

Through rain and shine:

Cheng Lock speaking at a rally. By his 40s, he was a leading member of the Straits Chinese community and noted for his intellect and views on the future of the Chinese immigrant community.



Cheng Lock's vision and mission

STAR - 09/07/2007

Tun Tan Cheng Lock played a pivotal role in getting the British to agree to hold Malaya's first federal elections in 1955, the prelude to the granting of independence in 1957.

By **HENG PEK KOON**

MORE than any other Chinese leader in the formative period of nation-building, Tun Tan Cheng Lock was responsible for securing basic rights and privileges – citizenship based on *jus soli* (the principle that a person's nationality at birth is determined by the place of birth), protection of Chinese education and culture, and participation in the Alliance governing coalition.

An eighth-generation Malayan Chinese with a cosmopolitan outlook and proud of his heritage, Cheng Lock can be considered one of the country's first visionary leaders. He had imagined a Malaya that would be both multiracial and self-governing.

In 1926, when as a member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, he articulated a powerful vision of a "Malayan community with a Malayan consciousness". Twenty years later, he continued to exhort Chinese and Indians to identify themselves as Malaysians.

In 1932, speaking out against British discriminatory measures against Chinese education and land ownership issues, he called for colonial policies that would instead establish a "Malaya for Malaysians". He also argued for a common language of instruction to "Malayanise" students enrolled in the country's Malay, Mandarin and Tamil schools.

An advocate of English as the common medium of instruction, he called for the inclusion of mother-tongue education in the schooling system to preserve the country's rich multicultural heritage.

Aware that the Chinese had to show loyalty



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to Malaya before Malay leaders would agree to their playing a role in a self-governing Malaya, Cheng Lock argued that the best way of inculcating a sense of patriotism among the Chinese was to give them "a fair deal in Malaya".

They would then, like the Straits-born Chinese, "regard themselves in the course of time as Malaysians first and Chinese second". To Cheng Lock, a fair deal meant equal citizenship rights, constitutional safeguards for Chinese education and language, religious freedom, and unimpeded opportunities for economic betterment.

Although Cheng Lock believed deeply that "equality is the very root and foundation of democracy", he recognised that the Chinese needed to make major compromises to accommodate Malay interests, particularly their economic needs. Because of their weaker

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Working for race relations

economic standing compared to the immigrant Chinese population, he felt that Malays had a justifiable claim to special rights treatment.

He also recognised that the slightly smaller Malay population then – in 1940, Chinese made up 43% of the total population compared to 41% for Malays and 14% for Indians – made them apprehensive about their future political and economic prospects.

Cheng Lock thus supported a special rights policy for Malays in order to protect them from “unfair competition and exploitation”. Writing in 1940, he stated that Malays “should be assisted by the Government in every way to accelerate their economic and educational advancement and progress.”

At the same time, he emphasised that “the interests and rights of the other races should not thereby be affected to their detriment and in such a way as to hamper their development and justice”.

In April 1946, after World War II, the British government inaugurated the Malayan Union, a scheme that created a common citizenship with equal rights for Malays and non-Malays. Due to this “affront” and another measure that sharply infringed upon Malay political sovereignty, the Malays formed the United Malays National Organisation to oppose the Malayan Union.

While Cheng Lock understood that Umno had opposed the scheme because it “failed adequately to consider the special position of Malays” among other reasons, he was bitterly disappointed when Umno, in cooperation with the British and sultans and without any Chinese input, produced the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948. The new citizenship clauses were so stringent that in 1951, Chinese formed only 12% of those who had become citizens.

Between 1947 and 1955, Cheng Lock worked single-mindedly to obtain citizenship based on *jus soli* for Chinese in a Malaya where no “single community (would) be placed in a position to dominate the others”.

He first embarked on his uphill struggle by cooperating with the leftwing Malayan Democratic Union and Malay Nationalist Party in the All-Malaya Council of Joint Action-Putera movement. For a short period, he even succeeded in getting the conservative Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce of Malaya to cooperate with the leftwing AMCJA in opposing the Federation of



Caring concern: Cheng Lock often visited residents in new villages in order to understand their plight and to find ways to help them. Picture shows Sir Henry Gurney (left) and Cheng Lock (right) chatting with an old woman in a new village in Negri Sembilan in 1951.

Malaya Agreement. With the movement's collapse, Cheng Lock turned his full attention to the MCA that was set up in 1949.

Pragmatic approach

Cheng Lock demonstrated a remarkable willingness to work with different political allies, to temper idealism with pragmatism, and to modify his strategies when faced with exigent realities. These qualities were fully displayed between 1946 and 1955, the period when nationalist activities were at their peak.

After failing to overturn the Federation of Malaya Agreement, Cheng Lock changed tactics, abandoning the political left to instead work with Umno. His return to the political mainstream was facilitated by Commissioner-General for South-East Asia Malcolm McDonald, who set up the Communities Liaison Committee (CLC) in 1949 to provide a platform for Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders to sort out their differences.

Citizenship based on *jus soli* for non-Malays and special rights for Malays were the most pressing issues that engaged the attention of the CLC, particularly Umno president

»Cheng Lock demonstrated a remarkable willingness to work with different political allies, to temper idealism with pragmatism«

Datuk Onn Jafaar and Cheng Lock.

Onn agreed to liberalise the terms of citizenship for non-Malays. In return, Cheng Lock pledged support for Malay special rights. Both leaders also appeared to have concurred that a multiracial system of governance would make for more harmonious race relations than the exclusivist Umno and MCA structures.

Both men, however, failed in their efforts to transform their respective parties into multiracial bodies. Onn was replaced by Tunku Abdul Rahman as Umno president in August

1951 after failing to persuade the party rank and file to accept non-Malays into their fold. By contrast, Cheng Lock held on to his party position even though the MCA voted in April 1951 against his proposal to admit non-Chinese with full rights.

When Onn formed the multiracial Independent Malayan Party in 1951, Cheng Lock gave it his support. Thus, when Selangor MCA leaders H.S. Lee and Ong Yoke Lin forged an ad hoc coalition with Umno to contest the Kuala Lumpur municipal elections in 1952, Cheng Lock was initially lukewarm toward the project. It was not until the election results conclusively demonstrated that Malays and Chinese voters greatly preferred the Umno-MCA alliance that he abandoned the IMP.

Refocusing his attention on the MCA, Cheng Lock worked to strengthen the Alliance. Gaining the trust and respect of Tunku Abdul Rahman, he played a prominent role in Alliance nationalist politics, guiding developments in the Alliance Roundtable – set up in February 1953 to institutionalise the coalition on a nationwide basis – and in the Alliance National Convention, which succeeded in putting pressure on the British to hold federal elections in 1955 and

to grant independence in 1957.

In May 1955, Cheng Lock suffered a stroke that incapacitated him. As a result, he was unable to participate in the constitutional negotiations that marked the final phase of the transfer of British power to the Alliance government.

It was Tun Tan Siew Sin – his son, closest confidante and political collaborator – who put the finishing touches to his life's work. After playing a pivotal role in the Alliance independence negotiations, Siew Sin became a major Malaysian figure, serving as MCA president from 1961 to 1974, and holding the powerful posts of Minister of Commerce and Industry, and Minister of Finance from 1957 to 1974.

When Cheng Lock died in 1960, he was honoured with a state funeral by the country he so loved and to which he had dedicated his life's work.

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Baba-Chinese who caught the eye of the British

BORN in 1883, Tan Cheng Lock was a Baba-Chinese whose ancestor Tan Hay Kwan arrived in Malaya in 1771.

His grandfather Tan Choon Bock founded one of the first steamship companies in Malaya.

Highly-educated and well-read in both Western and Chinese political philosophy, Cheng Lock was a teacher of English language and literature at Raffles Institution in Singapore before embarking on a successful career as a rubber planter.

In 1910, he formed United Malacca Rubber Estates, a company still listed on the Malaysian stock exchange.

Cheng Lock's oratorical prowess and his high status within the Chinese community in Malacca – facilitated by his business acumen and marriage to Yeo Yeok Neo,

daughter of the leader of Malacca's Hokkien community – caught the early attention of British officials, who appointed him to a number of key positions in the colonial government.

He became a Malacca municipal commissioner in 1912 and a Straits Settlements Legislative Council member in 1923, serving on its Executive Council from 1933 to 1938.

Also highly regarded within the Straits Chinese community, Cheng Lock in 1915 was elected president of the Malacca Straits China British Association, a body formed in 1900 to safeguard the political status of Straits-born Chinese as British subjects.

Cheng Lock's proposal to form a “Malayan Chinese Association” was first articulated in 1943 when he

was living in exile in India during the Japanese Occupation.

He wanted to use the MCA as the primary vehicle to inculcate Malayan loyalty among the Chinese population.

For Cheng Lock, the new party's key objectives would be to wean Chinese away from China-centric preoccupations, to involve them in Malayan nationalist politics, and to focus the collective Chinese mind on the urgent task of getting citizenship rights in an independent Malaya.

In February 1949, Cheng Lock's brainchild took concrete form when it received the active backing of British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney to garner Chinese support against the communist insurrection.

Others who helped in the forma-

tion of the MCA were Tun H.S. Lee and Tun Leong Yew Koh.

Cheng Lock's election as MCA president gave him a powerful political vehicle – a mass-based party built upon the country's extensive network of Chinese guilds and associations, the former Kuomintang movement and the Straits Chinese community – to pursue his political objectives.

Buttressed by the party's welfare work among the half million Chinese who were resettled in 440 New Villages during the Emergency, the MCA's membership reached 300,000 by 1954.

Cheng Lock was the first Malayan-Chinese figure to recognise that the immigrant Chinese population would need to show undivided loyalty to Malaya in order to earn the privileges of citizenship.

His eloquent advocacy of Chinese aspirations combined with an ability to gain the respectful attention of British officials and Malay nationalist leaders made it possible for his ideas to be given concrete form in 1957.

His political vision and ideas for a self-governing, democratic, multiracial Malaya are available in a landmark publication *Malayan Problems From a Chinese Point of View*, a compilation of his key speeches and writings spanning the period 1926-1947.

Not only did his ideas on nation-building and inter-ethnic relations impact decisively on the development of nationalist politics during the 1940s and 1950s, they still remain germane to the complex interplay of multiracial politics in Malaysia.