



CLASS OF
1981

Wah Sing Yee

Fiji College of Agriculture

Qualifications

- Diploma in Tropical Agriculture - Fiji College of Agriculture, 1981
- Owner of Marco Polo and Frespac Ginger

He is the owner of a large commercial complex in the capital city yet he describes himself as the boy from the bush, something which he says he's very proud of. Though many would feel this description is a bit harsh but for Yee Wah Sing it's the truth.

Wah Sing Yee, 58, was one of the first few students from the Fiji College of Agriculture who took up farming after graduation, and has done exceptionally well in agri-business, trade and property development.

His current office at Garden City, Raiwai, in Suva looks more like a workshop than the head office for Marco Polo, his family company that distributes consumer and industrial products.

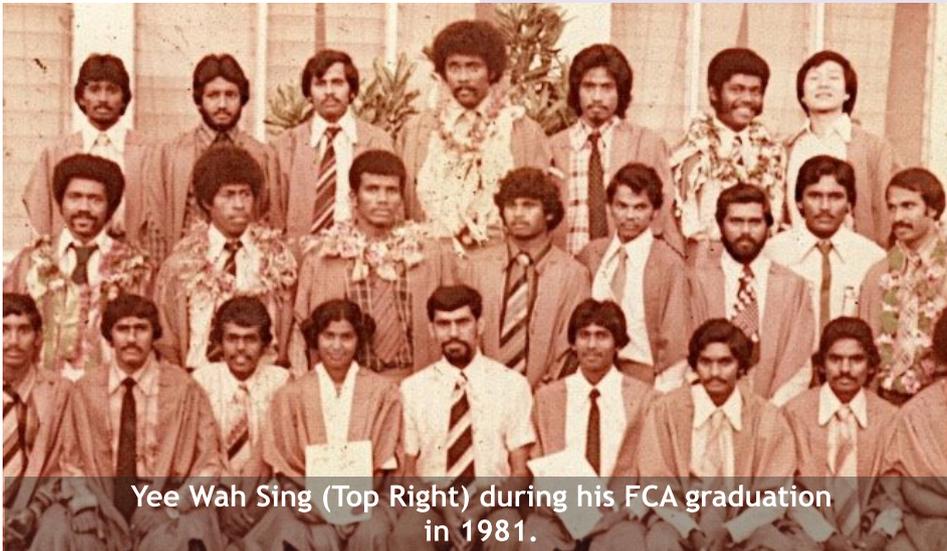
The Garden City Complex which started development in 2000 now hosts over 40 tenants.

Born in Lautoka of immigrant parents from China, Yee grew up in Lomaivuna, Naitasiri, where his parents grew bananas for export under a land development scheme which later collapsed. The farmers then turned to ginger farming and this led to the multi-million dollar confectionary ginger industry which Yee became involved in about 20 years later as processor and exporter.

Yee's father was one of 200 farmers selected from across Fiji to settle in Lomaivuna in the early 1964 with the hope their hard toil would provide a better future for their children. It was normal for Yee and his younger brother to walk 10 kilometres or more traveling barefoot to and from school.

Yee studied under the dim light of kerosene lamps at night. He remembers his parents talk of Lomaivuna Settlement transforming into a town one day. Unfortunately, they would have been disappointed since Lomaivuna has turned into a shadow of its former glory, Yee relates.

‘THE BOY FROM THE BUSH’



Yee Wah Sing (Top Right) during his FCA graduation in 1981.

After primary school in Lomaivuna and at Lelean, Yee attended Marist Brothers High School.

It was unexpected of a boy from a rural school, but Yee’s favourite subject in high school was English. That was perhaps, as Yee jokes, from having little option but listening to the BBC on Radio Fiji and reading lots of comics. His first job, after high school was with the Fiji Times as a junior news reporter, but a noisy newsroom with the sub-editors screaming for copy wasn’t exactly how Yee pictured himself spending the rest of his life. He enrolled at the Fiji College of Agriculture in 1979 and graduated with a Diploma in Tropical Agriculture (Distinction) in 1981 and was the Dux of his class.

“In those days the Fiji College of Agriculture was part of the Ministry of Agriculture, with the courses overseen by the University of the South Pacific. I was fortunate to have some good lecturers, who had a great deal of farming experience.

“**Being a young farmer straight out of college without any money or connections was tough. Yee’s application for a bank loan was initially rejected by the Fiji Development Bank, and it was only later that his ‘sweat equity’ was recognised. In those days, there weren’t any handouts and the bank charged a high 13.5% interest per annum, Yee related.**”

Yee grew ginger, taro and pineapples on 40 acre leasehold in Lomaivuna for sale in the local markets. “It wasn’t prime land. It was thick jungle that I had to clear by hand. It was tough, back breaking work,” related Yee with a wave of his hand.

He ventured into fresh produce exports in 1987 and confectionery

ginger processing in 1995. Today Frespac Ginger, the company Yee established 20 years ago is Fiji’s largest ginger processor employing over 200 workers.

While Marco Polo may be a fair sized enterprise for Fiji, Yee says his company should be regarded as a small family business. “We are happy with our current business. There is an important role for small family owned business in Fiji.”

Yee will soon celebrate 30 years of marriage to Yun whom he considers to be biggest factor for his success.

“My wife is the pillar of strength that holds things together when things get extra tough like in 1992 when Cyclone Kina wiped almost everything on our farm. We have also put five of our kids into university and it’s not likely any of them will go back to the bush.”

Besides gardening, Yee is also an avid cyclist and has competed in club races in Fiji and overseas.

On advice to future FNU alumni, Yee says “Muck in and Make Do!” A person would not get anywhere by waiting for the perfect moment. Yee quotes from Albert Einstein “Life is like riding a bicycle, to keep your balance, you much keep moving”.