Analyzing Business Opportunities

KAI-SHUI (LU) LO ’82

When Kai-Shui Lo ’92 came to Columbia in 1978, he knew he wanted a career in business. So he majored in operations research at the School of Engineering and Applied Science, learning about systems, and probability. As he looks back over the past 29 years, Lo says those studies provided a firm foundation for his work in construction and property development in Asia.

“I knew I wanted to go into business, and the math I learned at Columbia trained me to analyze systematically,” recalls Lo, deputy managing director of the Great Eagle Group, which is his family’s company, and founder of his own company, Sun Fook Kong Group Ltd.

“And what I learned about probability I used in my decision-making every day as I assessed the probability of reaching certain targets and finding the higher probability of going forward more successfully.”

That approach has served him well in his companies as they have navigated the economic cycles of boom and bust in the Asian economy over the past three decades.

“I tend to be conservative, not overly aggressive,” says Lo. “I have a schedule that I adhere to, make progress at my own pace, and I’ve performed relatively well. Good times and bad times come and go, like the seasons. You know there’s a probability of winter, in the business sense, but the probability of spring following winter is very high.”

The Hong Kong economy was in the doldrums in 1982 when he returned to Hong Kong from Morningside Heights. He said it was a good time for him to face the challenge.

“It was bad, in one sense, but in hindsight, it was also good, because I got to see the bad sides of things, and learned from it,” he says.

Lo has two major businesses. There’s his construction business, which builds in Hong Kong, with a substantial portfolio of all kinds of projects he put up for the Hong Kong government.

His property development business, meanwhile, is focused on China, where he’s involved in several residential projects in the Guangdong Province, which borders Hong Kong, and other provinces as well. The Great Eagle Group also owns office buildings in California and several hotels around the world.

Lo, who lives on Hong Kong Island, says he has had success building apartments in China.

“China has 1.3 billion people, and it’s still growing and becoming more affluent,” says Lo. “There’s a huge market for better designed houses. I build for all incomes, but I have to admit I like building higher-income housing because that allows you a wider range of creativity, which is fun.”

With Lo’s studies at Columbia playing such a critical role in his personal and professional development, he now wants more young people from China to have that experience. He’s working with Columbia to broaden its outreach in China.

“I’d like to see Columbia flourish while introducing Columbia to more of my countrymen,” he says. “If I can tie the two together, it would help accomplish certain higher priorities on my help list.”

Connecting the World, Wirelessly

SANJIV AHUJA MS’79

The biggest misnomer in the Internet age, says wireless communications pioneer Sanjiv Ahuja MS’79, is “wireless” — the World Wide Web. “It actually stands for Western World’s Web,” says Ahuja, 54, who splits his time between residences in London and New York. “You don’t see too many people living in emerging markets who are connected to the Internet. The best way to do it is with mobile technology.”

As chairman and CEO of Augere, Ahuja is providing wireless broadband conductivity in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Uganda, with plans to launch a network in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh later this year.

In Bangladesh, mobile phones have penetrated about 60 percent of the market. But Internet service is available to less than one percent, he says. The wireless signal for wireless phones is too narrow to carry much more than voice and text messages. The 4G system — the fourth generation of cellular technology — allows Internet accessibility from wireless devices.

“Our intent is to get broadband to people who aren’t connected to the Internet today,” says Ahuja, who grew up in India’s capital city, New Delhi. “And we want to do it in a way that’s affordable.”

Ahuja contemplated retirement at age 50, after his successful four-year tenure as chief executive officer of Orange, the United Kingdom-based wireless provider with 175 million customers worldwide. But the challenge of connecting the globe through wireless technology called, and he got back to work.

“That was this pull to do the right thing and get more people connected to the Internet,” he says. “It was too attractive, and too big a pull to say no.”

That pull brought him back to the United States. He’s chairman and CEO of LightSquared, which is building a nationwide wireless broadband network that will sell access to major mobile carriers and provide service to rural regions where many residents now lack Internet access.

It will help fulfill the Federal Communications Commission’s plan to bring broadband to all Americans. The LightSquared network relies on cell towers and satellites. LightSquared launched its SkyTerra 1 satellite from Kazakhstan in November 2010, which created an integrated satellite-terrestrial network, combining LightSquared’s 4G-LTE terrestrial network with satellite coverage. It’s expected to provide capacity to US wireless providers by late 2011 or early 2012.

When Ahuja arrived at Columbia in 1978 to study computer science, the field was in its early days. Computer science students were building relational data bases, learning the “C” computer programming language, and gearing up for C++.

He’d come to New York from Delhi, where he’d earned his bachelor’s degree at the University of Delhi. Once in Morningside Heights, he explored the wonders of New York City and cracked the books.

“Engineering education teaches you how to solve complex problems — be they financial, business, or engineering issues,” he says. “Columbia taught me how to take very large problems, break them into smaller pieces, and solve them. Those lessons have stayed with me for the rest of my life.”