On top of things!

Mr-Fix It, Robest Yong, has a knack for finding simple solutions to everyday problems.

Simply inventive

A master inventor tells Izwan Ismail the most simple ideas are often the
most effective

ROBEST Yong has numerous inventions to his name but his favourite is his first: A polyclone instant rubber stamp machine. The invention makes it possible to make rubber stamps in minutes compared to when one had to wait days or weeks after placing an order. It won him a gold medal at the Geneva International Invention Fair in 1994. The award inspired Yong to carry on with his inventions which are not hi-tech stuff but simple things for daily living. His other inventions include the Green Whizzard fertiliser, Kami-kaze mosquito glue, floating water heater, and the auto brake lock. Even at 52, the master inventor is showing no signs of slowing down.

EARLY YEARS
Yong comes from a poor family of 11 siblings. He remembers his childhood days in a rubber plantation in George Town, Penang. Being the most creative in the family, Yong made toys and other play items from things he found in the plantation. He remembers his first fishing rod, made from bamboo, with an innovative touch to it. “I cut the bamboo in half and put a nail inside the hollow. The two pieces could be reattached to make a longer fishing rod. I caught a lot of fish with it,” he says with a chuckle.

Yong was also curious about what went on inside things and how they worked. He would take apart things such as a bicycle bell and then put it back together.

Upon completing school, he worked with an engineering company that sold printing machines. “There I learnt a lot about machines, how they worked and how to repair them,” he says.

He was a diligent worker and his company sent him to Japan in 1980 for two years. He took advantage of the opportunity to learn more about press printing machines. In 1987, Yong left the company and started his own printing business.

FIRST INNOVATION
His first innovation — the rubber stamp — he hit upon when he was setting up his company. "I ordered rubber stamps but the shop took two to three days just to make one, which I found too long. That's when I got the idea to make my own rubber stamp machine,” he recalls.

Yong remembered a printing technology in Japan which used a photopolymer for making his instant rubber stamp device. But when it was unsuitable, he went to Japan to find out if it was possible to adjust the formula to fit his needs.

He came back with a rubber-like material he used for the stamp. Yong calls it polyclone, a polymer that looks like transparent rubber.

"Tiny lettering-bits had to be arranged and a plaster moulding was cast on them. Then, a rubber sheet was placed over the plaster moulding and heated to form the relief for the rubber stamps," he explains.

Yong came out with a scanner-like machine which scans anything anyone wants to turn into rubber stamps. His polyclone "rubber" enables one to produce a rubber stamp in just 15 minutes.

Yong's invention became popular with bookshops here and, he also received orders from Russia, Japan, US and Africa.

MORE CHALLENGES
Following this, Yong continued to come out with other new products. He gets his ideas from problems that people face on a daily basis.

For example, he created the auto brake lock after observing that people driving an automatic car needed to keep pressing on their brake pedal at traffic lights and junctions.

"The auto brake lock will put the car in a stationary position after you step on the pedal once. You can then let go of the pedal but the car will still be on brake mode and will only move if you step on the pedal again. It works like auto cruise mode," says Yong.

But like many inventions, not all have made it to the market.

"I accept it as part and parcel of the invention process and business world," he says.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX
Yong says that to innovate, one needs to think outside the box. "Innovation is about freedom of thinking. There should be no walls, no boundaries, no restrictions and no rules," he says.

However, innovations should be new and have commercial appeal.

"Do not try to create things that you cannot do, such as making a car that can fly. Invent something that is within your capability," he says.

A good and wise inventor must apply the three Cs in invention — Create, Claim and Commercialise.

"Many inventors here just create and commercialise their inventions. As a result, the products are not patentable. People can easily copy the idea and make better products," he says.

Yong says smart collaboration is the way forward. For example, he collaborated with UITM to develop a new type of fertiliser that uses probiotic enzymes. The result is a highly concentrated, nutrient-rich product that provides fast, clean and convenient fertilising.

"The fertiliser is an environmentally-friendly product that formulates nutrients to stimulate the growth of micro-organisms in the soil which are essential for breaking up nutrients and unlocking previously applied fertilisers which had been lying dormant.”

GIVING BACK
These days, Yong spends a lot of time at the Agency for Innovation Malaysia (Aim), where he serves as innovation ambassador.

"My schedule is filled with talks and training sessions all over the country," he says.

Yong travels to schools, universities and government offices to give talks on innovation.

He advises aspiring inventors to join non-governmental organisations like the Malaysian Association For Creativity And Innovation (Macri) and Malaysian Invention and Design Society (Minds).

"These entities provide the whole eco-system in innovation”.

NEW PLANS
Yong can't wait for his latest invention to hit the market.

"It's a plastic sauce plate for use in fast food restaurants. The current ones are sticky and hard to pick up. Most are also unhygienic as they are touched by customers.”

Yong has invented a non-sticky plate which comes out from a dispenser. He says the concept comes from a Chinese lantern.

"It's a simple invention but it solves a problem, right? And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to do that.”
Children in one of Yong's innovation classes.
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- Robert Yang

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Polyprint Stamp Machine

Yong with Air Green Whizmann Fertilizer