

In an MG, heading for the padang

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It was in 1952, just three years after the formation of MCA, when Tan Cheng Swee met Sir (Tun) Tan Cheng Lock, his father's close friend.

That was the time when the talk in town was on the impending independence.

"When we met, Tun asked what I was doing and why I was wasting my time and talent," remembers Datuk Tan Cheng Swee, 85.

"He said that I should be serving the community and the nation at large instead of just being contented with my position as an estate manager."

Cheng Lock was an inspiring leader and the young Cheng Swee was drawn into the world of politics.

The MCA leader had sized up the young man correctly, and Cheng Swee went on to serve the party, state and country admirably.

Cheng Swee served MCA as a vice-president (1970-1976), treasurer-general (1968-1976) and MCA Malacca liaison committee chairman (1963-1976).

He was also the acting chief minister of Malacca on four occasions (1961, 1963, 1967 and 1973).

Being English educated and very conversant in Malay and Mandarin, as well as several Chinese dialects, Cheng Swee started his political career by campaigning for the Alliance candidates in the pre-independence municipal elections.

"Unlike political campaigns today where an allowance is paid, I had to spend my own money on travelling and food," says Cheng Swee.

Two years later, Cheng Swee was appointed a Malacca executive councillor and it was the beginning of a solid friendship with the late Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba, who was then the chief minister.

"It was Ghafar who convinced me to take up golf. He said he would teach me but I was slow to learn and he was already an expert," Cheng Swee remembers with a smile.

"Ghafar had always been a very simple man. But he was very im-

He was a dashing young planter in Malacca managing the family estate when a chance meeting with his father's close friend changed his 'career', writes CYNTHIA LEE



patient and gave up on me. And he complained to Tunku Abdul Rahman (Putra Al Haj)."

But Tunku, the sportsman that he was, arranged for a golf pro to coach Cheng Swee.

Very much in the background now, Cheng Swee stays in one of the traditional Chinese buildings along Jalan Bukit Cina, that also doubles up as his office, where he still serves the people, lending a helping hand to all individuals and organisations who seek his help.

Cheng Swee and his wife have two daughters and two sons who have all flown the coop.

William Tan Doon Tian recently retired as the manager of Public Bank head office in Kuala Lumpur while Phillip Tan Puay Koon is a vice-president at Citibank in Kuala Lumpur. Amy Tan is a senior manager in EON Finance in Kuala Lumpur and Sisi Tan runs a restaurant in Australia.

Age may be catching up with him but Cheng Swee can never forget that bright and cheery morning of Feb 20, 1956.

"I remember the day," recalls Cheng Swee.

The Merdeka delegation led by Tunku was scheduled to arrive from Singapore. Tunku had an important official announcement to make.

The delegation, which also included (Tun) Abdul Razak Hussein, (Tun) Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, (Tun) H.S. Lee, (Tan Sri) T.H. Tan and (Tan Sri) Abdul Kadir Shamsudin, had left for London by boat from Singapore on Jan 1, 1956.

After three weeks of negotiations with the British, the independence agreement was signed on Feb 8.

The delegation left London by air on Feb 16, arrived in Singapore at midnight on Feb 19, and left for Malacca the next day.

"I woke up that morning feeling very excited and I took extra care with the way I looked," remembers Cheng Swee.

Dressed in bush jacket, Cheng Swee arrived early at the Batu Berendam Airport in his red open-top MG sports car with the rest of the motorcade members.

"We waited anxiously for Tunku and his delegation.

"When Tunku alighted from the plane, he looked a little tired but his eyes were bright and happy."

Tunku was then led to the red Nash Metropolitan convertible bearing the registration number M4442.

Datuk Panglima Bukit Gantang Abdul Wahab Abdul Aziz and Abdul Aziz Majid joined the Tunku in the Nash.

The Merdeka motorcade began to roll, and there was Cheng Swee in his MG, with the Tunku in the Nash behind him.

It was a 16-kilometre journey and thousands of people lined the road.

"They were all beaming with joy and shouts of 'Merdeka' greeted the motorcade as it passed by.

"When we arrived at the padang, there was a crowd of



Tunku Abdul Rahman and Datuk Tan Cheng Swee

100,000 awaiting us. I had yet to see such a large crowd in my life."

And the Tunku was in his element as he announced "according to the agreement reached in London, the Federation of Malay States would achieve independence on Aug 31, 1957".

"Then Tunku, who was holding a *keris*, lifted his hand and shouted 'Merdeka' several times."

Cheng Swee says he later learnt that many of the people who turned up had come from the outlying areas, and had slept in mosques, surau and even under the trees around the padang the night before.

"They had come to witness the historical event and they had travelled all the way from their kampungs, on foot, bicycles and some in old cars."

To Cheng Swee, there is nothing that can match the eu-

phoria of Feb 20, 1956.

The Malacca government had tried to recreate the mood of that historical event when commemorating Independence Day last year, but Cheng Swee says "it just felt different".

"The intentions were good but the people and the crowd were different and even the motorcade cars are gone".

Cheng Swee had tried to locate the red convertible that the Tunku rode in for last year's Merdeka celebrations, but "the owner had sold the car".

"But it was a good celebration in Malacca last year."

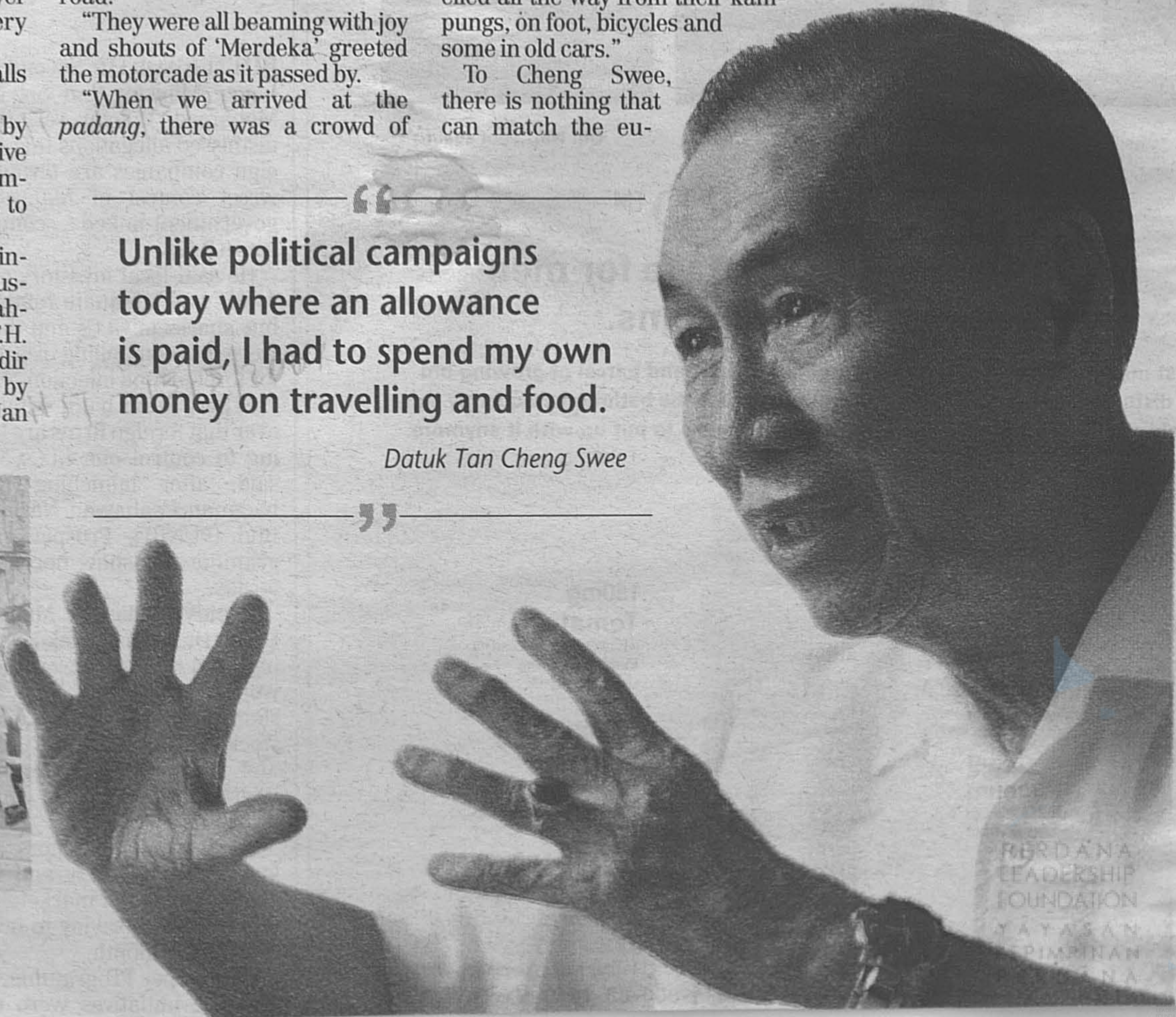
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Datuk Tan Cheng Swee



Tunku Abdul Rahman, with Datuk Tan Cheng Swee and then Information Minister Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman accompanying him, was in Malacca in 1963 to receive a Patriotic Fund donation contributed by the Chinese community.



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