

Profile: Pote N Lee



Helen Henderson and I caught up with Mr Lee at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October at his booth. There, he delighted us with his story of a very interesting and challenging life as a researcher, book dealer, library supply entrepreneur, and founder of iGroup (www.igroupnet.com). iGroup is an information supply corporation with offices in 14 countries and over 1,000 library customers throughout the Asia–Pacific region. It is hard to imagine that anyone would have the vision and foresight to build an information supply business in perhaps one of the most challenging regions in the world. Just consider the language and cultural differences, the struggling economies, the lack of infrastructure, and the political conditions.

Perhaps it was the early years that created this drive and passion for information in Mr Lee. He was born in Rangoon, Burma, now known as the Union of Myanmar. Myanmar has recently been prominent in world news again because of the long-standing history of political and social unrest in the country. From Burma, Mr Lee made his way to Bangkok where he received his education in Civil Engineering and worked from 1974–1981 as a researcher at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT).

With the serious lack of Western information available, and seeing how the research community needed access to that information, Mr Lee took on his first venture into the book supply business and opened a book store for researchers in 1981 in Bangkok's Patpong area, the city's well-known red

light district. The book shop, which specialized in medical, technical and professional books, was a success and by 1984, Mr Lee started hearing from libraries that they also needed access to research information. This led to a library supply business providing books and journals to libraries in Thailand. By 1987, information technology had advanced into the early days of CD-ROM databases and Mr Lee's business once again expanded as he introduced this new medium to his portfolio. At this time the company became the local in-country agent for ISI, UMI and CSA, amongst other CD-ROM publishers. Nowadays, iGroup has become the largest distributor of research information, partners with the world's foremost society publishers, and is at the forefront of the delivery of electronic information in the Asia–Pacific region.

From his initial bookstore in Bangkok, Mr Lee began building his multi-country network of offices. With representation ranging from India in the west to Japan and Australia in the east, iGroup today employs over 450 full-time staff providing an increasingly wide range of services to publishers, libraries and individual researchers. As more and more publishers look to expand their businesses in the booming economies of Asia, Mr Lee has astutely positioned iGroup in these markets to provide distribution, marketing, sales support and technology solutions to those publishers.

But iGroup is not just a sales and marketing organization, it also gives back to the library community by sponsoring many events through

which librarians can catch up with the latest technologies and research-oriented products. In addition, iGroup organizes and stages the annual Information and Education Conference, which hosts 400–1,000 librarians from around the Asian region and features keynote speeches on the latest technologies and trends in the information arena, delivered by both local and overseas-based industry experts.

While iGroup has expanded to become a major information services supplier to the region, Mr Lee has not abandoned his original goal of bringing research information to the fingertips of end-users in Thailand. He is still the largest importer of STM books in the country, an operation run by his wife and son through Booknet Co. Ltd, and is a very active member of the library community there. Although printed technical information remains very important in Thailand, Mr Lee advises that the country is growing rapidly to incorporate the concept and infrastructure of the digital library.

Mr Lee is always working and thinking hard. One of his many ideas has led to iGroup entering the publishing arena. iGroup has published a number of conference papers, a journal, databases and my favorite travel series, *Dos & Don'ts*, a very popular English language series of what to do and, more importantly, what not to do as a visitor to a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To date, there are published *Dos & Don'ts* for Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Myanmar, and more are planned for the future.

So, what does Mr Lee do to relax? He likes fine red wine, good restaurants, and thinking about his next challenge. He loves Californian wine in particular and is even opening a store in Singapore



called 'Water and Wine' to showcase some of his more interesting collections. We asked if he had any thoughts of opening a restaurant to satisfy these passions and, funnily enough, he had – Mrs Lee is opening an eatery in Bangkok that will serve fusion northern Thai cuisine, so watch out for the next Lee empire, coming to a plate near you soon. Another of Mr Lee's passions is golf, and both Helen and I were most impressed to learn that at his home in Thailand he has 16 sets of golf clubs (for ladies and gentlemen) so when visitors come they can play golf with their host. Certainly, he is a man for all seasons and we look forward to hearing what his next venture might be. We want to thank Mr Lee for taking the valuable time he set aside to talk to Helen and me, and we look forward to playing golf with him next time we're in Bangkok.

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Profile submitted by Dan Tonkery