



PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL LINES PTE LTD (PIL)

Teo Siong Seng, known in shipping circles as SS Teo, is the Managing Director of Pacific International Lines Pte Ltd (PIL), a global shipping conglomerate. He is also Chairman and President of PIL subsidiary Singamas Container Holdings Limited, listed in Hong Kong. Singamas operates eleven container factories and twelve container depots and terminals in Asia.

PIL, incorporated in Singapore in 1967, is the world's 17th largest container line and Singamas is its second largest container manufacturer; together, the Group has a work force of 18,000.

After graduating with a 1st class Hons degree in naval architecture and ocean engineering from Glasgow University, SS Teo joined PIL in 1979 and rose to his present position in 1992.

SS Teo's official appointments include "Chairman, Singapore Business Federation, Immediate Past President, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI)", "Chairman, Singapore Maritime Institute", "Director, Business China", "Chairman Steamship Owners' Protection & Indemnity Association (Asia) Limited".

SS Teo was a Nominated Member of Parliament. He was awarded the Public Service Medal in 2010.

Teo Siong Seng Managing Director



The Chinese saying, “时势造英雄” or “time makes the man”, suggests leadership depends on circumstance and implies leaders are born or moulded by the force of their situation.

Although you can go for a course to study leadership, I don't think learning alone qualifies you to be a leader. Be that as it may, it takes time to shape a leader.

What are my views on success? Much depends on its definition and whether it is based on material, spiritual or other means of measure.

Success to me is very simple. Looking back, if I can say, “I have not wasted my time”, I would consider myself successful and I think validation or recognition by others can always come later. The most important thing is you must be at peace with yourself. This includes me knowing I would substantially do the same thing again if I could relive my life.

During my father's time, family time was intermixed with business time. From about four years old, I would accompany him to the office and board ships with him. So too during weekends, when he received guests. More or less, I knew what he was doing and over time, grew familiar with his mannerisms, business ethics and thinking.

In 1967, I was thirteen years old when my father incorporated PIL at the age of 49. It meant my dad could stop working for other people. I was quite excited and happy for him that he was his own boss, but it also meant him needing to work harder and spend less time with us. Although we were hopeful, we faced trying times (PIL, incorporated with two second-hand Dutch coastal ships, grew within a decade to own over 60 more break bulk vessels).

PIL ships were christened with the Malay prefix, “Kota”, meaning “City” in Malay, Singapore's national language. We wanted to differentiate ourselves as Singaporean from the start, and today, I like to think that the shipping world identifies any ship with “Kota” in its name as a PIL ship.

From the early days, PIL ran routes from China to Red Sea and East Africa, both of which were then very new and closed markets. As a private company with limited capital, we could not at that time compete with the major shipping lines on the main European or North American trade routes.

Working in niche (then called third-world, and now emerging) markets was challenging. For example, in Africa, it sometimes took a week to travel by train from one port to another, with stops caused by lack of fuel amid 50 degree Celsius heat. Nor could we fly directly to China – we had to do so via Macau or Hong Kong.

As our network in Africa and China widened, we introduced container shipping services in addition to break bulk shipping.

As I had always wanted to join the family business, I worked in the company's various departments during my school holidays, from the age of 15 onward.

I began working for PIL from day one after graduating. It has been my first and only job and the years have been fulfilling. Looking back, I am lucky to have been given the exposure and opportunity to achieve what I set out to do in shipping. I have had no regrets and think I have not wasted my time.



I advanced with the blessing of my father, YC Chang, PIL's Founder and Chairman, who has inspired me a lot. I may not have absolutely agreed with him on every matter in the past, but it has been said that you disagree when young and progressively less so as you get older.

Lessons I learnt from my father included maintaining a sense of balance; staying calm, be humble, and remaining unaffected by extremes, whether overjoy or undue depression; thinking of how things can improve during bad times, and thinking of what might go wrong during the good times; staying focused on our core; and working hard consistently.

Recent examples of good times include when, as President of the Singapore Shipping Association, we hosted the 13th Asia Shipowners Forum in 2014, with the kind support of then Singapore Maritime & Port Authority Chief Executive Mr. Lui Tuck Yew, Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, who met leaders of the various delegations, and President S R Nathan, who hosted the delegation for dinner at the Istana. It demonstrated the Singapore government's strong support for our shipping community, and also showed how effectively the private and public sector work together to promote Singapore as a Maritime Centre.

In October 2011, as President of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI), I helped host the 11th World Chinese Entrepreneurs' Convention, the largest biannual event for the global Chinese business community. First held in Singapore in 1991, national prestige and the Chamber's standing demanded a good show. The Singapore government once again provided effective support, with the President, Prime Minister and Minister Mentor attending; the Convention's VIPs were received by SCCCI Council Members, who include Chairmen or CEOs of listed companies. It was an amazing moment for me to see the entire Chinese business community, mobilised and united for a common goal – Singapore and SCCCI!



And my bad times encompass just about every world crisis since the 1990s through to the last global financial crisis of 2008, starting from the Iraq-Kuwait war, when we spent months monitoring the situation and our “burn rate”, to analysing the significance of institutional collapses such as that of Lehman Brothers.

Throughout all of our tense moments, where measures included managerial pay cuts or painful retrenchment, we have had to stay focused on maintaining our core, and during these bad times, we kept in mind the good times.

In October 2009, one of our vessels was hijacked off East Africa by Somali pirates, who demanded a ransom for our crew's well-being. 75-day negotiations culminated in the release of all of the crew, and ever since, all our ships trading to high risk areas have been provided with armed guards, ensuring no further hijackings.

My colleagues are an important part of the PIL team and our success, if any, is attributable to this group effort. Recently, at a presentation, I was touched when a very senior team member who is non-family said, PIL may be family owned, but more importantly, he and others are treated like family members.

I feel it important for Singaporeans to value the country we have and to continue making ourselves relevant to a dynamic world. We are in a fortunate place where, for example, unlike other places where children grow up with their parents on the dole their entire lives, we have close to full employment.

However, we cannot continue doing what we are good at, whether it be competency in language, legality, services, public administration or urban planning. We must remain rooted in the pioneering spirit of our forefathers including Lee Kuan Yew, Tan Kar Kee, Lim Nee Soon and Lee Kong Chian. Together, we must work hard and try our best to address our competition.

Over the years, I have grown to be ever more proud to be a Singaporean – the little red dot is becoming ever more relevant and significant.