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China pays tribute to 'war friends'

Kamarulzaman Salleh

TWENTY-TWO men who served as volunteer drivers in the Kuomintang Chinese Revolutionary Army in 1939 attended the 60th commemoration of their services in China recently.

For them, the event - held in Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province - was a moment to cherish.

As drivers, the group, which included Malayan volunteers called "Nanyang Cheekongs", had to transport supplies along the 900km Burma-Kunming road when Japan invaded China during World War Two.

Among them were Kedah-born Yang Bao Hua, 85, who is the honorary president of the Yunnan Friendship Association of South East Asia Overseas Chinese Mechanical Workers, and Yap Ah Bee, 80, of Batu Pahat.

There were also "cheekongs" from Thailand and Indonesia who are now living in Yunnan.

For the first time in its history, the ceremony was attended by a large number of Malaysians, including members of the print and electronic media.

The Malaysia-China Friendship Association, under the patronage of the Prime Minister, had organised a tour of Yunnan with the co-operation of the China Southern Airlines which flew in members of the Press.

Tracing the history of the volunteer drivers, MCFA secretary-general Tan Kai Hee said more than 3,000 Malaysians, including Singaporeans, had responded to an appeal by the Kuomintang Chinese Revolutionary Army for the services of overseas male Chinese drivers to help in the war.

"Of the total, some 1,800 survived but fewer than 1,000 Malaysians managed to return home, while the rest 'missed the boat' and stayed back in Yunnan," he said.

Tan said the ceremony was very special to the "cheekongs" as it was held in memory of those who had perished as well as to honour the others who had made sacrifices during the war.

Held in the scenic West Mountain recreational park about 40 minutes' drive from downtown Kunming, the event also drew visitors from Singapore and Indonesia.

Wreaths were placed around a 10-metre-high marble monument built by the Chinese Government in 1989 in honour of the "cheekongs".

A convention on "Welfare of Overseas Chinese Volunteer Drivers" was held in conjunction with the ceremony.

Tan, who is Hai-O Enterprise Bhd managing director, said MCFA has managed to trace three surviving "cheekongs" in Malaysia - Dara Singh, 85, of Seremban, Li Ching, 82, of Taiping, and Yap.

He said MCFA's involvement with the volunteers started in 1994 during the visit of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to China. Tan was also in the entourage as representative of the association.

"During the trip, Dr Mahathir also visited Yunnan. This was when a group of cheekongs met me to tell their story. This was followed by correspondence and the MCFA later flew in 16 of the cheekongs to visit Malaysia for the first time in 1995," he said.

Tan said the Malaysian Government had been very supportive of the association's effort in promoting goodwill and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

During the recent trip, he said, MCFA officials led by him also met Kunming governor Li Jiating and Provincial Communist Party Committee secretary Linhu An.

"The trip was a success. Both leaders were encouraged by the activities of the association to promote friendship and bilateral ties between Malaysia and China."

He said Linhu had also agreed to consider a request by the "cheekongs" for a memorial hall to organise their activities in.

"The MCFA feels very honoured by this commitment from the provincial leaders," he said.

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