

The Sun - 26/3/2007

Tan Cheng Lock's role in MCA not in dispute

THE letter to the editor by Tan Siok Choo ("A surprising omission", March 15) was published with the purpose of "setting the record straight" about her grandfather Tan Cheng Lock. Tan was taking issue with a phrase I used in the first print of my book *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time*. The offending line on p65 qualifies H.S. Lee and Leong Yew Koh as "founders of the MCA".

Tan's interpretation of that claim was that I was saying that Cheng Lock was not the founder of the MCA, and therefore considered it a strange and unjustified omission on my part.

I did not mention Cheng Lock on p65 because I was relating an event in which a group of four men – Tunku Abdul Rahman, Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Lee and Leong – called on Gerald Templar to hand over a resolution warning of a boycott that the group was planning. Cheng Lock was not in that group and it would have been very strange indeed to mention him there. It was because the two names mentioned earlier quite suddenly appear in the text that I put in the phrase to help the reader along.

There was no intentional omission of Cheng Lock. As Tan also noted, her grandfather was credited as "party founder" later on in the book when it was relevant to mention him. Thus the issue is not about me denying Cheng Lock his historical status.

I think the disagreement stems from differing definitions of the word "founder". The issue is whether the MCA in fact had one founder or a

group of founders. In any case, I would not disagree that Cheng Lock was the main figure involved.

My reference to C.F. Yong and R.B. McKenna's book *The Kuomintang Movement in British Malaya, 1912-1949* was to draw Tan's attention to the list of persons found on p218 in that book describing them as founders of the MCA.

Thanks to Tan, I was made aware of the fact that the word "founder" when referring to the MCA is used by some in a highly-specified manner to mean that Cheng Lock was the only founder, and that other figures, as Tan puts it, "were among Malayan Chinese who provided the organising energy that helped Cheng Lock to get the political party off the ground".

Partly to accommodate this view, and partly because the phrase was of no central significance to the event that I was relating on p65, I had already changed the phrase used in the first print into "the latter two representing the MCA" in all reprints, and had informed Tan of that decision weeks ago.

I am sorry that the original phrase upset Tan so greatly. I would be the last to deny that Cheng Lock was a statesman and a central figure in Malayan history, and it would be ridiculous for anyone to ignore his enormous contribution to the founding of Malaya and to its multiculturalism.

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