

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Photo Credit: Singapore General Hospital



Three Cheers for the Houseman Canteen

*Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
You want to be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same;
You want to be where everybody
knows your name.*

— Lyrics from Cheers

In February 2008, two larger-than-life icons said their final goodbyes. One was Fidel Castro, the indomitable assassination-proof President of Cuba who had held power since 1959, and the other was the Singapore General Hospital Houseman Canteen, which has held court to generations of health professionals and the public since 1959. Both Fidel's Cuba and the Houseman Canteen have a certain aged, timeless, egalitarian charm. Both have survived tough times. Cuba faced a long painful trade embargo from the United States and the Houseman Canteen faced SARS and the emergence of branded next-door competitors DeliFrance, KOPITIAM, the Polar Café and a previous Block 4 sushi joint that underwent apoptosis. Cuba has built on tourism and biotechnology to help boost its economy. The Houseman Canteen overcame SARS and its then dismal lack of customers at less than 10 per day by providing packed food – over 2,600 packets for lunch and a similar number for dinner.

One can imagine the charismatic Fidel chomping a cigar and sipping the famed *Kopi-O* in the Houseman Canteen, expounding on serving the masses, the struggle for social justice in a capitalist marketplace and the ups and downs of a centrally-planned economy. Common real

world conversations in the Houseman Canteen include serving the masses, the struggle for ethics and professionalism in the modern marketplace of Medicine and the ups and downs of Cluster-level central planning. Fidel would applaud the Singapore public healthcare doctors for generally earning a fixed wage yet still working overall a lot harder than their average counterparts in Europe, Australia and the United States, and for being committed to equal access healthcare for all. Of course in some quarters, the Singapore medical salaryman has now been given a window to practise fee-for-service within the public healthcare system.

Cuba, as a country, produces the most doctors in the world per population, and its doctors form Cuba's best ambassadors abroad, being involved in humanitarian work and developing ground-level networks with other national health systems. Yet, in Cuba, doctors commonly earn less than cab drivers. Prevention is a big agenda in the Cuban health strategy and Cuba has the world's widest vaccination programme and a lower infant mortality rate than neighbouring USA. In Michael Moore's film *SICKO*, Cuba provided treatment to American 9/11 volunteers with chronic illnesses who were shunned by their own country's



The Editor as he was when he first spent his occasional evenings in the Houseman Canteen. At that time, *Kopi-O* was not his beverage of choice.

healthcare system. Its national health service was painted in a skewed fuzzy light of humanism and romantic ideals by Republican-bashing Moore. Still, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, UK's NHS top brass and even many Fidel-bashing American policy leaders have praised the Cuban health system for what it has achieved on a small resource.

I recently lunched with Dr Amparo, a senior scientist from the Centre of Molecular Immunology in Havana, Cuba. Against the odds of a flagging Socialist regime, Cuba has surprisingly produced and commercialised an impressive cache of pathogen vaccines, cancer vaccines (the widest programme outside the United States) and other biologics such as a monoclonal antibody against epidermal growth factor receptor targeting certain cancers with 18 ongoing clinical trials in various cancers, and four other monoclonal antibodies in clinical development, all in its own backyard.

Many healthcare workers will miss the Houseman Canteen. One such person, a paediatrician, a good friend, and one of Singapore Chinese Girls School's finest old girls, is already in serious withdrawal. The "Dispressed (Distressed and Depressed) Club" comprising Outram campus doctors who regularly gathered there after their long clinic days to whine and unwind, will have to find a psychiatrist's couch now and some fluoxetine to replace their *Kopi-O* fix and roundtable group therapy. The Houseman Canteen saw a heady mix of medical movers and shakers, schmoozers and king-makers, as well as junior docs darting flirty glances at each other and post-pubertics learning how to percuss and palpate for the first time. I myself was wheeled in a pram into the Houseman Canteen soon after birth as I grew up in the walk-up flats of Mac Alister Road behind the College of Medicine Building. Later, after moving to central Singapore, I still

continued to play hide-and-seek in and around the Houseman Canteen with my siblings on weekends when my father did his CCU and inpatient ward rounds at SGH. Dr Tan Wu Meng rightly alluded to "a juxtaposition of world class excellence and a Canteen like the Houseman as not being a simple coincidence". James Watson and Francis Crick spent many hours at The Eagle pub in Cambridge solving the structure of DNA and it was at this very pub where they triumphantly announced that they had found the secret of life. JK Rowling weaved her literary magic and gave birth to the 15 billion dollar Harry Potter phenomenon at the Elephant House Café in Edinburgh.

As Singapore impressively marches into the 21st century in-step to a singular drumbeat, I feel that the country is late in boarding the Soft Power and Deep Roots Train. Apart from nourishment of the mind and body for the clinical troops to and from the battle against disease, the Houseman Canteen had an incalculable influence as a hub for the exchange of home-grown ideas, caffeine-charged clinical and research discussions, roundtable ops orders before performing conjoint twin surgery, umbilical cord blood transplants, liver transplants, first-in-man clinical studies, ocular stem cell bedside applications, robotic surgery, planning the 'Battle against SARS' and other such unique interactions that cannot be described in any technocrat's White Paper on creating a more dynamic Singapore. It is not all about gleaming buildings, officious meetings and posh furniture. Some Singaporeans already feel that outside of aspiring towards cash, car, condominium, credit card and country club membership, the intangibles which root them to the country are becoming a thinner soil. In fact, one can now more easily achieve the 5Cs in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Melbourne, Mumbai and Mountainview, California. With no sentimentality,



heritage and past to root Singaporeans, their staying power may become more tenuous.

In the eyes of many in the world, it is soft power that still makes the United States great – jazz and rock music, Hollywood, Coca Cola, Facebook, iPod, its unstoppable creative energy, and the belief in the pursuit of life, liberty, happiness and freedom which make people forget its sometimes flawed and brutal hard power influences in the Middle East, Indochina and Central and South America. Likewise, the soft power global ripple of the Korean movie and K-Pop industry singularly sweetened its image abroad, including in old foe Japan, and in the process created a multi-billion dollar tourism industry. Closer to home in the local medical community, the Houseman Canteen had such soft power.

On the last day of the Houseman Canteen's life, I sat down for drinks with some of the finest surgeons in the land and beyond, respected leaders in their fields and fine sons of SGH ruminating about the canteen. Mr Lim Chak Yong, manager of LCM Catering had been operating the Houseman Canteen for 22 years. The stalls were largely family-run businesses, the *Mee Pok Lady* being the longest surviving at 25 years, preceding even his company's arrival. She started life as the dishwasher and waitress with her husband as the main cook with a Gordon Ramsay temper. Sadly he died of nasopharyngeal cancer (NPC), then leaving her, and two young (6 and 8-year-old) children behind. For days, she cried. The other stallholders encouraged her to take over the business. She eventually did and the rest is history. She truly demonstrates to healthcare workers what personalised care is all about as she commonly remembers the orders of the customers and their preferences and still providing affordable good food. To think she almost became a victim of the late serial killer and medium Adrian Lim

when she contemplated seeking his help for her husband when he was diagnosed with terminal NPC – but her late husband had chided her and so she never made the trip. Now, after 25 years of service, the *Mee Pok Lady* may retire as she will be undergoing surgery herself. Or she may reconsider returning to the new canteen. The famed *Kopi-O* Man who can make up to 700 cups of coffee in one morning alone, parallels the tyre-burning pace of clinical work on Outram campus. When asked how he creates his inimitable *Kopi-O*, he said, "Anyhow make one", a brew concocted from the same coffee powder from Hock Heng coffee suppliers for decades. Apart from Madam Liza of the Malay stall who may relocate to NUH, the other stallholders will be without work for the next several months.

As the Houseman Canteen makes way for the new Pathology Building, a beacon for a new generation of doctors and scientists moving the country forward in biomedical science, there are lessons to remember for the spirit of collegiality, the intrigue and gossip, the ferment of people and ideas, and the roots and sentimentality that the Houseman Canteen brought to the Outram Campus. There are also lessons to be learnt from Fidel's Cuba with regards to their laudable ability to bring R&D from the bench to the bedside and commercialisation, with over 900 patents to date, in a biotech industry which only began in the 1980s.

One of my favourite short films is Royston Tan's award winning *Hock Hiap Leong*, a gem of a film about a coffee shop in Armenian Street that was demolished as part of Urban Renewal Authority plans for redevelopment. There was so much in that film which reminded me of the Houseman Canteen. Maybe one day Royston Tan can do a short film on the Houseman Canteen. Houseman MD, *Kueh's Anatomy* or East Side Story, anyone? ■

