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# Bending with the wind

## Sharing a vision of using bamboo to fuel innovation

LIM CHIA YING

**N**otice that the stiffest tree is most easily cracked, while the bamboo or willow survives by bending with the wind, quoted the late martial arts exponent and actor Bruce Lee in describing how Chinese kungfu practitioners should be soft but unrelenting, firm yet not tough.

The virtues of bamboo is extolled perfectly here, a symbolic definition of not just its versatility but also tensile strength or resistance in withstanding pressure and compression.

Another quick bamboo trivia if you didn't already know is that the plant is one of the world's most sustainable resources and an immensely fast-growing grass, a species with a hollow and woody stem.

It has medicinal values, produces yields higher than timber, consumes carbon dioxide that helps with overall air circulation and inhalation and is low in maintenance. In short, it is a prized green commodity!

These qualities however, are not always recognised nor are the potentials fully harnessed; in Malaysia, bamboo planting is still relatively small-scale with only the wild species sparsely evident in forests.

An NGO is spearheading the drive to create awareness and educate the public with the first World Bamboo Day celebration in Malaysia that offers a range of interactive activities and exhibitions about bamboo.

The non-profit outfit, which calls itself the Global Innovation and Entrepreneurship Foundation (GIEF), is collaborating with the Malaysian Timber Industry Board to jointly organise the week-long event, to be held at 1 Mont Kiara Mall from Sept 18 to 23.

GIEF founder and chairman Datuk Ghazi Sheikh Ramli says the Malaysian-chapter of the event takes after the annual cele-

bration worldwide that was organised for the first time on Sept 18, 2009.

"During the 8th World Bamboo Congress 2009 in Bangkok (the congress is held every three years in different countries), the celebration was conceptualised and a simple planting ceremony commemorated the occasion with the participation of 43 countries," says Ghazi, a former senator.

The global celebration, as much as it is to increase global awareness about benefits of bamboo and advocate environmental awareness, is also about promoting its cultivation for new industries and its uses locally and for community economic development.

This is where Ghazi plans to bring his foresight about potentials of bamboo through the first-ever Malaysian-curated celebration next month.

"Most, if not all Malaysians know what bamboo is but the challenge and next step is to know the kind of businesses that can be made (through bamboo). We want to excite the public with unconventional ideas that can in turn lead to entrepreneurship, generate tourism dollars and which people can relate to.

"What's available in our market now are just small bamboo souvenirs or gifts; yet bamboo has often been regarded as aged and traditional.

"We definitely need a change in mindset which can be achieved through education. For example, bamboo has proven to be a tourism earner, but you need value-added proposition to it.

"Therefore, the question is how we can make it work – perhaps through a bamboo homestay, taking advantage of what the Tourism Ministry has been promoting? That begs for a lot of creativity and thinking," says Ghazi.

He cites bigger and finer examples like the Madrid Barajas

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# Bamboo species thriving in Malaysia

International Airport in Spain that incorporates the use of bamboo for its ceiling panels — making it possibly the largest bamboo project in the world — and green schools (built with bamboo) in places like Thailand and Bali.

Prior to heading GIEF, Ghazi was also founder of the Malaysian Association of Creativity and Innovation (MACRI) before recently 'retiring' from that post to concentrate on this new green pursuit, all while marrying that calling with his thirst for creativity and innovation.

He has been doing his own bamboo research for about five to six years now, visiting countries like China and Indonesia where bamboo is grown much more widely and rampantly.

"What Malaysia needs is a proper plantation industry and management," he says.

"In other countries, bamboo is cultivated from tissue through test tube in a scientific approach.

"I would think that the Malaysian Timber Industry Board realises too that timber is not a sustainable resource in the long-run and it takes between 30 and 40 years for the wood to be harvested. By comparison, bamboo can already be (harvested) within four to six years."

Malaysia, he says, has about 70 species of these bamboo plants which are spread out in various areas, out of the 1,500 known species in the world.

"Bamboo absorbs carbon dioxide at a higher rate than any other plant, is renewable, comes off stronger than

steel by withstanding up to 52,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, long-lasting as a construction material (provided there is proper treatment to it), while some species can grow up to two inches an hour.

"As with many ancient plants, bamboo too has its share of history — inventor Thomas Alva Edison used a bamboo filament for his first light bulb. It is still lighting today in Washington.

"Meanwhile, Alexander Graham Bell's first phonograph needle was made from bamboo too. Its medicinal properties have long been exploited in healing treatments and bamboo shoots are a nutritious diet not just to pandas but also humans," he says.

For the World Bamboo Day celebration in Malaysia, there will be some 15 exhibitors showcasing a range of eco-products and activities like music performances from bamboo instruments, fashion show using bamboo-made textile as well as interactive sessions and contests.

Venue provider is the 1 Mont Kiara Shopping Mall. The event also has the support of parties like Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

"We hope to have a series of follow-up programmes after this that engages the minds of the young in schools, colleges and universities. The Prime Minister had also announced recently that the Unit Inovasi Khas under the Prime Minister's department and Agensi Inovasi

Malaysia (AIM) have been entrusted with the mission of training 5,000

Genovasi (Innovative Generation) ambassadors to set the path in creating an innovative young generation.

"I find it timely and perfect to push for the bamboo agenda, especially because you need a product to work on when teaching innovation," he says.

Ghazi adds that there are currently no bamboo parks developed in the country, only scattered, small-scale gardens which lack a distinct concept.

"My hope is to have the Prime Minister champion and advocate the use and growth of bamboo as the world's next timber.

"With news announcing the arrival of two adopted giant pandas to our country, that should carry enough justification and weight for our bamboo cause," he says.

The World Bamboo Organisation headquarters is based in the United States, although it was first founded in 1992 in Japan.

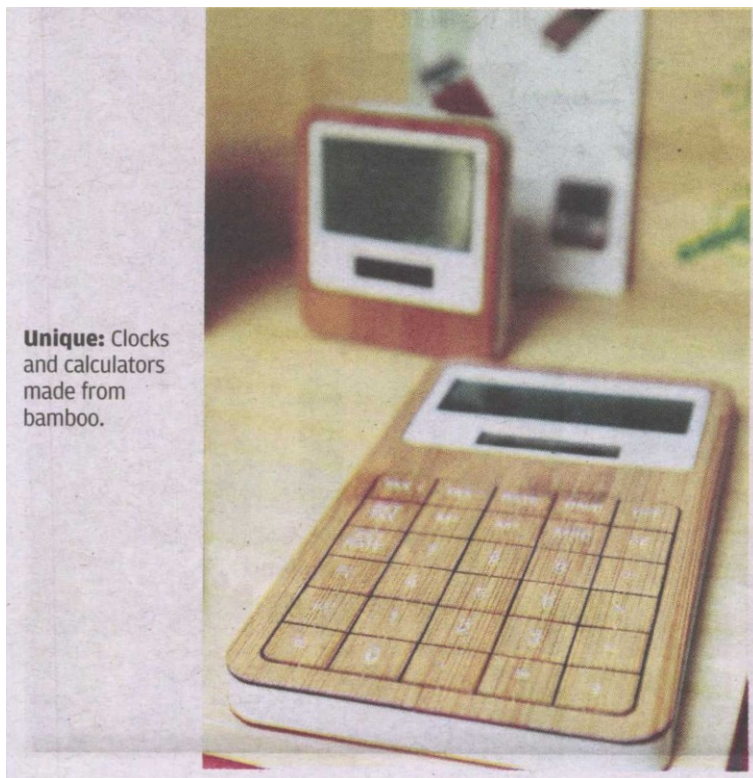
In 1997, a new body called International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR) was set-up in China.

Both organisations have since supported each other in celebrating the 9th World Bamboo Congress held in Belgium in April this year.

To know more about the World Bamboo Day Malaysian celebration, call 03-6201 1928 or email shazila@mygief.com

● A version of this article was also published in the Aug 30 issue of The Star Apps.

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**Unique:** Clocks and calculators made from bamboo.



**Inventive:** Ghazi showing off a bamboo mini radio complete with antenna.



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**Handy:** A miniature torchlight made from bamboo.



**Trendy:** Mugs made out of bamboo.