

The man behind Malaysia's 1st container terminal

Mohd Zain Ahmad, 1st local GM at Port Klang Authority, was entrusted to lead containerisation project



Abdul Razak touring the new container ship terminal at Port Klang in Nov 28, 1973, flanked by Deputy Communication Minister Datuk Wong Seng Chow (right) and Raja Datuk Seri Azam Raja Kamaruzaman. Behind the prime minister is Tun Sardon Jubir and deputy chairman of the authority Senator Datuk JKS Crawford (second from left)

by SHAHEERA AZNAM SHAH

IT WAS a mere jetty serving the coastal steamers passing through from the north to the south of the Straits of Melaka.

The idea of a port in Klang came about in the search for a hub for sea travel along the straits — not too far down to the south, and not too far up in the north. The proponents wanted a spot somewhere in the middle of the straits.

They found a spot in Klang. But the jetty could no longer serve the rising demand. In 1900s, the economy of Malaya started booming. Then under the control of the British, the thriving economy made a natural case for an enhanced port capable of handling the increasing capacity of transportation network. It was vital to oil the economy.

Built by the Malayan Railways, the enhanced Port Swettenham, then renamed Port Klang in January 1972, marked the evolution of the nation's port industry.

It was not all smooth sailing for Port Swettenham which officially opened to traffic on Sept 15, 1901. The port experienced major teething problems. There was the malaria epidemic that plagued the port from October to November 1901. They also faced hardship in managing larger ships.

Till 1912, Port Swettenham managed to grow rapidly despite the setbacks and challenges. The port kept handling more ships with increased tonnage. Port facilities were being upgraded and proper administration was put in place.

In 1955, the port hit the first one million throughput. By the 1960s, you could see a transformation taking place with Port Swettenham moving from a coastal port to a sea port. The administration of the port became more structured when a regulatory body, Port

Swettenham Authority (PSA), was formed on 1 July 1963 to manage the port. It was later renamed Port Klang Authority (PKA). PSA marked the port's separation from Malayan Railways. It began as Port Swettenham Advisory Board in April 1911 before being replaced by the Port Swettenham Board on Aug 1, 1953.

One major turning for the port came in 1964. Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, then deputy prime minister who later went on to become Malaysia's second prime minister, had put forward a bold vision. He felt it was time for Malaysia to be at par with the neighbouring countries and get the ball rolling on the containerisation of the port.

He looked no further and entrusted the task to Mohd Zain Ahmad, the first local GM at PKA. Mohd Zain served PKA from 1965 to 1976 and was one of the early Malaysian graduates from the London School of Economics in the UK.

Containerisation

Containerisation took the shipping industry by storm in 1970 when the International Standards Organisation (ISO) embarked on standardised sizes for the intermodal containers. The uniformed container sizes meant port equipment around the world could be streamlined. It was an opportunity to simplify

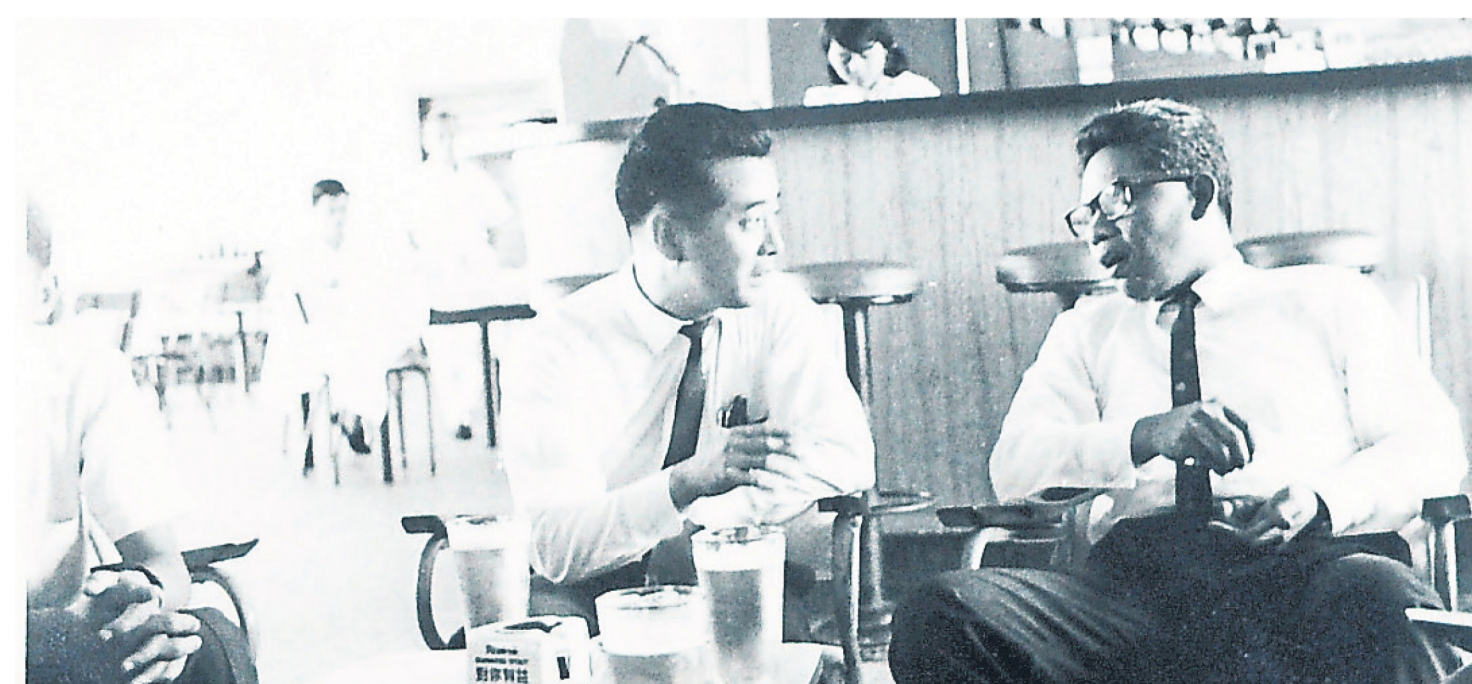
and increase the efficiency of the process of loading and unloading.

Abdul Razak's aspiration implied for an upgraded and extended facility at the port. It meant getting new equipment.

If Abdul Razak is known as the nation's "Father of Development", Mohd Zain can be called the "Father of Containerisation" for the Malaysian port industry.

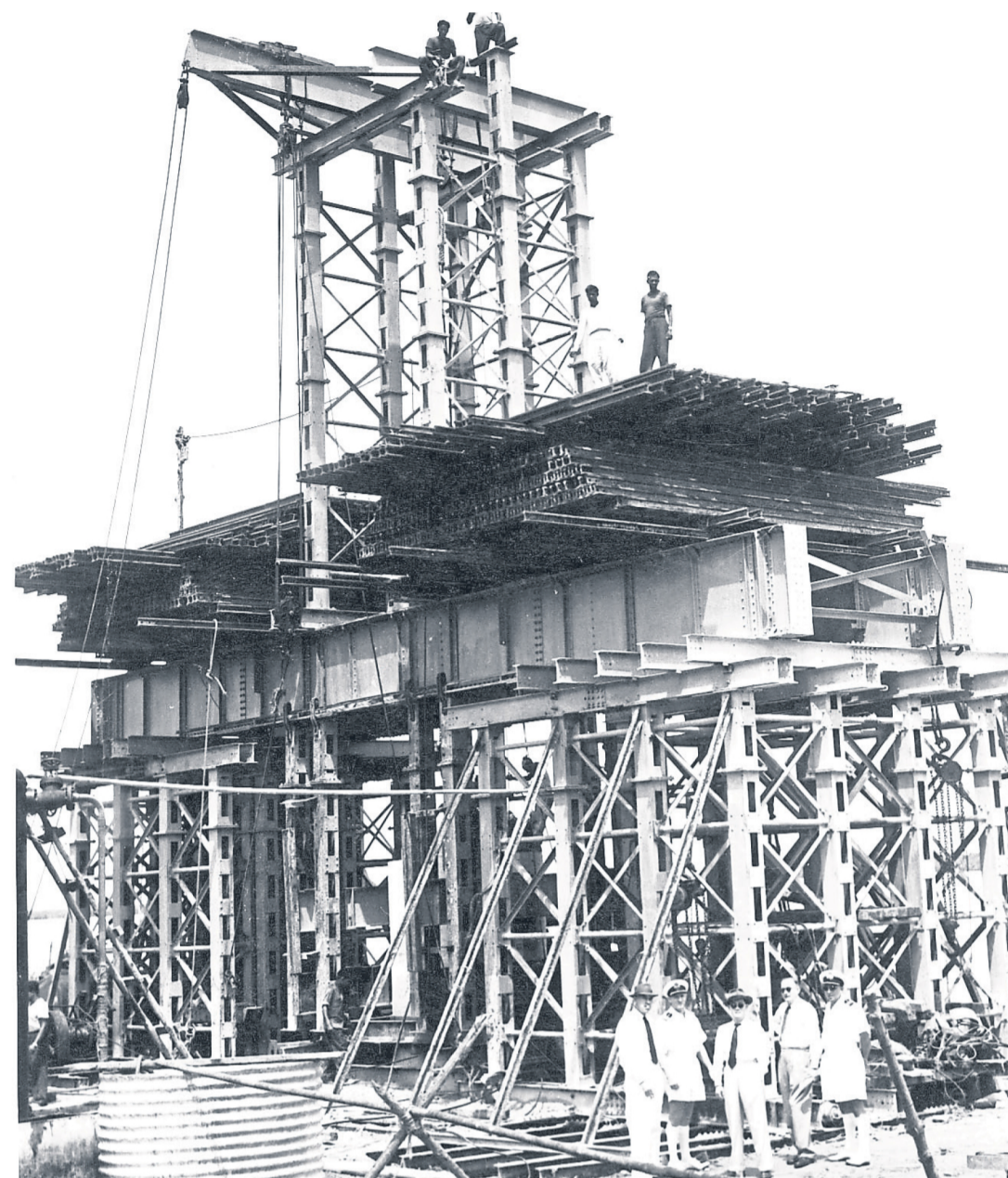
Mohd Zain, who passed away on April 4, 2017, was the backbone of the containerisation operations.

He was involved in every inch of the process. From setting up a management team to studying



Mohd Zain (right) with a Japanese businessman

Pic credit: Personal collection of David Tan



The then Minister of Transport Tun Omar Ong Yoke Lin inspecting piling operations for new wharves at the North Klang Straits (later renamed Northport in 1967) during a visit to Port Swettenham in 1956

Pic credit: Port Klang Malaysia's Maritime Marvel Book



View of Port Swettenham in its early days

Pic credit: Port Klang Malaysia's Maritime Marvel Book



The 1st passenger jetty at Port Swettenham in the 1900s

Pic credit: Port Klang Malaysia's Maritime Marvel Book



The 1st full container ship, MV Tokyo Bay, arrived in Port Klang on Aug 5, 1973 — marking the coming of containerisation in Malaysia

Pic credit: Port Klang Malaysia's Maritime Marvel Book

the trend of containerisation. When the government decided to roll out Port Klang as the main national container terminal by 1973, he made Port Swettenham as the port of call. Port Klang received the first third-generation container ship, MV Tokyo Bay, in Aug 5, 1973.

The Malaysian Reserve (TMR) caught up with Port Klang pioneer staff Soon Jin Kim and David Tan, a close friend of the late Mohd Zain.

They both described Mohd Zain as an inspirational leader.

Soon had worked closely with Mohd Zain in setting up container terminals for the port. He attributed the success of many initiatives to Mohd Zain.

"He was an inspirational manager. He motivated the crew to be ambitious as we were the first to do it. In the late 60s, the container transportation technology was new. Now you are moving boxes.

"On top of that, he put us into perspective the consequences if we do not deliver our job well. After the separation [of Singapore] in 1965, we were in an urgent mode to constantly compete with Singapore to cater to ships from across the world. He made us committed to our job," Soon told TMR.

"A GM must be able to lead and give good direction that is in line with the main goal of the project. In order to lead with direction, you have to know which direction you are taking. I believe Mohd Zain had done an incredible

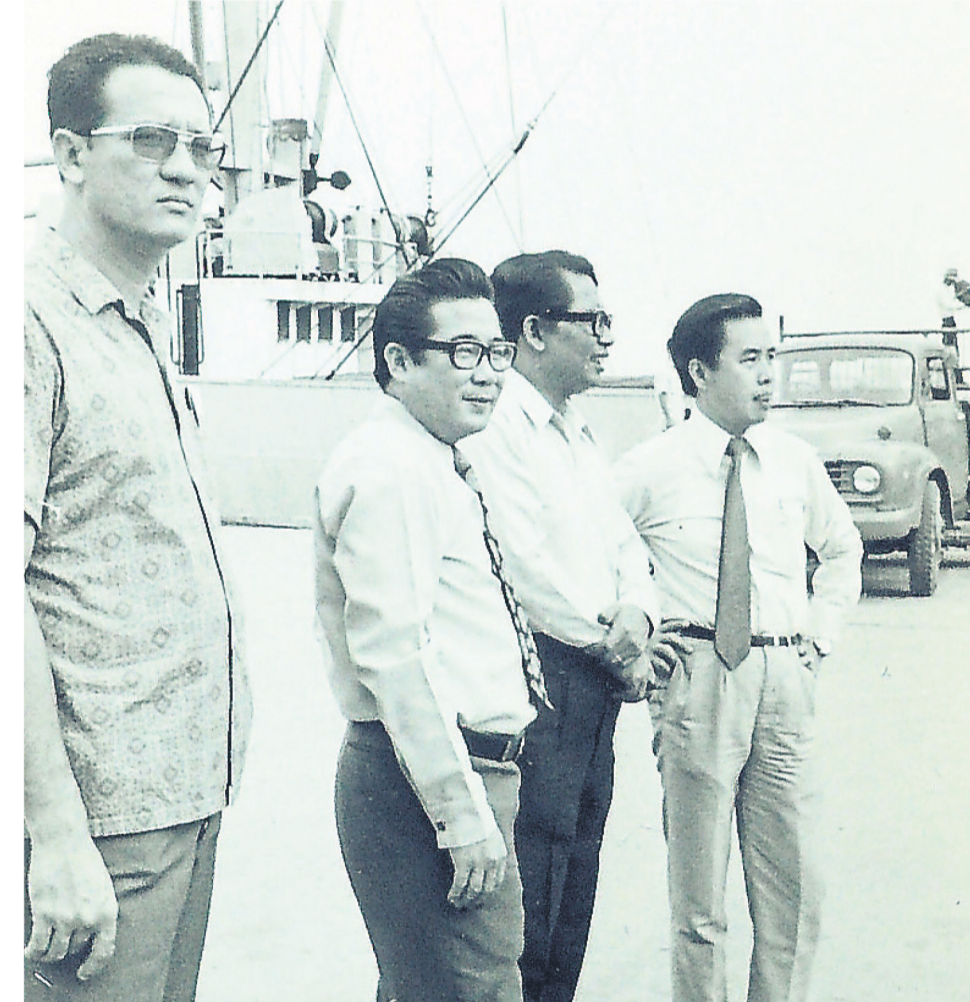
job in fulfilling the responsibility as a general manager as he had the ability to give good direction and lead people at the same time," he said.

A close confidante, Tan said Mohd Zain was indeed everything that people claimed him to be. He described Mohd Zain as a selfless man with integrity and honesty. Tan said Mohd Zain foresaw the success of the nation's port industry. Mohd Zain had certainly built and shaped the Malaysia's port industry simultaneously.

"Anyone who knows Mohd Zain would describe him as a principled person. There was not a moment of talking nonsense with him. There was a lot of respect for him, not just by Malaysians, but from the foreign port industry players as well.

"He personally told me that he was placing his head on a chopping block by doing this project as it was considered as one of the biggest project at that time in terms of the cost," he said.

Mohd Zain has contributed his wit and wisdom to make Port Klang as the port of call for container. Today, Northport (M) Bhd is a subsidiary of MMC Port Holdings Sdn Bhd (MMC Ports), Malaysia's largest port operator.



Rajang Port Authority former GM Andrew Chan (second from left) and Mohd Zain (third from left) with two other port personnel

Pic credit: Personal collection of David Tan



Soon and Tan reminisce about the good old times as they were talking about Mohd Zain

Pic credit: Mohd Amin Naharun