What is largely regarded as the most liveable city in South Asia? If you ask Managing Director of CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd Houliang Jiang, his company is building it.

HEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd (CHEC), signed an agreement with the Government of Sri Lanka in August 2016 to resume building the Port City, now called the Colombo International Financial City (CIFC), following a one-year suspension. Upon full completion in 2041, the city is expected to bring US$15 billion into the Sri Lankan economy. It is the largest foreign direct investment in the country’s history, as well as being a symbol of advancement of the strategic cooperative partnership between China and Sri Lanka.

CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd’s Managing Director Houliang Jiang is the man tasked with ‘building a world-class city for South Asia’ – one that will span 269 hectares of reclaimed land from the sea. What will this new city look like, and how has it been progressing? The CEO Magazine had the opportunity to speak with Houliang and delve further.

Building Paradise

As featured in
The CEO Magazine
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Surbana Jurong is one of the largest Asia-based global urban, industrial and infrastructure consulting firms, with a track record of over 50 years in creating sustainable cities.

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We create spaces and provide design infrastructure services, shaping cities into homes with sustainable jobs, where communities and businesses can flourish.

The CEO Magazine: What are your favourite features of Port City Colombo?

Houliang: Port City Colombo has a big portion of green area for public use. Spacious and widespread parks and waterfront facilities will make the city a great place for people to live, work and play. There are five precincts: the financial district, marina, international island, central park living, and island living. This makes this mini city holistic in itself.

However, our master plan is to make it seamless with the old Colombo Fort. In fact, the recent Urban Design Ideas competition, in which some of the world’s top design firms participated and which was hailed by the Sri Lanka Architects Association as one of its kind for the country, focused on this very concept. The Port City’s vision for the future is to make this new city the most attractive and desirable city to live in, not only for Sri Lanka and South Asia but also for the rest of the world.

How do you approach your relationships with your clients and suppliers?

If by ‘clients’ you mean investors in the Port City who will be into property development, then in the last year we have been in contact with investors in South Asia, South East Asia and the Far East especially. Our sales and marketing team is expanding our footprint globally day by day, especially. Our sales and marketing team is expanding our footprint globally day by day, especially.

We follow local and international standards in dealing with the supply of goods and services for the project. When it comes to local supply of raw materials, we have stringent rules and regulations to follow. The materials have gone through an environmental impact assessment (EIA) and are monitored on a day-to-day basis by more than 20 government agencies.

Internally, we have local and international experts and consultants who assist us.

Tell me about your journey leading up to becoming managing director of CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd.

I graduated from Central South University of China in 1992, and after completing six years in Sri Lanka in 2000, I was assigned to CHEC. Shortly after that in 2001, I was assigned to Sri Lanka. In 2007, after completing six years in Sri Lanka I was employed by another Chinese engineering company in the US. I was working there until 2010, after which I got the opportunity to come back to Sri Lanka.

One of the key reasons why I was assigned the position of managing director of CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd, I believe, is my prior Sri Lankan experience. Port City Colombo is essentially a Sri Lankan project and I am more than familiar with local conditions and the business environment.

This is not the first development project in Sri Lanka you’ve been involved in since your return, is it?

That’s right. On returning to Sri Lanka, I was assigned the position of project manager of Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport development in Hambantota. Overall, the work was quite challenging as there were many areas of this project I was not initially familiar with, including navigation, telecommunications, meteorology and lighting systems. But we brought in the right consultants and experts and were able to successfully complete the project to the appreciation and satisfaction of all concerned.

Port City Colombo is not a lot different from the airport project, in terms of being challenging. It is another new avenue for CHEC to explore, and I believe they considered me the right man for the job.

What do you enjoy most about your career in engineering?

I enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes with the successful completion of a project. As a civil engineer, it is heartening to know that our hard work has helped improve quality of life – for example, the way people travel on newly built highways or bridges, or live in modern, intelligent housing. Port City Colombo is such a case in point, where an entire new...
city would contribute towards improving the way people live, work and play. This is the most fulfilling part of my work from an engineering point of view.

How did you end up in engineering? Was it just a natural interest, or was it a more winding path? It wouldn’t be correct to say I ended up in engineering. I may hold an engineering degree, but the projects I have handled to date have been far more complex and required knowledge in a number of fields other than engineering. For example, Port City Colombo relates to many different areas. Therefore, the focus is far from being limited to engineering.

What measures are you taking to ensure that the project has approval from the Sri Lankan people? Sri Lanka is known for its environmental awareness and strict environment protection regulations. CHEC has been working in Sri Lanka since 1998 and is clearly aware of this fact. Therefore, we give high priority to environmental protection and sustainability. We have engaged the services of a number of Sri Lankans who are familiar with the regulations and approval procedures. We have also reached out to the best law firm in Sri Lanka to carry out due diligence research for this project. Our official partners, the Ministry of Megapolis and Western Development and the Urban Development Authority, are highly professional in this aspect and have greatly assisted with our compliance with local regulations. We then jointly appointed a world-class engineering consultancy firm to oversee the project. The transparent and regular communications ensure that the necessary approvals are acquired on time.

When is the project scheduled for completion? Are you on target? The Mattala Airport project is the most challenging one that I experienced, but it was also my favourite. It was a completely new type of project. As Sri Lanka’s second international airport, it has great potential and it has been built taking into consideration all modern aviation requirements. The airport will prove to be a great asset for the future as it would open up the southern part of the island for development not only in tourism but in connectivity for its people. The whole process of development in Sri Lanka is broadening and moving towards an inclusive economy from the centre to the peripheries. TheMattala Airport is not only a part of this strategy, but can be seen as a harbinger of things to come.

What activities do you enjoy doing in your spare time, and do these activities help with your approach to work? Of all sports, jogging and golf are my favourites. In a way, these two sports are similar in that they both stimulate my thinking. I can give deep thought to the project I am working on and organise information in my mind while indulging in both these activities. These sports have a calming effect on me and allow me undisturbed mind while indulging in both these activities. These sports have a calming effect on me and allow me undisturbed time to consider different opinions of my colleagues on important issues and make the right decisions.

You’ve mentioned how you wouldn’t have been able to do any of this on your own. Tell me about the support team that is backing you. The people I have worked with have been, and still are, a great support and inspiration to me. We have Chinese, Sri Lankans and other international colleagues working shoulder to shoulder to complete these projects. Some of us are far away from our homes, but in spite of a few hiccups, we have accomplished and continue to accomplish amazing results.

This brings to mind just one thing: the cooperation and understanding we have with Sri Lanka. The friendship between our countries that goes back many centuries is something that cannot be broken.
The concept of a ‘Port City’ first emerges in Sri Lanka under the government’s Western Region Megapolis plan. Completion of medical centre and convention and exhibition centre. Commencement of reclamation. Completion of reclamation works and marine structure. Target completion date of full development of Port City Colombo.

Timeline provided is indicative and may change dependent on partner output.

Turning vision into reality

Faithful+Gould’s Director – South East Asia, Rick Hancock, gives an overview on masterplanning projects such as China Harbour Engineering Company’s (CHEC) Colombo Port City.

The Colombo Port City project, adjacent to Colombo International Container Terminal, is Sri Lanka’s single largest private sector development. It involves seabed reclamation of approximately 269 hectares to create 5.65 million square meters of gross developable area, to be used for commercial, residential, marina, office, retail, education, medical, hospitality, leisure, exhibitions and conventions, as well as parks and beaches, connecting the Port district and CBD in central Colombo.

Faithful+Gould is providing development advisory services to ensure the plot division and real estate development are strategically planned, designed, phased and delivered to maximise returns. We are addressing the significant commercial questions associated with masterplanned communities. There is, of course, pressure for each asset to earn its keep. When forecasting community needs, additional business elements will ideally be embedded within the development mix to generate further revenue streams. Residential components will benefit from community shopping and healthcare facilities, for example.

Our team is leading the establishment of project development strategies that consider the master plan composition, the return on investment objectives, and the investment constraints to achieve the optimum mix of real estate land parcels so that sound commercial propositions can be brought to market.

It’s also essential that the overall product mix produces a positive lived experience for residents, businesses and tourists, and exists alongside suitable infrastructure and sustainable plans for the future. There are some key signature projects, and we are preparing feasibility studies for these.

Development phasing is especially important to investment returns. Masterplanned communities are often delivered in phases as a result of funding constraints and geo-political drivers, and to progressively respond to market sales. Development sales strategies can be modelled in detail, determining which facilities should be completed first.

We are modelling infrastructure strategies, together with establishing costs for the various options. This is followed by a fast-track phased program that allows infrastructure construction to commence closely behind the reclamation works, improving our client’s cashflow by giving early access to sellable land.

Faithful+Gould offers comprehensive support to private sector and public sector real estate developers and funds, supporting masterplanning schemes across Asia Pacific and in other parts of the world. We bring a sound understanding of business case planning, program management, urban planning, design and engineering to our clients’ development planning, helping our clients transform their vision into reality.

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