

CHINESE BUSINESS OWNERS UNITE NOVEL EFFORT WINS PRAISE POLITICAL ISSUES KEPT OUT OF COMMERCIAL DEALINGS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While business people from China have lived and traded in south Florida for decades, it took a relative newcomer to organize them into a viable Chamber of Commerce.

Laura de Swart arrived in Fort Lauderdale three years ago, but in just that short period of time, this dynamic young woman has brought her countrymen together for cooperative efforts and business growth.

“I guess nobody ever thought about it,” de Swart, a Weston resident, explained. “Now, we are helping both Chinese and non-Chinese business people to find contacts in China and encouraging other Chinese businesses to relocate here.”

Already, others in the Chinese-American community feel that the new Chamber’s efforts are paying off. “We just got started late last year,” explained Winchell Cheung, Director of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council in Miami who serves as chairman of the Chamber’s program committee. “During my two years here in Florida not much has been done, so the chamber is helpful to bring a focus on business with China.

Cheung pointed to President George W. Bush’s recent trip to China and the acceptance of the People’s Republic of China into the World Trade Organization as positive signs that trade between his native country and the West will continue to increase. “The implications will be opportunities for free trade, lower tariffs and increased retail opportunities,” he said.

Many of the Chamber’s activities focus on linking Chinese businesses in China and in south Florida with Latin American markets.

“We have seen a lot of interest between Latin America and Asia,” said Miramar resident Mark Ma, Director of Purchasing for FOB Asia. “Latin America is a big market, but language and distance are problems,” he explained. “We are trying to help the businesses by networking and making contacts.”

Helping with those contacts is Philip Guo, a Fort Lauderdale attorney who lives in Pembroke Pines. Working mostly with import and export companies, Guo helps to write contracts, develop legal status for foreign companies, obtain visas and residency papers and arbitrate disagreements.

“We are a non-political group,” affirmed Guo referring to the Chamber’s membership that is made up of people from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. “Our purpose is to help improve business, not to settle political issues.”

“We can provide a neutral environment to help business,” explained Harold Gubnitsky, CEO of iReality Group in Weston and an American citizen who has experience working in Asia. “We are a beacon for those that want to network and work with others to do business in the China region.”

Gubnitsky, who lives in Southwest Ranches and serves as the Chamber’s president, says that the group is planning several missions to China for local business people.

All of the Chamber's participants praise de Swart's enthusiasm and drive which brought the group together. "I'm aggressive and have many friends who help me to do networking here," she explained.

De Swart managed shopping centers in Beijing before deciding to locate to south Florida with her British-American husband Ted and seven year old son. "I attended a shopping center convention in Las Vegas in 1995 and was amazed by U.S. centers," she remembered.

She was among the first Chinese member of the International Council of Shopping Centers in 1995. "As a result, I came to its annual convention in Las Vegas every year - 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, etc.," de Swart explained.

Coming to south Florida in 1999, de Swart worked first at Kendall's Town and Country Center before moving the BeachPlace Shopping Center in Fort Lauderdale in January, 2000, where she was quickly promoted from the center's Marketing Manager to her current position, Property Manager.

"America is a free country, a fair society and a country of opportunities," de Swart affirmed. "Where else could a foreign woman like me come and move up into management so quickly? That wouldn't happen in other countries."

De Swart, who is working on her M.B.A at Florida International University and hopes to get a law degree here before returning to China, credits south Florida's international community with the warm welcome and advancement that she has experienced here.

She noted that Boynton Beach has a sister-cities relationship with the Chinese town of Qufu in Shang Dong Province.

"I would like to stay here for a couple of years then go back to China and open my own shopping center," she said. "All of the major U.S. companies have affiliates there," she said, naming Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wal-Mart, McDonalds, Starbucks, Hard Rock Cafes and TGI Fridays.

Noting the differences between Chinese centers and those in the U.S., De Swart said that American centers are sprawling, covering many acres, while Chinese centers are almost "all vertical"--high rise buildings. "Many centers here have large department stores as their anchors, while in China they are made up more of small specialty stores," she said.

In addition to working, studying and raising her family, de Swart is also involved in community organizations, including the Chinese Association of Science, Economics and Culture (CASEC), an international alliance of Chinese organizations created to promote Chinese culture in communities around the world.

CASEC recently sponsored an annual Spring Festival at the BeachPlace center, attracting over 1,000 participants who watched dances in celebration of the Chinese New Year. "This event really showcased the Chinese culture and the Chinese American community in south Florida," de Swart said.

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