

Royal Selangor – The Brand's the thing!

Robert Chambers, Court Assistant at the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, and his wife, Soonhee, visited Royal Selangor in Kuala Lumpur in April and were shown around by Yong Mun Kuen, a director of the company and grand-daughter of its founder, Yong Koon. Further material for the article was gleaned from the book “*The Royal Selangor Story*” written by her daughter, Chen May Yee.

Robert came away with two principal messages:

“The main market for [Royal Selangor’s] pewter will not in the future be the USA or Europe, but Asia”; and “The message for pewter manufacturers is: *Create your own Brand.*” He adds:

Setapak Jaya is an unprepossessing suburb of Kuala Lumpur, out of sight of the city’s gleaming skyscrapers. But taxis and buses arrive here daily, delivering visitors to the HQ of one of Malaysia’s international brands, Royal Selangor, the world’s largest pewter maker. Here the Visitor Centre (opened in 2003) celebrates the Selangor story and showcases the vast range of pewter produced in the modern onsite factory. The shop sells an impressive range of pewter items at impressively high prices.

The story begins in 1885 when the teenage Yong Koon emigrated from China to seek work in the booming Malayan tin-mining town of Kuala Lumpur, soon to become the world’s largest tin producer. For the next 60 years Yong Koon and his family strove to build a business making and selling pewter from their “shophouse”, a workshop which also served as their home. The first customers were tin miners who bought pewter incense burners and other Chinese ceremonial items for domestic altars.

By the 1930’s, during the worldwide depression, pewter was a dying craft, not for the last time in the 20th century! But the business picked up by finding new customers, namely expatriates, mainly British, who wanted pewter giftware such as cigarette boxes, ashtrays and tea pots. Then came the Second World War. The expatriates left, business crumbled and the Japanese occupiers oppressed the local Chinese community. The business (then known as Selangor Pewter) survived by making sake sets for the occupiers.

Yong Koon had four sons. They feuded. One son was murdered by gangsters. In 1952, Yong Koon died leaving only one son, Peng Kai, still in the pewter business. But all his four children joined the business and today they are active directors of Royal Selangor, with the youngest, PK Yong, at the helm. Several members of the 4th generation are also involved in running the business.



Robert and Soonhee Chambers in front of the world's largest tankard

The rags-to-riches story continued in the second half of the 20th century. Manufacturing innovations, such as the introduction of a production line and the purchase (in 1951) of a second-hand engraving machine for decorating tankards and trophies, helped the business grow. Tourists became the main market. In the Visitor Centre the company commemorates the large order for cigarette cases received in the early 1960's from the Hollywood actor William Holden. At the time, this was the largest order the business had ever taken. Later, American servicemen, on R & R from the Vietnam War, became major customers of pewter giftware, which Selangor packed for them and shipped to the USA.

The move to a modern 4000 sq ft factory at Setapak in 1962, and the opening of the company's first independent shop in 1968, were significant landmarks. A second factory was opened in Singapore in 1968, but eventually closed. In 1977, the company moved to a nearby 5 acre, 60,000 sq ft, site where it remains to this day. It seems unlikely that the company will ever quit Malaysia, despite the lure of lower cost production in China and elsewhere. The company has forged its achievements in the Malayan peninsula and the Yong family, which describes itself as "born and bred in pewter dust", is rooted in Malaya.

In the 1970s Australia became the company's first "Western" market. Following a complaint about the packaging of the pewter from the company's Australian agent, Selangor hired a Danish designer, Anders Quistgard, in 1976 to design modern packaging. He became Chief Designer, created an in-house design studio and married into the family. A visible example of his legacy is on display outside the Visitor Centre, where visitors can have their photograph taken in front of the world's largest pewter tankard (produced in 1985), a giant piece nearly two metres tall and with a capacity of 4,920 pints!

Other Western markets followed. Sales offices and shops were set up in Europe and North America. By the year 2000, 60% of the company's output was exported, compared with less than 2% in 1970.

This is the time when Selangor started to build an international brand and to go global. A programme of acquisitions included Englefields of London (in 1987), the 350 year old maker of Crown and Rose pewter, Comyns, the London silversmiths (in 1993) and Seagull Pewter of Canada (in 2002). Diversification also included the setting up of Selberan, a gold jewellery company.

In 1979, the Sultan of Selangor, having discovered on a visit to Perth that Selangor Pewter was more famous than he was, appointed the company "Royal Pewterer". In 1992, Selangor Pewter changed its name to Royal Selangor, reflecting the patronage it had received from the Sultan.

Today, Royal Selangor exports to over 20 countries and is found in top stores, including Harrods and John Lewis in the UK. But the largest export market? It will be China!

Back in the shop at the Visitor Centre the Chinese tourists, who are buying a brand they know and trust, are a significant source of income for the company. The pride in achievement and remembrance of debts, both past and present, are everywhere on display. A bust of the founder and the tools of his trade are on show, as is a likeness, modelled in pewter, of Kuala Lumpur's iconic Petronas twin towers. This imaginative work of art, which took six months to make, was created with more than 7,200 three-quarter pint tankards! Mentioned in dispatches are the designers, such as Eric Magnussen from

Denmark and Britain's Nick Munro. Not forgotten are all the long serving employees, whose palm prints are impressed on a lofty, specially-constructed, pewter wall.

For the visitor more interested in the narrative than the brand the "Selangor story" seems at times almost to be a morality tale: the overcoming of adversities through hard work and enterprise. Several times the company almost failed: during the Great Depression, during the Second World War and again during the race riots of 1969 (which for a while brought tourism to a halt in Kuala Lumpur). Yet a family from humble origins survived and built a world class company. Unlike so many family concerns that fail by the third generation this family business has so far gone from strength to strength as each generation takes over.

Moreover, it is difficult not to imagine that Royal Selangor will continue to be a success story. There is now little doubt about the eastward shift of global economic power to Asian markets, most notably China. [A recent example of this was when the Italian fashion house, Prada, this year decided to seek a stock market listing in Hong Kong rather than Milan, "because East Asia is where people can afford to buy Prada"]. In these new growth markets, companies with established reputations, like Prada and Royal Selangor, have a head start and are already racing ahead.

Perhaps the only surprise is that the business has been powered by a single family. Professor John Davis of Harvard Business School described Royal Selangor as "a model family business story". Few would argue with that and many could agree that the story provides hope and lessons to any business with an ambition to sprout wings.

Robert Chambers

Editor's note: The company's website will tell you that Royal Selangor has: over a thousand different tableware and gift items, from traditional tankards and tea sets, to photo frames, and desk and wine accessories, the company has more than 40 shops worldwide. It has, in addition to selling in major stores, its own retail outlets in several capital cities around the world.

The website, www.royalselangor.com, will handle nine different currencies.

Committed to innovative designs and excellent craftsmanship, the company every year, comes up with new ranges. In 1989 and 1991, Royal Selangor received the Design Plus award at the Frankfurt International Gift Fair; and in 1997, the Gift of the Year Award in the licensed gifts category, from the Giftware Association.

Next issue: The whole matter of 'branding'

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Published by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers, Pewterers' Hall, Oat Lane, London EC2V 7DE

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