Interview with Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen,
Director of Royal Selangor International Sdn Bhd

Dr Cuthbert Teo - CT: Datin Paduka Chen, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Can you tell us about your grandfather and how he founded the company?

Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen - CMK: In 1885, my grandfather, Yong Koon sailed from the south-eastern Chinese port of Shantou in Guangdong province to Malaya. Since the age of 11, he was already an apprentice pewtersmith and was 14-years-old when he arrived in Kuala Lumpur. My grandfather was proud of his Hakka origin and it angered him when his grandchildren spoke another dialect.

Yong Koon joined his older brother Chin Seong and younger brother Wai Seong, in the newly established tin mining town. By 1898, Malaysia was the largest tin producer in the world. They had a pewter business in a shophouse in 23 Cross Street, now Jalan Silang. The name of the shop-house was Ngeok Foh, which means Jade Peace in Hakka. The brothers made a variety of simple household items, like pails, weighing scales, incense burners, joss stick holders and candle stands for altars. The brothers’ touch-mark, Ngeok Foh, was stamped in Chinese characters on each piece. As the business grew, Yong Koon returned to China and brought back a bride, Loh Pat. They had sons Peng Pow, Peng Sin, Peng Kai (my father) and Peng Seong who were, in my father’s words, born and bred in pewter dust, since the family stayed in the shophouse.

My grandmother was a formidable no-nonsense Hakka woman who eventually saved enough money to buy their own shophouse at 219 Pudu Road.

CT: What happened to Yong Koon’s sons?

CMK: My grandfather and his sons later went separate ways. From the split, three other pewter companies emerged — Tiger, Lion and Selangor. The eldest son, Peng Pow started Malayan Pewter while Peng Sin, Peng Kai and Peng Seong had set up Tiger Pewter at the original premises. Within a year, Tiger folded but was revived as Selangor Pewter. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese declared tin a controlled commodity, and the pewter business crumbled. My father ran a taxi service to supplement the family income.

In 1952, my grandfather Yong Koon passed away, aged 81. By then, my father had married Guay Soh Eng. She was calm and level-headed, qualities that contributed to the success of the business. My eldest brother, Poh Shin, was born in 1939, sister Mun Ha in 1941, myself in 1942 and youngest brother Poh Kon in 1945. In 1945, we rented a shop in Batu Road (now Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) where customers could go. William Holden, an American actor visited while filming the movie The Seventh Dawn. Mr Holden’s visit was a boon because he placed a large order of cigarette cases. My father worked alongside his employees, sweating in his Pagoda-brand white cotton vest, always paying his staff promptly and never raising his voice. My father treated his employees like family, and his staff worshipped him. Peng Kai was always looking for ways to improve the business. Besides introducing technical innovations like the spinning lathe and engraving machines, the company was one of the first to hire female workers. In 1962, my father moved operations from Pudu to the present factory in Setapak.

CT: How did Royal Selangor build up its brand from there?

CMK: In the 1970s, Australia became a big export market for the company. With business booming, the family realised that there had to be some formal design and marketing effort and roped in my mother’s niece, Guay Boon Lay who studied in Bristol Art College. She was responsible for the tulip-shaped goblet design, which became a best seller. In 1976, the company hired a Danish designer Anders Quistgaard to come up with new packaging, and he came up with the blue and white lapis lazuli print and diamond shaped logo. By that time, the factory moved to a
larger site five minutes away, where Anders set up a model shop to make prototypes of new products. Anders was also the one who conceived the idea of the Giant Tankard.

Since then, the company’s design department has continuously developed new product ranges using either our own in-house designers or by commissioning designers from overseas.

CT: You told me an interesting story about a melon pot when I was in KL. Can you please repeat the story?

CMK: In the museum, you will find a pewter melon pot when I was in KL. Can you please CMK: In the museum, you will find a pewter melon pot when I was in KL. Can you please...
there must have been many celebrities and regional and world leaders who have visited Royal Selangor. What are some of the more memorable visits?

CMK: Many years ago, we had an American actor visit us and I had absolutely no idea who he was. Anyway I sent a picture of the visitor to my daughter and she was absolutely flabbergasted that it was actually Mel Gibson! I’ve also had the pleasure of meeting Bill Clinton and many other heads of state and their spouses.

CT: The younger generation of your family has become involved in the family business in various capacities. Can you tell us more?

CMK: The next generation of Yongs, my grandfather’s (the founder’s) greatgrandchildren have entered the fray. Poh Kon’s son Yoon Li and my son Tien Yue are general managers, respectively looking after the factory and marketing. Before joining the business, Yoon Li spent nine years in the automotive industry in the UK and Malaysia while Tien Yue worked as a consultant with McKinsey.

Mun Ha’s daughter, Sun May Foon buys stones and designs for Selberan. Poh Kon’s youngest son, Yoon Kit helped create the company’s website in 1998, which won a regional CIO award in 2001. He now heads the company’s IT department. Poh Shin’s eldest son, Chris helps with our new designs.

CT: There is a Chinese saying 富不过三代 (fu bu guo san dai), meaning that it is rare that the wealth of a family can last for three generations. This saying hints that the first generation works extremely hard, the second sees the value of and maintains the hard work while the third generation forgets and squanders the wealth. It is very obvious that the Royal Selangor does not fit this saying.

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CT: Despite the long history of the business, the company has curiously remained privately owned. What is the corporate strategy in remaining so?

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