

snipping company at 18 — Mr Robert Khoo is a classic rags-to-riches story. Today, he has made enough to retire comfortably. But this is*

latest pharmaceutical manufacturer, Opto-Pharm. **CHAN HWA LOON** reports in our continuing series on Singapore's new entrepreneurs.

From coolie to boss — Robert Khoo moves from strength to strength

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OPTO-PHARM'S Mr Robert Khoo must reckon true entrepreneurs never retire.

Mr Khoo is 53. Others of his age who have made their fortunes would have settled on spending time in a country club and indulging in other pleasures of retirement.

But Mr Khoo chose to plunge into a second enterprise — and incurred initial losses of \$3.5 million launching a new line of products.

The losses were due to delays in obtaining licences for manufacturing his pharmaceutical products.

"Everything — the product formula, the packaging — has to be approved," said Mr Khoo, executive chairman of pharmaceutical manufacturer Opto-Pharm.

While waiting for the licences, his sales and marketing staff were just "sitting around doing nothing", he said. He had therefore not sold a single product as yet.

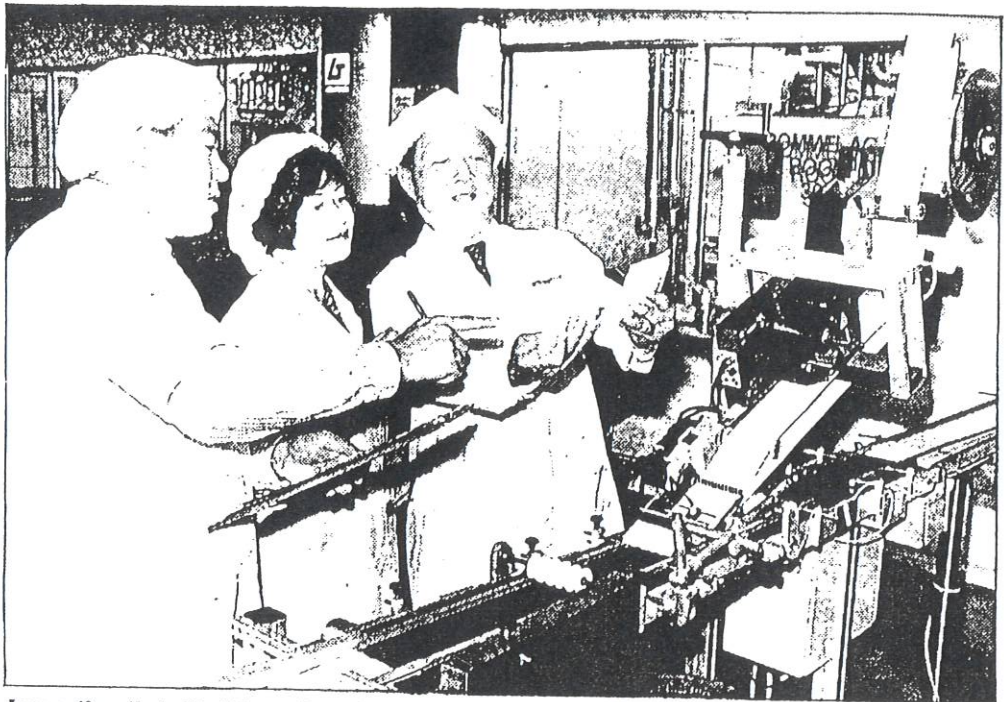
Fortunately for him, much of it was "just paper losses", he said.

"I was also on the luckier side. Many other people may not have the cashflow to tide them over," he added.

His cashflow for absorbing the initial red ink was from the "quite substantial amount — several millions", which he said he made when he sold off his first enterprise. He sold the company, Hillite, a maker of multi-coated lenses, to a French optical group.

Hillite was sold in two stages — 70 per cent in 1987 and the rest early this year. He declined to disclose the exact amount which he received as the French company requested that it be kept confidential.

Opto-Pharm's recently-



Inspecting their Uni-Dose Packaging of pharmaceutical products are, from left, managing director Low Kee Slang, executive director Helen Khoo, wife of Mr Khoo, and Mr Khoo.

opened \$12-million plant at Tuas produces intravenous drips for hospitals, contact lens solutions and other pharmaceutical products. With that, he expects sales to "double and triple" and pull the company out of the red.

Mr Khoo's path to entrepreneurial success reads like a classic rags-to-riches story. He was born in the southern tin-mining province of Ranong in Thailand and orphaned at the age of eight. His parents were killed when a boat they were travelling in hit a stray Japanese mine left over from World War II.

He and his older sister were then brought up by an uncle in Penang, where he studied at St Xavier's. But he did not complete his secondary education.

"I needed to start earning a living. I had no pocket money. My uncle gave me only one dollar a week," he said.

So, at the age of 18, he came to Singapore to seek his fortune, working as a coolie-cum-clerk in a shipping company at Telok Ayer Basin.

With a secondary education, why did he have to start as a coolie?

"In 1957, after the Hock Lee Bus and Maria Hertogh riots, jobs were very hard to come by," he said.

From that earthy coolie job, he went on to become a salesman at what is now the Getz Corporation. It was in this job that he started his lifelong career in the optical business.

After nine years at Getz, he joined American Optical and another optical company, Barnes-Hind Pharmaceutical. He worked short stints at these companies before deciding to set up his own company — Hillite — with his wife in 1972.

He initially traded in optical products. But he expanded into manufacturing in 1980, with a capital investment of \$3 million and an investment allowance from the Economic Development Board. The optical machinery was bought from German camera maker Rollei, which had gone belly-up at that time.

"Everybody said that I would fall as the investment was too big and I was not an engineer," he said.

But by 1987, Hillite was so successful that it was courted by a number of suitors. Mr Khoo eventually sold 70 per cent of the company to French firm Essilor International. But he stayed on as the managing director of Hillite.

It was not long before he was bitten again by the entrepreneurial bug. The following year, he set up Opto-Pharm to manufacture a range of pharmaceutical products complementary to those produced by Hillite.

Early this year, due to policy differences with Essilor's top management, he finally sold his remaining 30-per cent stake in Hillite to Essilor. And he quit his managing directorship to become executive chairman of Opto-Pharm.

Employing state-of-the-art Swiss technology to maintain standards and costs, Opto-Pharm is one of the most advanced intravenous solution makers in the region.

Orders are already lined up from customers in Australia, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand and the United States. Opto-Pharm looks set to be another winner for Mr Khoo.

For others hoping to follow in his footsteps, his advice was: "Don't go out of your field. For 20 to 30 years, I have been in nothing but optical-related products. By keeping close to your field, you are better informed of new developments and you will be better warned of impending problems."

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