Survival of the fit

The son of former Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin has built a mini yoga empire

A LOCAL society magazine recently hailed Patrick Wee as one of Singapore’s most eligible bachelors. He is not happy. “I was the oldest crown in the hat. It’s sad. I’m 40 and not married,” he tells bookish-looking, bachelor suit and tie with mock mohawks.

The past behind True Yoga, Singapore’s largest yoga centre, turned up the status of ang Mo ook in one word: Work. Work 18–6 on weekdays, seven days a week. I used to go shooting with a 24-hour thrill; now it’s the Centre and power-golfing in Luxor. Even: “Now, I don’t even get to play golf. I guess one has to make sacrifices in the life and this is the time to do it.”

Mr Wee, the youngest of former Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin’s four children with his wife Cynthia, is not sure whether the sacrifices have been worth it. “God only knows,” says the iron-fisted entrepreneur.

But there is no hiding pride in his voice when he talks about the little empire he has built over since he left the low profession and entered the fitness business about seven years ago. “I have fitness centres and yoga studios in Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Maldives,” says Mr Wee, who was the local partner for California Fitness when it opened here in the late 1990s. His businesses are not small. He has four California Workouts World in Thailand, all of them open 56,000 sq ft — including one that is under construction.

This month, he launched Yoga & Fun Studio in Ngee Ann City. In Singapore, he raised many eyebrows when he pumped in “north of a million dollars” to open True Yoga in November. Located on Pacific Place in Scotts Road, the 12,000 sq ft centre is one of Singapore’s most spacious yoga studios. One of which can accommodate 80 people — and offers 50 yoga classes, from Hatha to fast-paced yoga-dolls.

I have eight full-time yoga instructors from India, five part-timers from Singapore and we occasionally bring in masters to teach specific courses.”

Detractors would wonder whether it is a huge gamble. “After all, yoga — unlike aerobics — may not be everyone’s cup of tea,” Mr Wee thinks otherwise.

“Yoga conditions not just the mind but the body too,” says the bouncy man, who begins each day with seven sets of sun salutations.

“We have all the facilities and, most importantly, we offer flexibility. We have 36 classes for people to choose from each day. A person can come here, do a class, shower and head back to work, without wasting a large part of the day.”

He continues enthusiastically: “Also, it’s very affordable. We are half the price of our competitors.”

He then quotes American tycoon Donald Trump: “If you built the best, they will come.”

His confidence is boosted by his success in Hong Kong. He opened a Planet Yoga there in February 2003, when SARS was raging in the south. It performed a remarkable turnaround in six months. But by June that year, we had signed up 4,000 members. Today, more than 35,000 people a month go through our doors in Hong Kong. Singapore shouldn’t be any different.”

Mr Wee recently left a BBA after graduating from the National University of Singapore in the late 1990s. He was handling the legal work for the setting up of California Fitness here is tried when he got roped in as its legal partner.

“Being a lawyer was great training for the mind, but it was not something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Most of the time, it’s a contest of skills — between you and a client or you and another lawyer, and I find it very negative.”

He claims to be a lot happier now, even though his workload is prolific. He also claims he no longer has the time to live up to his reputation in a ladies’...