



## VIRUS OUTBREAK

# SCCCI adapts to new virtual normal amid pandemic; says China is still key market

**Chambers says its ties with China's province-based trade bodies here are useful; members are now younger**

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### Singapore

IN THE face of the inconveniences wrought by Covid-19, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) has gone virtual. The business organisation now offers its members online courses, digital trade fairs and consultancy services, e-introductions to opportunities abroad, and webinars in which the authorities help to explain support packages.

SCCCI president Roland Ng told *The Business Times*: "You take a few years to promote digitalisation... (then with Covid-19), in a few months, you actually get into it, because if you don't get into it, you get into problems."

He said the Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for both SCCCI and its members to go digital and to do more online. And although international travel has been curtailed, he said the post-Covid world still offers chances for firms to ride major trends and go global.

The SCCCI has polled its members six times since February. Early in the year, more than four out of five respondents said that their top chal-

lenge was a decline in revenue. More than half cited cash flow issues.

In April, more than half the respondents reported that their business had taken a blow of more than 50 per cent due to "circuit-breaker" measures—although government support also boosted their confidence of weathering the crisis.

The SCCCI has been helping members understand the available sources of government assistance, aided by technology.

Mr Ng said: "We're also thinking of turning this crisis into an opportunity." With Covid-19 sparking a mass migration to video-conferencing tools such as Zoom, he said it is now much easier to reach members through webinars.

Mr Ng, who has been SCCCI president since 2017, said the organisation is helping members identify major trends in a post-Covid world. The long-term strategy is to look at "where Singapore is going to stand in the world", tracking policies and developments at home and abroad.

This includes leveraging the SCCCI's traditional ties to China to monitor promising areas such as 5G and artificial intelligence, and to help firms expand there. Its first Singapore Enterprise Centre was set up in Shanghai in 2010, followed by one in Chengdu and then in Chongqing.

"China is a very big market. You have to understand the risks," said Mr Ng. "You don't just go in lightly." He re-

commends that firms find a reliable partner, ideally one that has worked within the system of state-owned enterprises.

A firm must also be ready before it makes that leap, he added. In advising firms with such plans, the SCCCI will typically ask: "Is your product ready? Is your business ready?"

"In fact, we sometimes tell people, 'Hey, don't go in, I think it's too difficult for you. I think it's better for you to work a little bit more, get yourself ready, before you go to China'."

But if a firm is indeed ready, then the SCCCI can help it with the logistics of setting up—from registering an entity and opening a bank account to providing secretarial services out of their enterprise centres there.

The idea is to save firms time, said Mr Ng. He added that there are plans to set up more offices in China. Second- and third-tier cities present more opportunities, as they are less saturated than big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

The SCCCI also supports members in China's digital realm. It recently collaborated with Enterprise Singapore to raise the profile of Singapore food and beverage brands on China e-commerce platform Meituan Dianping, resulting in the firms receiving 30 million clicks in a month.

Firms from China that expand into Singapore do not usually join the SCCCI. Full membership is for locally-

owned firms. While some do join the SCCCI as associate members, they are more likely to join province-based bodies such as the Jiangsu Association (Singapore) and Zhejiang (Singapore) Entrepreneurs Association, or the umbrella China Enterprises Association (Singapore).

The SCCCI has a close relationship with these China associations. Members of these associations have the opportunity to interact at official dinners and unofficial get-togethers, said Mr Ng. This networking allows for the exploration of opportunities, particularly in the region.

He acknowledged that the SCCCI previously tended to view these other groups as competitors. "Later on, we found that we have our own niches, we have our own strengths... We found that it would be better for us to work together," he said.

"Chinese companies need people like us in Singapore, who know the region, know the culture. I think there is a perfect match if we can work together."

The SCCCI has 5,000 corporate members; it also has, as members, more than 160 trade associations, which represent over 40,000 companies.

And while there may be a perception of the SCCCI as an "old man's club", the membership is getting younger, he said.

This is not just because companies are being handed over to second- and third-generation bosses, but also



**SCCCI president Roland Ng hopes members of the chambers are open about the problems they face, so the chambers can pass their feedback to the government.** PHOTO: SCCCI

because new members are coming from emerging fields such as fintech, integrated logistics and supply-chain management, renewable energy and business financing.

The diversity of the SCCCI's membership means it can be harder to understand all their struggles, compared to trade associations, which are more industry-focused.

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Ng. A good relationship with the government enables the SCCCI to pass on feedback smoothly, so that the government can help its members.

"When the government rolls out measures, a lot of things are (based on) feedback from the trade associations. We want our members to realise that we are able to help them."

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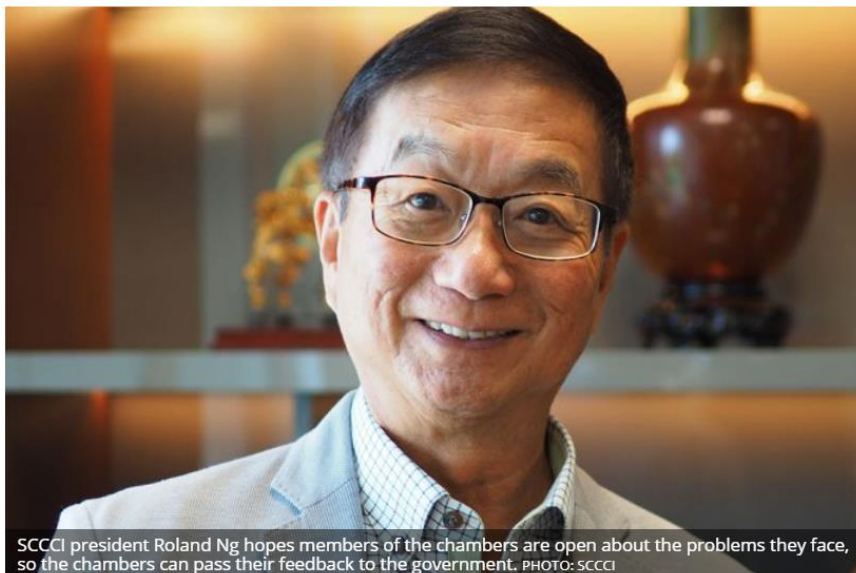
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SCCCI president Roland Ng hopes members of the chambers are open about the problems they face, so the chambers can pass their feedback to the government. PHOTO: SCCCI

<https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/sccci-adapts-to-new-virtual-normal-amid-pandemic-says-china-is-still-key-market>

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