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Politics divides U.S. expatriates AmCham rankled by 'pinko' label

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American Chamber of Commerce members yesterday discounted the possibility that the chamber will withdraw from the Asia-Pacific Council of American Chambers over the Peking-Taipei issue, which has created a controversy isolating Hongkong from the other chambers in the region.

The disagreement between the local AmCham and APCAC is a "major one," admitted the chamber's Executive Director, Mr Stanley Young, and "certainly the 'commie' label hurts."

Hongkong "earned" the label during emotional debates at the recent APCAC conference in Jakarta, according to an Asian Wall Street Journal report yesterday.

During the conference Hongkong delegates

unsuccessfully argued against a Taiwan-backed resolution which effectively involved the chambers in two political issues - China-Taiwan relations and the defence of South Korea.

Despite the seriousness of the controversy within APCAC, Mr Young said: "We are not about to pick up our toys and go home to play. We hope instead to work it out as we strongly believe there should be a regional voice for American businessmen here."

The issue will be discussed by the local board during its meeting tomorrow. However, it has been decided that the local chamber will attend the APCAC meeting in Bangkok on February 25, according to the new AmCham President, Mr James McGee.

Arrangements to attend the meeting have already been made by at least 10 of the members who will represent Hongkong.

The controversy centres on the role of the chambers in economic issues when these issues carry strong political overtones.

"In objecting to the

resolution during the Jakarta conference, we were putting out the view that as businessmen we should not get involved in the question of military forces to protect investments and that we should leave the China-Taiwan issue to be resolved by those countries themselves," explained Mr Young.

APCAC maintained that while the U.S. keeps an eye on developing relations with China, it should not compromise its commitments to Taiwan and should protect American investments there through the maintenance of the U.S.-Taiwan defence treaty. APCAC also called for U.S. support for South Korea.

"We are not happy because we believe that to be effective APCAC should involve itself with economic matters only," said Mr Young.

"Although we feel that it is important that the United States should normalise relations with China, that 'pinko' label is grossly unfair."

However, Mr Young believed that the Hongkong chamber is no longer going it alone. In conversations with various members of other AmChams since the Jakarta meeting in November, it has become evident that others are beginning to understand what the Hongkong chamber is driving at.

It is now a matter of communication, he said. But as far as the Hongkong members are concerned, they believe the local chamber is in the right.

Mr Young reported that members here were also upset by the suggestion that they are "naive" and that the chamber is dominated by young men, with limited experience of the true situation in the region.

"Many of our leaders have been here for a very long time," he argued. A number, in fact, are veterans of the Pacific War.

At the Bangkok meeting next month, there are surely going to be some hot heads, he predicted. "But we can play it cool."