

In Memoriam: Professor Chao Tzee Cheng (1934-2000)[†]

They say you should never add ice to Scottish malt whisky and that you should only add chilled mineral water. The water soothes the searing fire and releases the hidden aromas of Scottish malt. Ice would only smother the spirit of the feisty drink, apt now for the deadened time and space I feel I am in. Any “dram” would do really.

I swirled the ice in my glass, and watched the 10-year-old Laphroaig single Islay malt whiskey glisten bravely. A thousand hues of gold, brown and crystalline white scattered, danced, burned and subsided before me. The ice cubes gently rocked and knocked around hypnotically in the swirling aurous bath before the drink settled down. Down and down to the caramel collage that is whisky and ice.....

I last saw Prof Chao when he and his wife visited my family some 2 weeks ago over Chinese New Year. He proudly showed us photographs of his first granddaughter born in Sydney, now about 3½ months old. I poured him a double peg of the same, 10-year-old Laphroaig single Islay malt whisky, also heretically on the rocks. He was as usual, full of zest and humour. He joked how his son, Alex was now a kept man as he has completed his HMDP in Sydney and was now living off Alex’s wife, Woon Puay while she was finishing her PhD thesis in Sydney as well. All this banter, did not distract him from the Laphroaig of course, “This is good whisky, the peaty nose is very nice” (only real pros liked peaty whisky). That was the last time I would pour him a drink. The same bottle of Laphroaig remains today unfinished in its white canister. Before he left, he told me that he would be competing against the famous Hong Kong singer, Emil Chau in the near future in those “call-up” charity events to be broadcast on national TV. He half-in-jest asked me to garner support among my friends in the profession to support him by calling up when he sang. He was looking as always, to the future with mirth and vigour.

Prof Chao was a living giant of medicine in our midst. I will not dwell on how he took up forensic medicine after forgoing surgical training as a result of a bad road traffic accident in West Malaysia. Neither will I dwell on how he was a key figure in all of modern Singapore’s disasters, from Spyros, Hotel New World, Cable Car Tragedy to MI 185, nor all the murders he helped to solve, including the Flor Contemplacion case, the body parts murder and the more recent murder of the Bulgarian woman. For this and more he has been decorated at least 3 times by the State, culminating with the Meritorious Medal as well as the appointment to the substantive grade of Superscale “C” in the medical service. He was also conferred the Honorary Membership by the SMA two years back, the highest honour that the Association can bestow on anyone.

But the job does not make a man great; it is the substance of the man that fills and defines the post. For all intents and purpose, he was forensic medicine of Singapore. His popularity underscored by the landslide margin in which he achieved in the first compulsory SMC elections. I once joked to my SMA colleagues before the election that it was Prof Chao with one seat confirmed and the rest

of the candidates vying for the remaining one. Though he was the personification of forensic medicine, he did not stifle the development of those he trained, but sought instead at many opportunities to give his protégés higher profiles and more exposure than himself. One of the last occasions in which I saw him was at the Ministry of Health Service Regulation Division Dinner and Dance late last year. I gave him a lift after the dinner. I played some really old Samuel Hui 70s Cantonese songs on the way back. Maybe it was the philosophical Sam Hui lyrics or maybe it was the XO he drank earlier, but he was in a reflective mood. He talked about how the Ministry has changed in its treatment of doctors, how doctors themselves have changed and even how some doctors he taught have disappointed him. He was also unhappy about how the university wanted to cut down the number of undergraduate forensic medicine lecturers. I wonder if the medical school did cut down the number of lectures after all. As an undergraduate once myself, I must say that most if not all of us thought his lectures were very interesting. There were really other lectures that were more deserving of the axe in my time at least. Well, I guess the University will no longer hear his objection in any case anymore. But then again, neither will successive generations of medical students and doctors. Yes, beyond the whisky, the jokes and the singing, there were things about the practice and teaching of medicine, institutions and difficult personalities that bothered him.

At the end of the day, while the medical profession mourns the loss of one of its mightiest members, I think the loss would be most felt by his family and friends, because Prof Chao was ultimately a devoted family man and a steadfast friend. There were four occasions which I now remember in particular as ones in which he was particularly happy. The first was ironically at my grandmother’s funeral, when he met Woon Puay for the first time: I pointed out to him that the girl walking up to the funeral parlour was Alex’s girlfriend. He spun around in a flash (I had never seen him move so fast before), took a long good look at Woon Puay who was about 40 feet away and smiled broadly. Another occasion was of course during Alex and Woon Puay’s wedding, and especially during the tea ceremony when he attained “father-in-law-hood”. The third was during the informal retirement dinner at Xin Cuisine some years back when he was surrounded by his friends. Finally, two weeks ago when he showed us photographs of his newborn granddaughter, I think his family and friends mattered to him far more than the awards and the honorary titles that he had received, and definitely far far more valuable than the ceremonial regalia, pomp and pageantry of academia and medicine. He loved the life he lived and lived as he loved: his family, friends and his work.

The ice has melted, the whisky drunk. A giant has left us. A void remains.

Dr Wong Chiang Yin

Honorary Secretary, 37th to 40th Councils, SMA

[†] Reprinted with permission from The SMA News 2000; 32:N11.