down to give us a candid interview seated next to her brother Nicholas Leong who is the General Manager of Sheng Tai is bemused at the antics of her top management as they sportingly took photographs alongside with her at the Sheng Tai showroom gallery. Situated just a stone's throw away on the same block where her plush office is located, the showroom epitomises expensive taste – with shiny black marble flooring complementing the overall feel – backed by some development models taking pride of place with their artistic contemporary design renderings.

An air of camaraderie quickly ensues and envelops the showroom gallery as her top management team engages in playful banter while posing for the camera. It is immediately obvious that passion drives the team.

Behind her calm exterior and easy-going persona, Sir Ley is managing no ordinary fleet of properties. In fact, this trained lawyer who graduated from the UK has her legal firms spread out in Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam. In addition to this, her real estate agencies spread out not only locally but also globally – with her latest agency being planned in Seattle, the US.

“After practising law as a corporate legal advisor for a few companies for some time, I actually ventured into property. When I was a practicing lawyer, I was actually a corporate lawyer and also did conveyancing so I did a lot of corporate and property transactions for my clients. Throughout that kind of practice, I actually got myself interested in properties and so I ventured into real estate,” shares the Barrister who graduated with a Bachelor of Law from the University of London, the UK and also has an Honorary Degree from the Malaysia legal profession. Today, while Sir Ley's legal firm still remains, she is dedicating her time fully on real estate development and no longer a practicing lawyer.

Real Estate Wheel Comes Full Circle

That was more than seven years ago since she first ventured into real estate by establishing Sheng Tai International in an aim to introduce

Malaysia's real estate to the overseas market – a move that would lead her on a fascinating journey that entailed her venturing from Malaysia to Hong Kong and moving from there to other countries and then back to Malaysia.

“We survey most of the property sectors in Malaysia because I'm looking worldwide as most of our investors are from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Dubai. And, we have our offices in Hong Kong,” she says also sharing the story of the pivotal pick-up and turning point of her career.

“Then, when I ventured into properties, I found that Malaysia's property segment was a bit soft and the banks were not supportive when it came to loans. And, due to the fact that there is not much of support from the banks – construction activities were slow,” shares Sir Ley recounting her journey.

“So I thought to myself – ‘Why not venture into the world?’ Malaysia is a beautiful country. It has multi-cultures, delicious food and good weather. There are no tsunamis nor earthquakes, so I ventured out,” she relates further.

One of the best “weapons” that accompanied Sir Ley during that challenging initial start-up was all the inspirational statements and quotes that she could muster and remember from “The Secret” – a book that has inspired her which she has been reading for some 10 years now which she says has guided her at every stage of her life - as well as advice and encouragement from her dad – and anything else she could gather to encourage herself on her maiden business venture overseas.

“I ventured out and eventually, I found out that it was quite interesting. And, when I achieved that, it became my turning point. I felt that Malaysia became smaller and my world became bigger - and before that, my world was smaller, and Malaysia was bigger. When I ventured out – my whole world just expanded – from Hong Kong to Japan, Korea and Dubai. I found out that every country in the world is possible for me to venture into,” she shares about her leap of faith in launching out to start her business overseas.

Looking back from its early days, the internationally renowned real estate company has grown by leaps and bounds and span several countries abroad. To date, the firm has already been operating in Hong Kong for more than seven years now followed by its opening of offices in Japan, Korea and Dubai.



Guests from Hong Kong receive a warm welcome

The rationale of opening Sheng Tai offices in Hong Kong she shares is due to the fact that some of the property sales that can happen in Hong Kong offices can't happen in Malaysia. Hong Kong was also planned as a springboard or gateway to a bigger market in China. Property prices in Hong Kong according to certain reports indicate an upward trend, given the dwindling supply of properties there. Hong Kong was also selected due to its strong financial foundation that put it immediately in an advantageous position as a place to introduce and promote Malaysian properties.

Despite Sheng Tai International's relatively low profile and minimal spending in advertisements, the group has been able to sell over RM10 million worth of properties to overseas investors to date even as it continues to seek new opportunities in the global real estate industry. This has resulted in the creation of multiple investment platforms across various regions spanning China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, the Middle East, the US and Malaysia, of which Sheng Tai has established its name as a trusted company.

The fact that the Hong Kong Government is also imposing many restrictions on the secondary property market transactions coupled by a lack of new property listings there serve to make overseas properties even more attractive.

"Those countries that we have ventured into are not as mature as Hong Kong (in terms of the property market) but those are the countries that we are already in. So, I would stay in Malaysia for two weeks or a month while other weeks, I will be travelling," she adds.

Having no airs about her – Sir Ley comes across as a lady of substance capable of achieving a healthy work life balance despite handling such a diverse portfolio of properties and projects. Already, she jet sets every two weeks and goes away for a month or so to oversee her business operations in Hong Kong. She shares that Seattle next on her list of office that she has set her eye on opening.

Unfazed by the challenges in launching out into the deep, the eternal optimist admits though that the responsibilities can mount up – especially when it comes to handling huge mega projects all at a go and suggests a helpful antidote to overcoming stress with this nugget of advice.

"I think that when we venture out to do business – there's always stress. Because you are handling expenses – you are handling profit and loss and stresses that come to your mind and body which is not good to your soul so how do you keep or filter around this. The only secret I think to inspire myself is to stay positive," shares Sir Ley.

"We have a mind and the mind has a choice to decide what you want. You have to keep your mind properly in control and stay in a realm of positivity while not allowing any negativity to come into your life which is a ripple that can create consequences. This way, you can achieve bigger things in life – and, especially in business.

Having been involved in real estate for more than seven years now, Sir Ley is not intimidated by being female and reckons there are no glass ceiling in order for her to achieve her dreams although she is in an industry that is perceived to be dominated by mostly males.

"I would say that in any industry in the world – there is no male or female (segregations) and there is just equality. I would say that because we are all humans so what we think is actually alike. It is just the way of handling things that might be different but this does not mean that there is male domination in the property sector and I find that every day is the same," she quips.

Promoting Malaysia and Malaysian Properties To The World

Malaysia asserts Sir Ley has a unique environment that include a slower pace of life, lower population density, rich variety of cultures, and properties with freehold titles that are affordable. In addition to this, Sheng Tai properties here are also beautifully designed with special consideration given to green initiatives and located in strategic locations that are attractive to foreign investors.

"As a leader, I am happy to lead my team towards greater achievements. In Malaysia, the sales team, known as the 'Princes' and led by my brother Nicholas is very famous in catering to and doing follow-ups by taking care of our investors from overseas," says Sir Ley.

Sheng Tai International General Manager Nicholas Leong certainly doesn't discount the tourism factor which is also an attractive draw for potential investors.

Elaborating on the painstaking details they take in organising trips to Malaysia for their overseas buyers – and taking care of everything for them – including hotel accommodation, food, travel to places of interest and other tourist attractions on the house – which has set Sheng Tai apart from the competition. She terms the 'Princes' as part of the company's effective strategy in attracting overseas investors here by virtue of not so much selling the properties as in selling what the country has to offer in terms of diversity of culture, food and tourist attractions.

Nicholas, who oversees the tourism and leadership aspects for the company says that from the moment they land at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) until the moment they take off – they are taken care of with VIP five-star treatment by the 'Princes' who will be dressed in white and carrying Malaysian flags.



Tastefully designed show unit at MBC Hotel, Ayer Keroh in Melaka



Regalia Beachfront Residence & upcoming resort hotel in Tanjung Kling, Melaka

“Besides selling properties, we go the extra mile in seeing to their flight details and they can also opt for a long stay via Sheng Tai International,” shares Nicholas.

He explains that the team would double up taking on an ambassador role to regularly organise “property holiday tours” that allow potential investors to personally visit the properties in Malaysia and also give them an opportunity to experience the country in terms of its story, culture and food – all with the objective of boosting their confidence in Malaysia.

The formula seems to be working well to Sheng Tai International’s advantage – judging from the sheer popularity of these trips and overwhelming results.

“Experience starts from our customers and people start talking about the experience. We have our ‘Princes’ - 13 of them with 20 female ushers to welcome our investors here. Those who come from overseas need a sense of home. So we send out the message that they are welcome in Malaysia.

“From the airport – we take them to their hotels and let them try out local delicacies. We let them enjoy the atmosphere in Malaysia with the best hotels to stay in. Of course, the whole tour is talking about properties so we will take them to see all the existing projects – and immerse them in the experience of staying in Malaysia. They will then be able to get acquainted with the culture in Malaysia and what they will experience in buying a property in Malaysia,” adds Sir Ley.

She explains that after Nicholas brings in these investors - all expenses will be paid by Sheng Tai International covering food, accommodation and everything else.

“The legal firm which is already here will proceed with the documentation at one go. In Hong Kong, our people and team leaders over there will take over the task and make sure they won’t change their minds in terms of purchasing the properties and we will cater and pay for everything. All they need to do is board the plane

and come over and be treated to good food, quality accommodation and partake of tourist attractions and activities,” elaborates Sir Ley.

A big boost she opines lies with Malaysia’s colourful multi-culture and its charismatic people. The charms of this country she adds is renowned worldwide as a quality holiday destination. And so, she attests that foreign investors are keen to invest in the real estate market in Malaysia – particularly evident in Hong Kong buyers.

Furthermore, the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) initiative can only bring about a new wave of development opportunities to Malaysia. Testimony to this she says can be reflected in many major property developers from China who have been investing in Malaysia many years ago that point to the fact that there is very good investment value here with opportunities still present coupled by future growth potential in the property industry.

“As Malaysia is a direct beneficiary from the “OBOR” Initiative, its properties have in turn, been well-received by overseas investors. Sheng Tai plays an important role in bridging the gap between Malaysia and investors from overseas,” says Sir Ley.

The properties and developments under Sheng Tai she rationalises would thus benefit from the “OBOR” initiative coupled with Malaysia’s strategic geographical location and rich cultural mix which positions the country as set to become amongst South East Asia’s most viable country for investment. The Chinese Government’s investment here is seen to be a boost to Kuala Lumpur, Melaka and Johor which inevitably turn them into hotspot locations for investment. Recognising this, Sheng Tai’s properties and developments are mainly concentrated in these states which have great potential for capital appreciation.

Sir Ley has identified the coastal state of Melaka as an interesting place as the Straits of Melaka has been an integral part of the Maritime Silk Road in the olden days, playing a connecting East meets West role. In addition to this, Melaka has also been able to preserve most of its historical sites. And, besides its many beautiful

and historical sites, the state is also famous for many of its legendary stories passed down since many generations ago.

Thus, the team would share these stories with their overseas investors besides explaining the benefits of OBOR whenever they introduce The Regalia Beachfront Residence to them. In other words, Sheng Tai International would go the extra mile to showcase the ideal lifestyle that purchasers will be buying into while turning their stay here as their ultimate dream holiday.

In line with this school of thought, Sheng Tai has also established a one-stop overseas service platform to provide a comprehensive range of services to foreign investor that include property management, rental and renovation of properties as well as interior design. This will yield investors stable returns in terms of capital gains and rental returns in the long run.

To leverage on the globalisation of tourism industry, Sheng Tai international is also in the midst of rolling out a series of exciting hotel brands that also include a 5-Star hotel with a French luxury touch.

“Malaysians are very warm-hearted and good-hearted people as compared to some cultures in other countries, Malaysians are not as particular and are more easy-going in nature,” she opines.

Members from the Prince team are given the opportunity to explore other countries to promote the properties that are in Sheng Tai International’s portfolio. In addition to this, since they are establishing new network or branches in other countries, they would also be given shares according to certain applicable terms and conditions. The recent tour groups from Hong Kong have recorded about 150 guests per group, and each month there are more than 400 guests coming to Malaysia.

She says this strategy works as she quotes a report by CBRE Group, Inc. stating that Malaysia’s real estate market has risen 172% over the last 10 years while being ranked number six in terms of rental returns in the world and 99th in terms of world property price.

Attaining Local & International Recognition

Success certainly agrees with this female entrepreneur of the world whose firm – Sheng Tai International was recently honoured with the title of “Best Niche Developer for Overseas Market” at the Property Insight Prestigious Developer Awards (PIPDA) 2018 held on 1 June at Shangri-La Kuala Lumpur which adds up to her list of accolades and achievements.

Past achievements include being recognised with the Global Youth Excellence award at the Global Chinese Outstanding Youth Award ceremony in Hong Kong on 20 November 2016. Earlier in April 2016, she was also awarded with the President’s Volunteer Service Award (PVSA). These two titles also added to her crowning list of achievements that was no ordinary feat – considering she received two consecutive international awards in a year. Her recognition did not go unnoticed to Malaysia’s royal family who awarded her the title of Dato’ back in 2015.

Up, Close and Personal with Dato’ Leong Sir Ley, Chairman and President of Sheng Tai International Sdn Bhd

In an exclusive interview with *Property Insight*, this enterprising female entrepreneur whose real estate firm received the title of “Best Niche Developer for Overseas Market” at the recent Property Insight Prestigious Developer Awards (PIPDA) 2018 gives some insights into the world of real estate in terms of promoting properties.

Where did you get the idea for promoting properties combined with the tourism aspect of Malaysia?

Malaysia is basically a good country by itself so no one comes to Malaysia says it is bad in terms of having earthquakes or tsunami. And now, with a better economy envisioned on the horizon – with our Prime Minister who is making a name for himself with his age of 92 years old armed with his positive mindset – makes us work even more.

What are the new launches Sheng Tai International will be launching in the near future?

We are going to launch our new project called Melaka Dynasty and The Sail.

Looking back over your life – would you still choose real estate as a profession? Why or why not?

Yes, of course I would choose real estate as a profession. If I look back at my life, I have no regrets on what I have been doing now or of what I’ve done, what I’m doing now and what I will be doing in the future. I don’t regret everything and I think that I am on the right track.

What is the secret to your success? Any encouragement you could lend to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Well, I would say - be determined and have the grit to face any challenges in life, be it at a personal level, work or in business. And, if you get humiliated and you feel that your confidence has been challenged because you are a female - do not feel challenged at all. It is the same counterpart. And, even if you put a male on a start in the real estate sector, he will feel and undergo the same thing as everyone else goes through that. There is no short cut. Have courage and be confident under all circumstances and pressure. In addition, I also draw inspiration from my family who has been a great pillar of strength all the while.

Who is your role model who has encouraged and honed you to be the enterprising entrepreneur that you are. Also, what was the advice given?

My father – Leong Keng Chan who is a businessman was my role model as kid and still remains now my role model. He actually trained me up to be a confident lady. “Well girl, you need to grow up to be independent. You will need to be able to execute what you need and think and be able to achieve what you want in life. Life as a woman is not just about getting married and having a husband and be a housewife. It is more than that,” he said. And, from there – he made me believe that I can achieve my dreams and due to the fact



that I come from a very traditional Chinese family where daughters are actually being dominated by sons – but with my father’s statement – I strived very hard to become a lawyer and I did it. And, I am the first and only one in my family who is a lawyer and then I found out why my father said that when I grew up. Interestingly, he said he was trying to trick me into this profession as he knew that I am good in this area since he said I can talk well and so can do business. But he stressed to me that I needed a degree, as with a degree, I could then venture out and do what I wanted to pursue. He said:- “It doesn’t mean that being a professional, you need to be like a professional - being a lawyer, accountant or anything else but you can use your professionalism as a stepping stone for you to do bigger business and become an entrepreneur of the world.”

You mentioned that “The Secret” has inspired you to achieve all you have so far. Can you share some nuggets of inspiration from this book and how do you achieve a healthy work life balance?

“The Secret” is about the “Law of Attraction”. You see, I think that when we venture out with our business ventures, we have stress. Stress management is important. When you talk about the figure of RM1,000, RM10,000 or one hundred million or even billions – the stress level is different. I work very hard every day but I balance my work life and family life by giving myself a break at times especially weekends. I play the piano and relax and have family day during the weekends and I like to exercise every single day. I think that with a healthy body, one will have a healthy mind and positivity will come. Of course, even though I’m in property sector – I like to cook, love music and I like to go to movies to inspire myself and I also do a lot of reading every day. I also enjoy reading digital articles, quotes and snippets by and those about Jack Ma and other inspiring entrepreneurs. I usually read while on the move.

What’s your record breaking achievements?

We have two projects in Melaka at the moment which are coming to a tail-end Melaka. When we came in, we actually bought over these two abandoned projects and became a white knight. We rescued the projects and continued to finish up the construction, but more importantly is we prevent the purchasers making a loss in their investments, and subsequently injecting a lot of our resources to create long term and sustainable values for their properties by bringing in foreign investors to invest in the once-abandoned development. Everyone is happy in the end. With this, we are actually charting significant milestone and mark in the industry – more meaningful as it is crafted in a historical and heritage city like Melaka.

Your success has been able to capture ideas and to capitalise on challenges to leverage on opportunities. Can you elaborate on your unique business model?

When I was in Hong Kong, we did our sales and exhibitions in hotels so there are bookings and people who want to buy and when I came back to Malaysia, the booking was not successful due to the fact that there are no follow-ups and people always change their minds. People ask me – being in the role of a developer – “How am I supposed to know that I’m in safe hands? I’m not secure.” So, we set up a company and office in Hong Kong just to cater a place for our buyers to come up and to see us or to communicate with us. Of course, to set up an office in Hong Kong is much, much more expensive than in Malaysia. The rental in Hong Kong is high and the spaces there are very small. And, as I went along the flow, foreigners there actually wanted completed projects – or half completed or only 20 per cent completion as a start. But if they know us by our track record and experiences with us, then they don’t mind under construction projects.

I had a thought at that time – there are projects in Malaysia that are 20 per cent or 30 per cent completed but only one block out of a few blocks - so I could turn around abandoned projects. So, I thought to myself and my team how am I going to do this? I gathered some of my friends and also my brother and told them “Why don’t we go in and rescue the project?” We foresee that there will be some good opportunities there if we proceed with the rescue plan as we will have a whole lot of previous purchasers from the previous developers whom we can create goodwill with throughout our journey with them. These will be the very group of people whom we can genuinely take care of from the beginning, give them hope, and hopefully they will become our strong followers, supporters and partners in long run. In addition, we will also have the opportunity to accumulate the necessary knowledge and experience to evolve into a full-fledged developer at a faster pace – it’s a fast-track learning journey in a way.

How do you view what you do as adding value to your buyers and Malaysia as a whole?

What I mean is – when foreigners come to Malaysia and when I’m in other countries promoting our properties, I do not talk so much about our properties – I promote Malaysia, that’s what I’m trying to say. And, I am helping people from around the world to find their home. I find Malaysia is a cosy place to have a home. I just had an interesting wechat with my friend. Japanese citizens have to work nine-to-five and if they want to have a lifestyle and play golf, they will come to Malaysia.

People in Hong Kong, do not have a lifestyle because their houses and properties are very expensive.

If they want a beautiful house with less money paid for the property, they can come to Malaysia. So, there’s a lot of things in Malaysia that can cater to residents from other countries. So if you want to find good and happy homes – and not just a place to stay but also have a lifestyle – then Malaysia is the place to be to achieve a happiness index.