



True blood

Fourth-generation stewards of Royal Selangor Yong Yoon Li and Chen Tien Yue remind us that innovation isn't about creating the next big thing, but about doing something differently, and doing it better.

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YONG YOON LI, Executive Director of Royal Selangor, isn't sure that his late great-grandfather, Yong Koon, would have liked that his classic, melon-shaped pewter teapot has been given a makeover—it now comes in a metallic pink shade. He might marvel at how a compact item like a flash drive can store such large amounts of data, yet at the same time, wonder why they're sold in the shape of a human skull.

But it's fair to say that Yong Koon would have been proud to see his legacy flourish—from cottage industry roots to a cherished, 129-year-old Malaysian luxury brand that's known around the world. What started with just a handful of craftsmen in a two-storey colonial shop house, during the tin-mining days of Kuala Lumpur, has grown to become one of the foremost names in high-quality pewter gifts and home décor. The unique history and reputation of Royal Selangor are what inspires Yong, a design engineer with an MBA from the prestigious IMD in Switzerland, and his Oxford-educated cousin Chen Tien Yue to keep pushing forward with innovations, particularly in product design.

DIFFERENT, INNOVATIVE, UNPRECEDENTED Although items like skull flash drives might not form a large percentage of sales, it's a testament to the company's commitment to connecting with younger customers. "A lot of people grew up with



Above
Yong Yoon Li, Executive Director of Royal Selangor International, and Chen Tien Yue, Executive Director of Marketing, at the Royal Selangor factory in Setapak. They are the great-grandsons of founder Yong Koon, and represent the fourth generation in the family to lead the company.

Right
Filing and polishing the rough surfaces of newly cast pewter products are done by hand, against a buffing wheel or fine-grade sandpaper. Great skill is required to remove the patina that forms during the casting process.



Royal Selangor, knowing it for certain things such as trophies or a plate with a retirement message on it," says Chen, who is Executive Director of Marketing. "The challenge is to get people to look at the brand in a different way."

To achieve that goal, the family set out to take ownership of the creative process. In the early '70s, according to Yong, his grandfather Peng Kai and his father Poh Kon believed that an in-house, formal design process would be the piece in the Royal Selangor puzzle that "separates the men from the boys". They hired Danish designer Anders Quistgaard to manage a team of creatives, which today is a 30-strong team, led by Eugenia Lee, consisting of sculptors, designers, craftsmen, model makers and patent makers. "It's really nice to see guest designers' takes on design," Chen says. "When you're designing for your brand, sometimes, you like to have a different perspective. You get to see how they've progressed in their brands, how they infuse their style, their techniques and their capabilities into the design. It's quite refreshing."

From a product designer's viewpoint, direct access to the top management of a pewter company with control of the entire production chain—from materials and manufacturing to design and sales—means a greater degree of creative freedom. "Designers have fun when they work with us," Yong says. "When they're talking to someone at Royal Selangor, they know that the possibilities are practically endless. They can look at different categories. We encourage them to give us new ideas, things we've never done before." It's easier for them to woo designers they want to work with too. Recent collaborations include a tableware series that incorporated walnut wood and Volakas marble by Singaporean designer Nathan Yong, and



Top
A half-hour session at the School of Hard Knocks inside the factory shows participants how to shape their own pewter dish using traditional tools.

Middle
A collection of tea caddies with a Chinese calligraphy motif created by Hong Kong graphic designer Freeman Lau.



Bottom
Artefacts displayed at the Visitor Centre include a pewter money tree that was used as real Malay Archipelago currency in the early 20th century.



an exquisite collection of tea accessories by Jamie Yang from China, who also introduced non-pewter materials like bamboo and porcelain to his product designs. Utilising a mixed-media approach not only allows for an infusion of colour and new product ranges, but is also a prudent step in staving off the impact of rising tin prices and staying competitive on the global scene.

For this reason, Yong and Chen actively continue to seek out guest designers whose work complements Royal Selangor's contemporary product vision, and as part of the quest to figure out what consumers in a new territory want. The guys travel overseas frequently to meet potential new foreign collaborators, whose designs and ideas can provide insight into their local market. Just two weeks ago, they were in Paris for a meeting with a design studio, and in the coming months, Yong will be in China to talk shop with a sculptor whose expertise lies in creating Chinese deities. The company recently opened stores in India, and is exploring opportunities in the Middle East.

There's an appeal in the unknown challenges of a new market. "The modern global consumer today is quite similar, whether he or she is in New York, Singapore or KL. But as you broaden out to the rest of the market, there are big differences in lifestyle,"

Top
Make music by tapping pewter vases of different sizes in the Chamber of Chimes.

Above
A display in the gallery shows the amount of pewter and gold to balance a scale.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROYAL SELANGOR

1885: Tinsmith Yong Koon arrives in Kuala Lumpur from the port of Shantou, China. From a shop called Jade Peace on Cross Street, he makes and sells pewter prayer accessories.

'30s: Yong Koon, with the help of his wife, saves enough to open their first factory on Pudu Road. But family disputes cause his sons to start their own pewter ventures. Eventually, only Selangor Pewter, owned by Peng Kai, survives.

'40s: World War II erupts and the Japanese declare tin a controlled commodity. Peng Kai reopens on Batu Road when the war ends, selling pewter ashtrays and cigarette boxes to foreign soldiers who are heading home.

'50s: Tourism flourishes as the country begins rebuilding, and Peng Kai sets in motion a formalised manufacturing procedure. Patriarch Yong Koon dies in 1952.

'60s: Moves to new factory premises in Setapak and begins to build a reputation for engraved awards and trophies.

'70s: Formalises the design process by introducing an in-house design team. The company also expands to Europe, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. In 1979, Selangor Pewter receives a royal charter from the Sultan of Selangor as his "Royal Pewterer".

'80s: The world's largest pewter tankard is created to celebrate the company's centenary in 1985. It weighs 1,557kg and can hold 2,796l of liquid, and is listed in the 1987 edition of the *Guinness Book of Records*.

'90s: Selangor Pewter becomes Royal Selangor in 1992. In 1998, the company launches one of the first online shopping portals in Malaysia.

2000s: Introduction of Visitor Centres in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

2010: Commissioned by the Formula One Grand Prix Races to produce trophies for races in Malaysia, Singapore and China. Replicas of the trophies can be seen during the factory tour of the Visitor Centre.

Chen says. "In China, people drink a lot of tea and you find that our tea items do well there. In the UK, it's christening gifts; and in Australia, our beer tankards are more popular. So you can see the differences when you go from market to market."

TRADITIONS, VALUES, DISCIPLINES

Yong is quick to point out that despite the ambitious expansion into global territory, quality craftsmanship remains very much a top priority, and outsourcing production isn't an option. "We're still making our own pewter items with that same care and expertise. All our pewter items are made here—even wood, for which we have our own woodworking facility," Yong says. Ninety percent of the 250 craftsmen employed by Royal Selangor are Malaysian. Some, like Wong Suet Mui, a master engraver, joined in 1966, when the company was still known as Selangor Pewter. "I've been here 46 years!" Wong laughs. Having worked under Peng Kai, employees like Wong bring institutional knowledge that enables production to be more efficient and disciplined.

More importantly, they represent a valuable connection to the company's history, which saw turbulent times during the depression of the '30s and two World Wars. A family squabble during Peng Kai's generation caused the family to split into three different companies, but only Peng Kai's survived. When the nation embarked on the rebuilding process after World War II, the pewter business began declining, and Peng Kai could have moved onto other forms of trade; but he stayed the course, believing in the resilience of pewter—provided that it was applied in a manner relevant to the times.

And his foresight proved accurate. Foreign servicemen, whether Australian, English or American, were pleased to bring home with them beauti-



Above
Royal Selangor produces thousands of beautifully crafted items that can be found at the retail store.

Below
Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, the Royal Selangor Visitor Centre welcomes 25,000 annual visitors. It is also home to the world's largest pewter tankard, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

ful and intricately crafted cigarette boxes, ashtrays and beer tankards—distinctively Malaysian pewter souvenirs that reminded them of their time here. Peng Kai made sure to improve manufacturing procedures as a result of the popularity of such items; and by the time the '70s rolled around, when tourism began to boom, Peng Kai was ready to keep up with the demand for pewter gifts and souvenirs. The company's successful turnaround was acknowledged when it received a royal endorsement from the late Selangor Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah.

MADE IN MALAYSIA

Royal Selangor's history can be viewed at the Visitor Centre, located at the company's headquarters and factory in Setapak. It sees about 25,000 visitors annually, and has welcomed celebrities and world leaders such as Mel Gibson, Martha Stewart, Bill Clinton and IMF president Christine Lagarde. The centre is a gleaming 40,000-square-foot facility that houses a factory tour, the School of Hard Knocks, a café, a retail store, and a gallery of interactive exhibits and historical artefacts, including Yong Koon's pewtersmith tools. Royal Selangor's headquarters in Setapak might be a unique place of interest for visitors, but for Chen and Yong, it's a legacy proudly rooted in Malaysian soil. "It's absolutely critical that we stay on top of our game here in Malaysia, our home market, to make sure that today's consumer finds Royal Selangor relevant to his or her lifestyle," Chen says. "If you don't create a connection early, there's a real danger that a 25-year-old today would have zero reason to walk into our stores." Somehow, one has a gut feeling that the guys will do just fine. That survival spirit—it runs in their blood. ☞



DAPPER IN THE DETAILS



Royal Selangor introduced a range of personal accessories about 10 years ago that has proved very successful, and subsequently, refreshes the product range constantly. Yong Yoon Li, Executive Director of Royal Selangor, recommends the Poker cufflinks, which come in a set of four and are from the Rock and Roll collection. Those looking for Raya gifts should check out the Ceplok cufflinks, inspired by traditional batik motifs.

