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## Steadfast in helping Chinese community

By Yong Tiam Kui

THE Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry is marking its 100th anniversary with three days of celebrations beginning next Wednesday. YONG TIAM KUI takes a look at the chamber's colourful history.

THE names of the founders of the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry read like a list of the city's roads - Loke Yew, Chan Sow Lin, Chow Kiat and others.

These self-made millionaire towkays of yesteryear, who were the movers and shakers of old Kuala Lumpur, felt that there was a need for an organisation that would represent the interests of Chinese businessmen and the Chinese community in general.

The idea was floated in an article in the Malay Mail and upon receiving an enthusiastic response, the "Commercial Bureau" was set up on March 27, 1904 with Loke Yew at the helm.

The bureau served as an informal liaison office between the British Administration and the Chinese community. It also helped to translate new laws and regulations into Chinese and disseminated them among the business community. This was crucial as very few Chinese were conversant with English then.

Besides helping to organise rites of passage such as wedding and funeral ceremonies for its members, the bureau also helped settle disputes within the business community as the Chinese had a marked aversion to bringing matters to court. It also played a leading role in the promotion of Chinese education and social welfare activities.

Unfortunately, little else is known about the bureau's activities before the Second World War because the chamber's records are no longer extant. They were deliberately destroyed to prevent the Japanese occupiers from identifying its members as they had helped to raise funds for the anti-Japanese war effort in China.

"The Chinese community raised funds to buy weapons and provide support for the then Government of China. Who gave and how much, it was all recorded.

"So, when the Japanese invaded Malaya, Chinese associations and organisations had to destroy the incriminating evidence," says the Chamber's vice-president Mew Jin Seng.

Members had good reason to fear Japanese reprisal. The chamber, like many other Chinese organisations, had also helped to mobilise 3,000 local Chinese youths to help build the famous Burma Road. This 1,120km stretch of road, which snaked through some of the most impassable terrain in the world, from the southwestern Chinese city of Kunming to Lashio in Myanmar, played a crucial role in China's survival.

It was the only possible route for American military supplies to make their way to the embattled Kuomintang regime as the advancing Imperial Japanese Army had seized all of China's seaports.

As a consequence, the chamber had to lie low during the Japanese Occupation. But with the return of the British, it was once again called upon to defend the interests of the Chinese community.

The Immigration (Control) Act 1950 was of particular concern to the Chinese community because it declared that those who were born in the various Malay States who had not been awarded Federal citizenship would not enjoy the same rights of entry into the Federation enjoyed by those

born in Penang, Malacca and Singapore. The Malays were exempted from the limitations of this Act.

At the time, only some 120,000 people had been awarded Federal citizenship, so the overwhelming majority of Chinese born in the Federation would not be able to re-enter the Federation without immigration passes. The chamber collaborated with 50 Chinese organisations in Selangor to draft a petition requesting that the authorities repeal the Act.

After studying the Malayan Federal Constitution Proposal, the chamber submitted a memorandum requesting, among other things, that (1) those born locally should be given citizenship; (2) equal treatment be given to mother tongue education; (3) foreigners who reside in the country for five years have the right to apply for citizenship; (4) Parliament is to be conducted multi-lingually; and (5) applications for citizenship should not be subjected to the limitation of knowledge in certain languages.

The chamber has changed its name several times over the years. It was known variously as the Commercial Bureau, Chinese Commercial Bureau and Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce. It adopted its current name - The Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry - in 1983.

The chamber has been based at its present location in Jalan Ampang since July 1, 1995. Prior to that, the chamber operated from rented premises in the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall.

Mew says the chamber continues to work closely with the Government and regularly makes recommendations on policy matters.

In 1988, the chamber responded to then Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call to boost local demand for Malaysian products by holding an exhibition of made-in-Malaysia products.

In 1998, it organised the "Love Malaysia Buy Malaysian Products" trade fair to help the economy recover from the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

The chamber also forwarded 11 proposals for turning the economy around at a closed-door National Economic Recovery Plan briefing with Dr Mahathir.

When the pig farming industry was devastated by the Nipah epidemic in 1999, the chamber and seven other major Chinese organisations submitted a memorandum containing five proposals for overcoming problems faced by pig farmers to the Government.

The chamber has been expanding its role over the years and has set up a number of specialised committees to serve its members better.

In 1991, for instance, the Financial and Economic Research Committee was created and given the task to carry out meticulous analysis of the country's economic policies and related financial matters so that members were kept informed of the latest developments.

The committee has also held seminars and forums on numerous topics including Listen to What Experts Have to Say on the '98 Financial Budget, How to Turn the Economy of the Nation Around, The Financial Crisis Economic Impact on East Asia, Capital and Foreign Exchange Controls and Opportunities for Chinese Businessmen/Entrepreneurs in the 8th Malaysian Plan, Opportunities and Challenges with China's WTO Entry and Looking at the 2004 Budget from the Taxation Point of View.

When it became clear that the Government was placing renewed emphasis on agriculture, the chamber set up an agriculture committee to look into ways to promote the industry.

In 1983, it set up a RM1 million scholarship fund for needy students. Eleven years later, the chamber set aside another RM1 million for a bursary to provide study loans. Both funds provide assistance to students irrespective of their racial origin.

Members' involvement in Chinese education continues to this day. Most of its council members sit on the boards of four independent Chinese schools in Kuala Lumpur - Confucian Private Secondary School, Kuen Cheng Girl's High School, Chong Hwa Independent High School and Tsun Jin High School.

The chamber has been recognised by the Registrar of Societies as one of the country's 10 most active and well-managed societies Malaysia.

It has developed strong linkages with Chinese business organisations in the Asean region, China, North America and Australia.

Today, the chamber has a membership of 66 trade associations, 1,517 companies, 193 individual members and 12 associate members.

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