

By Dr Wong Wee Nam



Nostalgia

...pain a sick person feels because he wishes to return to his native land, and fears never to see it again”, it instantly became an illness. However, because of wars and refugees, rapid social and technological changes and increasing longevity, this condition reached pandemic proportion. By the early 20th century, it was obvious that nostalgia was

Doctors, in particular psychiatrists, love to create new syndromes and new disorders. It is for this reason that everyone loves to be a doctor, marry one or be a patient of one. Politicians are also very grateful to doctors. This is because labels are often used to turn social problems and troublesome people into medical diagnoses and save politicians from finding other forms of solutions.

As Irving Zola, a sociologist, said, “If a problem gets defined on the medical/individual level, then it becomes less likely that treatment/intervention will occur on any other (for example, political, social) levels.”

This explains why if you walked into an integrated resort often enough, you may end up suffering from gambling addiction, a label which makes it no longer a social problem but a condition which requires psychiatric intervention.

Similarly, if a male cannot have good sex, he is suffering from erectile dysfunction (F52.2), and if a female wants plenty of sex, she may be suffering from nymphomania (F52.7). If an employee wants time off to attend to a personal problem, he is encouraged to get a medical certificate from the doctor. This saves the supervisor the trouble of giving him leave.

No wonder doctors are very busy people. This has not been helped by pharmaceutical firms, which love to invent new drugs and push what human beings have lived with for a long time into medical diagnoses that need to be treated.

The proliferation of medical syndromes explains why medical textbooks get thicker and thicker every year. Virtually any problem could become a medical diagnosis. In the 19th century, after Johannes Hofer, a Swiss medical student described nostalgia as “the

no longer a deviant’s problem and the condition was de-medicalised.

Medical conditions rarely get de-medicalised. We can now happily declare we are nostalgic without getting stuck to the stigma of suffering from a mental disorder.

Nostalgia is not a condition that can be easily contracted. Like experience, it has to be earned. It is a privilege only senior citizens can have. We need to live enough years and have little balance left in our life account to be able to reminisce about the past.

Nostalgia means different things to different people. To exiles like Su Dongpo and Li Bai, nostalgia stimulates creativity. To refugees and minorities whose culture and ethnicity are slowly being eroded, nostalgia is politics. To the rest of us, nostalgia, though no longer a psychiatric illness, has become a therapeutic tool that the greying folks use to cope with life or what remains of it.

Generally speaking, for most of us, nostalgia is just a mechanism used to enhance our self-esteem as the present overwhelms and threatens to leave



A painting of Ah Leng's canteen by Mr Wong Niap Leng's son-in-law

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Ah Leng's Canteen

(Photos courtesy of Mr Wong Niap Leng)



Miss Wong

us behind. It is, therefore, a yearning to return to a time of youth and prime – a past that is no longer recoverable. This therapy works for the human organism that is on the way out in the same way ED drugs work for a human organ that is on the way down. Nostalgia also serves as a morale booster that adds zest to the life of something which is reaching its expiry date.

Many nostalgic memories are commonly shared, though the feelings and perception towards past events or experiences may be different. Medical students lived through many moments together and that is why old doctors share many memories of ragging and the parties with nurses from Vickers and Bremner House. However, to the students who entered medical school from 1947 to 1983, there is one particular place and one special person they remember more than anything else.

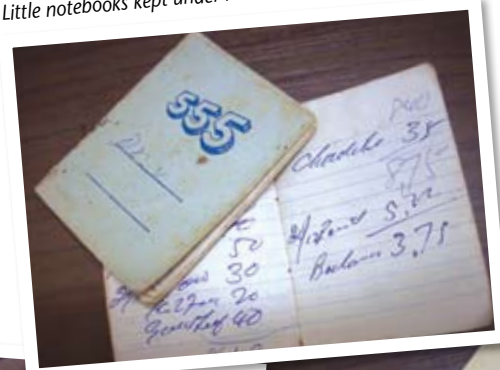
In 1947, a lad, as old as that intake of medical students, took over a canteen that his father had started in the 1920s to serve medical, dental, pharmaceutical and biomedical science students. The canteen has no name but because of the lad, Wong Niap Leng, it became known unofficially as Ah Leng's Canteen.

Over the years, doctors may have forgotten how Faris Lecture Theatre looked like. Some could not because they had never attended enough lectures there to remember it. But mention Ah Leng's canteen and the memory bank lights up immediately. Many, for sure, have no clue where the national preserved monument, the Tan Teck Guan Building, is. But tell

them it is near Ah Leng's canteen and they will have a vague idea.

There are many canteens that medical students in those days go for their food and tea breaks. You have the 150 Canteen where you rub shoulders with doctors and the nurses. You have the Housemen's Canteen, where in your white overall, you like to be mistaken for its residents. Then there is the canteen at the Medical Alumni where you cannot forget the times you got a good scolding from "Agong" when he was not in a good mood or was displeased with your behaviour.

Little notebooks kept under lock and key by Ah Leng



Mr Wong Niap Leng with Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Tun and Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the reunion of Year 1947



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So why is Ah Leng's canteen so special? Ah Leng's canteen invokes different memories for different people. To hostelites, mostly Malaysians, of KE Hall, it was home away from home. Some remember it for the authentic Hainanese food. Quite a number remember Ah Leng's beautiful daughter, Miss Wong. At that time, the inmates of KE VII Hall even declared her as the most beautiful lass on Sepoy Lines.

To second and third year medical and dental students, it was a breath of fresh air from the anatomy dissection room. To others, it was a place to rest when one did not want to attend a lecture. When not attending lectures, young socialists met there to prepare political newsletters and drafted press releases protesting against injustice.

It was a place where the Michaels and the Maggies would meet to discuss tutorials. It was a place where Siti

had waited for Mahathir to go to lectures together. It was no wonder that when the Class of 1947 met for their reunion, the former Malaysian Prime Minister and his wife could not resist taking a photograph together with Ah Leng.

To the impoverished medical students and those who had run out of money due to over-spending, delay in remittance from home or a run of bad luck at card games and mahjong, Ah Leng's canteen was like a bank where students went to eat on credit or borrow money to pay school fees.

These two lines from Dr Ngiam Tong Lan's poem entitled "Ah Leng's Place" published in the Medical Alumni's publication *Centenary of Tertiary Education*, described Ah Leng aptly:

*"Counsellor, banker, provider of food and drinks
Ah Leng reigned supreme."*

Wong Hoe Sang, Ah Leng's eldest son, recalls: "Some of those poor students would sit in the canteen having their usual coffee and as long as my mother was around, they would not make any move. The moment she turned her back, they would rush up to my father and pleaded with him to lend them

some money. My father, always very kind and soft, found it difficult to say no."

One old doctor remarked: "If his wife had not been firm, Ah Leng would have mortgaged the canteen to help those impoverished medical students."

Indeed, quite a number of doctors today have to be thankful to Ah Leng for his kindness in helping them out in times of financial needs.

In those days, Ah Leng, now 79-year-old, used little pocket notebooks to keep the accounts of students who borrowed, ate and drank on credit. To this day, he still keeps these notebooks nostalgically in a special box under lock and key. Unlike official secrets, he has no intention to make them public even after 50 years. Being the benevolent man he is, Ah Leng said most of them had paid up after they started working. As for the rest, he believed they had genuinely forgotten.

Let us just hope that in one of their nostalgic moments, these forgetful people will recall their benefactor's helping hand.

My visit to Ah Leng was intended to be a nostalgic trip but I did not know it could unearth many unexpected stories. As if to make nostalgia complete, Ah Leng and his wife insisted on cooking a complete

Hainanese meal for me. This included the Hainanese chicken rice, the fried brinjal and the chives cooked with *tang hoon*. The meal also came with tea made from the same type of tea leaves he had used in the days of Ah Leng's canteen.

As I tucked into the delicious meal, I told Madam Han of my recent visit to Hainan Island and the villages of my ancestors. In the course of the conversation, I discovered Madam Han grew up in a village near my mother's home and they were very good friends during their childhood. She even made my trip to Hainan Island more complete by filling up the gaps in my knowledge of my ancestry. No wonder the meal tasted exactly like my Mum's cooking, something I had not eaten for more than 40 years!

Nostalgia – a psychiatric disorder? I do not mind having plenty of it. As poet and playwright John Dryden said: "There is a pleasure sure, in being mad, which none but madmen know!" That goes for nostalgic sufferers too, I suppose. ■



The author, Dr Wong Wee Nam, with (from left) Mdm Han, Mr Wong Niap Leng and his son, Mr Wong Hoe Sang