

A true Malayan nationalist

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TUN Tan Cheng Lock (1883-1960) became founding president of the MCA in 1949. Although he was 66 when elected to the position, Tun Tan was regarded as the only man able to bring the Malayan Chinese together in perhaps their most trying time.

The post-war years and the Emergency was a difficult and dangerous juncture for the community. The Chinese were deeply divided and their loyalty was under scrutiny.

Among the Chinese, only Tun Tan had the stature to engage with senior Malays such as Datuk Onn Jaafar and Tunku Abdul Rahman at a time of imminent constitutional changes in the country. Strongly anti-communist, he was also trusted by the British colonial officials.

A fifth-generation Baba Chinese from Malacca, Tun Tan came from a family of traders and shipowners. But he gained his own wealth through ventures in rubber planting, banking and insurance.

In 1923, he was made a nominated member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Three years later and long before others did, Tun Tan spoke of a territorially unified and politically united Malaya in a speech to the council.

He also envisaged eventual

self-government for a Malaya that would offer democracy, equality, and justice to all citizens.

Later, he joined the Malay leaders - first through the All Malaya Council of Joint Action, which he chaired, and then the Communities Liaison Committee headed by Onn - to fight for constitutional change and work towards inter-ethnic cooperation. He chaired the inaugural meeting of Onn's multi-racial Independence of Malaya Party.

In the end, Tun Tan decided that only a Chinese party could safeguard the interests of his community and that multi-ethnic cooperation was more likely to be achieved through partnership with Umno. With that, the MCA joined with Umno to form the Alliance, the precursor to the Barisan Nasional.

Today, Tun Tan is acknowledged as a founding father of independent Malaya, along with Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, and Tun V.T. Sambathan.

Dr Lee Kam Hing had a chance to interview Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, MCA President and Housing and Local Government Minister, on today's MCA event to mark the 46th anniversary of Tun Tan Cheng Lock's death.

Datuk Seri, for the first time

ever, the MCA is holding a commemorative gathering to honour its founding president Tun Tan Cheng Lock. What made the party decide this year to mark this date?

As we approach our nation's 50th year of independence, it is an occasion to look back on its achievements. We take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those who played an important part in the creation of a unique political arrangement of inter-ethnic cooperation and power-sharing. In particular, we want to remember their struggle for our independence. And among

these men and women, Tun Tan was a major figure.

Tun Tan has been described as one of Malacca's most illustrious sons and a Malayan nationalist. He, together with early Malay political leaders such as Datuk Onn and Tunku Abdul Rahman, worked to lay the foundation for our modern, multi-ethnic society.

It would seem that few Malaysians today of all ethnic groups remember or know much about Tun Tan. There are some good publications on his life and his hopes of a new Malayan nation.

Can more be done, especially through heritage bodies and learned societies, to promote among the young an awareness and knowledge of past leaders like Tun Tan?

This is where history courses at school and university levels can offer a broader approach to enable the younger generation to learn about, and appreciate, the contributions of all those who fought for the freedom of this country.

Newspapers, television, radio and magazines can also contribute. I hope to see film and television companies draw upon the life stories of Malaysian leaders, past and present, as the content for some of their programmes.

In Tun Tan, Malay students would come to know of a Chinese leader who traced his roots back to 18th-century Malacca, and whose love for his state led him to refer to it fondly as "negeri bertuah". In the pre-independence years, he was already urging economic assistance for poor Malays.

Likewise, non-Malays must read the political writings and thoughts of the early Malay leaders and understand how Datuk Onn and the Tunku, while fighting for the rights of the Malays, also saw Malaya as a home for all ethnic groups.

Tun Tan was certainly a nationalist. His courageous anti-communist stand was crucial at that critical period in our history, when there were those who doubted the loyalty of the Chinese community.

It was Tun Tan, and the MCA, who went around the country to provide assistance to those in new villages, rubber estates and tin mines whose lives were disrupted by the Emergency.

Several hundred MCA members were killed by the communists; in April 1949, Tun Tan was injured in an MCP (Malayan Communist Party) attempt on his life.

And so through him and the MCA, the Chinese community had a leadership acceptable to the British and the Malays, and which they could work with.

Malaysia's 50th year of independence could be the occasion to initiate some meaningful projects centred on Tun Tan. There's not even a full biography on him. Do you think more could now be done?

The party will be organising seminars and conferences on Tun Tan as well as on all those leaders, Malays and non-Malays, who fought together

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Rapport with Malay leaders

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for independence. But I would like to see other institutions initiate events related to Tun Tan. He belongs not only to the MCA, but to the nation. The party could help start some of these projects.

For a start, we could introduce an annual lecture named after Tun Tan, to which distinguished local and foreign scholars could be invited to speak on topics related to his life and times.

More ambitiously, we could set up a research centre, possibly in a university and named after Tun Tan, devoted to addressing issues of nation-building in this country. Or it could be an endowed chair in a university.

With that, scholars can research his ideas and life-long work and bring out publications that are accessible to the public. His memory and place in our nation would thereby be firmly established.

Tun Tan enjoyed close political rapport with senior Malay leaders. They discussed and argued, sometimes heatedly, on pressing issues such as citizenship and the nation state. But they appreciated one another's hopes and aspirations, and genuinely respect-

ed everybody's feelings. Can we learn from their example and, through this, progress further in our nation-building?

Tun Tan and Datuk Onn, as well as the early leaders, lived through momentous periods in history. They experienced colo-

onial rule, the Japanese Occupation, and the Emergency. For some of them, those were hazardous times. They witnessed extremism, be it the harshness of the Japanese, or the armed militancy of the Emergency.

There had been inter-ethnic

violence immediately after WWII. Tun Tan and Datuk Onn saw death and suffering, and these led them to take a more moderate position and look at the concerns of the other side.

They also realised that their common goal was to end colonial rule and attain

independence. It was this shared experience and struggle that forged a bond between them.

I was also struck by how humble they all were. They accorded each other due respect and showed courtesy and generous hospitality.

The Tunku occasionally stayed in Tun Tan's house when he was in Malacca. There was real friendship, and even when they were in opposite camps, there was genuine respect for one another's political beliefs.

In a recently published book, one scholar suggests that during the early years under Tun Tan, the MCA agenda was ambiguous. Was it a welfare organisation; a colonial tool against the MCP; a Kuomintang organisation in a new form; a communal reaction in defence of sectarian interests, or merely a seller of lottery tickets? In a sense, these elements were all present in the MCA then. How far has the party moved away from these images?

Even while under Tun Tan, the MCA had begun to move towards a more focused agenda. Tun Tan himself was aware that the party had lost some direction and was seen as essentially a welfare organisation. But alleviating the sufferings of more than half a million Chinese displaced by the Emergency was still an important task it had to engage in.

And the social welfare lottery was introduced as a way to raise money for welfare, educa-

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A leader for all Chinese

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tion and even cultural activities in the new villages set up for the relocated Chinese.

However, in September 1951, Tun Tan reminded MCA members that the party should not limit its purpose to merely responding to the Emergency, but also be a strong democratic institution that is ready and able to play a part in the nation's future.

In fact, he described the MCA then as a loosely knit association of persons, most of whom did not even know its basic aims. Tun Tan took steps to realign the MCA from an essentially welfare organisation into a political party.

Today, the MCA is a strong political partner within the inter-ethnic ruling coalition. While defending the interests of the Chinese community remains its core concern, the

party is also involved in educational, cultural and welfare efforts, thus continuing a tradition set by the early MCA. And like Tun Tan, we are clear about our priorities.

As a Baba Chinese from Malacca, Tun Tan hardly spoke any Chinese dialect. Some also thought he represented narrow Straits Chinese interests. How is he viewed today by those Chinese who knew, or remember, him?

In his time, there were those Chinese, especially the Chinese-educated, who might have reservations about Tun Tan becoming their leader when he did not speak the language of the community. But at that point in time, he was the most able and experienced Chinese leader - someone acceptable to both the British officials and Malay leaders.

And Chinese business leaders held him in high regard because he was a successful planter and banker. In overseas Chinese society, the merchant class assumed leadership of the community.

Significantly, while Tun Tan spoke no Chinese, he strongly supported Chinese language and education. He saw it not as a communal issue, but believed that in a free and democratic society, the people had the right to study and use their mother tongue. He was a great defender of the rights of the individual.

Furthermore, it was Tun Tan who led the MCA to help thousands of Chinese register as citizens when the opportunity to do so was offered, briefly.

And he pleaded successfully against the threatened repatriation by the colonial government of hundreds of Chinese

who had been detained during the Emergency.

Chinese today who know of Tun Tan remember and acknowledge that he fought for the interests of all Chinese. He is therefore well thought of.

Tun Tan was already a very wealthy businessman when he entered politics as a nominated member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council in 1923. He had also

been a teacher, having completed his studies at the Raffles Institution in Singapore, which few in his day had the opportunity to do so. Is the MCA attracting people like him today?

Perhaps not quite of the same calibre and stature as Tun Tan, but men and women with almost similar background and commitment have been joining the MCA, and in increasing numbers.

Yes, he was already very wealthy when he entered politics and he excelled in all the fields he applied himself to. But, above all these, I was struck by the dedicated and honest approach he adopted in all his business and political dealings, whether with the Malays, Chinese or British.

It was this leadership quality he offered to the Chinese com-

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Laying foundation for unity

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munity.

To him and many Chinese of his generation, a role in public affairs was a responsibility. Having achieved success in their different fields and professions, they felt incumbent to use their wealth, time and skill to serve the community and the people.

Apart from Tun Tan, there were other Chinese of similar conviction and commitment, men like Tun H.S. Lee, Yong Shook Lin and Leong Yew Koh.

Likewise, there were Malays such as Datuk Onn, the Tunku, Tun Razak and Tun Hussein Onn, who felt that with their education and status came the responsibility of leadership.

Both early Malay and non-Malay leaders seemed to sense that they belonged to a generation specially entrusted to lead their community in a period of political transition and that destiny had decided that some of

them should lead the nation to independence. To them, politics was a public duty.

As we approach our 50 years of independence, we need to recapture that spirit.

You are the first MCA president who can lay claim to having a full Chinese-language education. Tun Tan and those who followed him were largely English-educated while the majority of members are not. Does being Chinese-educated help in today's Malaysian Chinese politics?

I am actually trilingual. I went through six years of education in a Chinese primary school, after which I studied at a government secondary school under the English medium.

When I entered the University of Malaya to do my Bachelor of Science, it was in the transitional phase of changing from English as a medium of instruc-

tion to Malay.

That is, about 70% of the courses were still taught in English and 30% in Malay.

That makes me a trilingual Malaysian.

Tun Tan demonstrated that although he came from a minority within a minority, being a Baba Chinese within a largely Chinese-speaking Chinese community, he could still play an effective role in public life and eventually lead the community.

He showed that language is no hindrance if there is willingness to serve.

I hope young Malaysian Chinese can emulate Tun Tan and his attitude. As a young man, he was active in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Straits Chinese British Association and the Hokkien community, and the trusteeship of community funds and temples such as the Cheng Hoon Teng, and various bodies with

cultural or humanitarian objectives.

Tun Tan supported the work of these organisations and he did make a difference.

We are grateful to men like him and those of his generation who did it not for personal interest, but for the betterment of those around them.

More young Malaysian Chinese should be active in society, and help those around them who are in need, and speak out on issues that concern society and the nation.

As MCA president, you have assumed the mantle of Tun Tan. What ideas and visions of his inspire you most?

Tun Tan addressed major political issues concerning the nation as well as social problems affecting ordinary people. Even as he spoke in the Legislative Council of his hopes for self-government and inter-ethnic harmony, he touched on

the problems of opium addicts and the semi-slavery status of mui-tsai (bonded servant girls), the hardships faced by Malay fishermen, and the limited educational opportunities of Portuguese descendants in Malacca.

Likewise, we in the MCA work within the Barisan Nasional to tackle the challenges and opportunities facing our nation. But the party also helps to alleviate urban poverty, improve the quality of life in new villages, and reduce the dropout rate of students.

Like Tun Tan, who was concerned about education, we expand college and university opportunities and, at the same time, encourage lifelong learning to enhance the quality of life.

We also assist young entrepreneurs, especially those in IT, to create start-up companies. What these young men and women need are initial financial

support and business networking. In a small way, we are helping young Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds to become competitive and global.

Tun Tan is a good example for our young today. As a youth, he ventured into rubber planting, then a very new industry.

There were risks involved, but he displayed entrepreneurial skills and a pioneering spirit. He ventured into banking and insurance, and eventually held significant stakes in OCBC, the United Malacca Estate and Sime Darby. We in the MCA hope our young will emulate his unique qualities.

But of Tun Tan's vision, I am particularly inspired, and I am sure others would be, by his hope for a united Malaysia with a true Malaysian consciousness among its people.

To him, it is a nation founded on the will of its people to live together harmoniously and to construct a common future.