LANGIT COLLECTIVE

Of heirloom rice and age-old farming wisdom

Besides creating an alternative economic model for rural indigenous communities, Langit Collective is also a strong advocate of regenerative and environment positive farming

Photos by Langit Collective

BACK in 2015, when Langit Collective was established, Chan Zi Xiang and his fellow co-founders could not have imagined that what began as a fun project would turn into a social enterprise that is not only shining the light on tasty heirloom rice produced by an indigenous community in the highlands of Sarawak, but also how age-old farming wisdom combined with modern, regenerative farming methods can be kinder to the planet and farmers.

Recounting the start of the enterprise, Zi, who serves as the CFO, says he and the other co-founders — Lilian Chen (CEO), Chia Yong Ling (CTO), and Melissa Lim (CMO) — were colleagues in another non-profit that worked on basic infrastructure projects, such as gravity-fed-water systems, for rural communities.

"After a few years of cycling through kampung after kampung in the remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak, we thought that there must be a better model for rural development. We were solving the most urgent problems in a sense by building water supply systems for these remote communities, but the question that always came to mind after that was, what's next for these communities?

"There was also the other side of the story, where, as we got acquainted with these remote locations, we were quite stunned by the treasures right in our own backyard, so to speak, that lay hidden and unappreciated. So, in late 2015, as we finished up a project in the Lawas highlands, we started with the Lun Bawang community, which had an abundance of heirloom rice," says Zi. That first batch of 30kg of heirloom rice was hand-carried back to KL, packaged and sold as Christmas gifts. The response was overwhelming.

That so-called fun project eventually took a life of its own. Today, Langit works with 45 farmers in Long Semadoh, a valley of seven villages, in Sarawak's northeast highlands. Its products include heirloom varietals of white, red and black rice, sold in just under 1kg bricks as well as 5kg blocks. Between 2015 and 2019, Langit paid a total of RM235,000 in direct payout to the farmers in the collective — allowing them to upgrade their rural homes and pay for their children's schooling needs — from school supplies to transport.

As for the market response, initially, Langit faced the stereotype that everything imported is superior to Malaysian grown/made products. "It was not until chefs from fine dining restaurants and top hotels took interest and used our products that the general public started to gain confidence in the quality of our farmers' products. From the early years of customers just buying one or two bricks of our heirloom rice in bazaars, we now have consistent subscribers. There are also those who purchase our Borneo Heirloom Grain Collection box as gifts for their overseas friends as they feel this represents some of the best that Malaysia has got to offer," says Zi.

Creating an alternative economic model

Elaborating on Langit's roots, Zi says "the initial goal was rather simplistic — to create an alternative economic model for rural indigenous communities by

Farmers in the collective, Rumie Piri and her husband pick the healthiest and darkest grains from their lot of black rice. This varietal sold by Langit is now named after her.

revaluing their existing agricultural produce." Previously, the farmers only had two options with the rice they produced — keep it for their own consumption or sell it in Lawas, located about 100km and, depending on the road conditions, a four-to-six hour journey.

Many opted to retain the rice produced simply because of the associated costs of bringing the rice to Lawas, not to mention the limited availability of transport. The fluctuating prices in Lawas (because once the rice is brought down to Lawas, they are at the mercy of the aggregators there) — which have been known to vary by 30% within the span of a week — were another setback, says Zi. "We finally understood why their rice never got beyond Lawas."

Working on a fair trade basis, Langit assures its farmers a minimum of 35% of the retail proceeds. The social enterprise absorbs the cost of transport and is very open with the farmers on the cost involved throughout the supply chain.

He points out that the promotion and sale of heirloom rice, and by extension all of Langit's products, is really its market persona. "It's there to ensure that our model is not just a one-off project and that the sustainability of our work is weaved in from the very beginning. A larger, but ironically less visible portion of our work, is on the ground, or rather, in the fields with the community. And there are two aspects to this work — the human aspect where we seek to understand their living conditions and their motivations, and the technical aspect where we try to understand their farming methods and see how and where we can complement them.

"We started with a deep dive into the myriad of heirloom rice that the Lun Bawang community has (there are more than 30 varieties still being planted now), then into the methodology, and the historical and cultural aspects of rice," he says. Not having a background in agriculture turned out to be a blessing. "We went in without any prejudices and preconceived notions."

Over the years, the social enterprise has strived to bridge the knowledge gap by bringing in more research-based methods of cultivation. In 2017, Langit brought in external trainers and ran a workshop on the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). This is a knowledge-based methodology that increases the productivity and resilience of rice, and more recently, of other crops too. The simple changes of agronomic practices were assembled in close collaboration with farmers during the 1970s-1980s in Madagascar.

"It was a steep learning curve for us. Without any sure way of convincing the farmers, and to test the efficacy of the method, we had to do it ourselves," says Zi. There were a few brave early adopters who were willing to work with them on this, he adds. Through the SRI methodology, Langit saw yields rising by 30% but on the flipside, they found that it required more labour. They did, however, find that transplanting the seedlings earlier than the norm of 30 days was a plus to boosting yields.

"Since then, we have continued to farm, expand and run annual farming improvement initiatives. Through it all, we brought in innovation, methodology or mechanisation, but the most important lesson and value that we swear by is appropriate technology. We can have the most well-researched technology, but there's no sure way to guarantee its suitability and, hence, efficacy in the field. The core guiding principle for us is to always be community-centric and focus on the

Ribed Balang (left) and Lim carry sun-dried padi in the reng (traditional Lun Bawang woven bamboo basket) from the fields to the house for storage and further processing

Chen (foreground) gets tips on malid (winnowing with the wind) from Ribed Balang

Photos by Langit Collective

Rumie Piri looks on as her rice is loaded onto a 4WD by a Langit-appointed driver to be brought down to the nearest town 100km away on a dirt trail

The founders of Langit Collective, from left Zi, Chia, Lim and Chen work shoulder-to-shoulder with the Lun Bawang farmers to harvest heirloom rice in Long Semadoh.

suitability and adaptability of anything that we bring in," he adds.

Over the years, Langit has onboarded new communities — working with Dusun farmers in Sabah and a Bidayuh farmer in Serian to come up with layo (ginger powder) and Sarawak peppercorns, respectively. "We spent more than two years with our pepper farmer to bring forth the first batch of organic Sarawak peppercorn in 2019," says Zi.

Advocate of regenerative farming

Langit's narrative has since expanded from just an alternative economic model through agricultural produce to advocating regenerative farming and environmental positive practices.

The team spent three years collecting harvest data and mapping out the padi fields of the whole region. "Through our rough estimates, the volume that we are currently moving is not even taking up 10% of the excess rice that the community is producing (after accounting for the volume that they produce for themselves and their extended family).

"This was a mind-boggling discovery, as it completely went against the narrative of traditional farming being so-called backward and low-yielding," says Zi. What's more, currently, only less than 60% of the existing fields are being planted because of the lack of demand beyond personal consumption. And what's more interesting is that the farmers of Long Semadoh's traditional method of padi cultivation is already yielding close to the national yield average of conventional padi farming. "Do note that our farmers are achieving this yield without any input unlike in conventional fields," he notes.

In view of this, Langit plans to build enough demand to take up the rest of the excess rice from the community, revive abandoned fields should demand max out their current excess padi, and experiment with regenerative farming methods that can increase the yield per plot.

On the consumer side, the team concedes that the conscious consumer is still lacking among the general Malaysian public, and Langit's own rather convoluted and sometimes-opaque supply chain doesn't help. "To put our money where our mouth is, we decided to put all the data that we spent years collecting up on a system to both give full credit to our farmers for their produce and to let consumers know exactly where the rice they bought was planted and who farmed it," says Zi.

This was how the FoodPrints Initiative was born. Rolled out during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, the corner of each brick of rice is now affixed with a sticker with a unique QR code. Scan the code and consumers will see basic information such as the farmer's ID (face and name), the rice variety, milling date, and origin.

"Some of our farmers have checked out FoodPrints and they have since found new pride in doing what they're doing, getting the well-deserved credit for their work as well as having that sense of ownership in ensuring quality," says Zi.

With the MCO earlier this year putting the brakes on its plans for the year, Zi and the team are now playing catch up. "We are also in the midst of raising funds and planning for some infrastructure improvements in the village." ◆

By Sreerema Banoo