

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Change We Need, Or Country First?

My tableside lunch interview with Professor Charis Eng was enlightening and refreshing as she waxed lyrical on a life in Science, Medicine and the exquisite meal and wines that were laid before her at *Iggy's*. For the *suaku* non-gourmand chocoholic that I am, it was a voyeuristic journey into a celluloid-like world of wonderful food films like *Eat Drink Man Woman*, *Babette's Feast*, *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Chocolat*, aromatically narrated by a pre-eminent global leader in cancer research.

However, what struck me most was Professor Eng's description of her early years spent at the Laboratory School, founded by the great educationist John Dewey, a memory that was as fond to her as the terrine of *foie gras* that had just melted on her palate. John Dewey was a pioneer in experiential learning who decried a strict authoritarian knowledge-delivering educational process. The last time his name wafted into my mind was eons ago while writing my International Baccalaureate Philosophy Extended Essay on 'The Role of Moral Education in a Modern Society like Singapore'. The educationists John Dewey, Jacques Maritain and Paolo Freire were deep influences on my wonder years of truly learning. While Professor Eng is the intellectual equivalent of a 1787 *Chateau Lafite* to my own fizzy soda pop of a brain, I could not help but wonder whether this Fine Wine of a

Mind would have matured as she has, if she had remained in the 1970s' muggy climes and humid soil of our then very pragmatic education system, dry in creative thinking whilst geared towards fuelling a young industrial society.

I recently shared a Saturday night *teh tarik* at Adam Road Hawker Centre with an old friend who is an academic leader at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSOM). We discussed a YLLSOM medical student's blog which griped about the perceived preferential treatment and more favourable impressions of the students from Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School by some faculty of local teaching hospitals. He then reflected on how the YLLSOM curriculum could also learn to be more progressive. Disciples of Harvard Business School's Professor Michael Porter would feel that such competition is good for lifting quality benchmarks all round, and I have no doubt that they are right on many counts. But broadly

comparing both medical schools can be like comparing chalk and cheese.

One is a still-evolving over-century-old medical school born of the British tradition that has, and is still producing some of the best and brightest of Singapore's doctors; and supplies the foundation of our health provider system. The YLLSOM currently has over 200 medical students per class, while Duke-NUS GMS is the new kid on the block;



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with its pioneer class a tad bigger than the 23 medical students of the original 1905 King Edward VII Medical School vintage. However, the graduate school has a wider national mix of Singaporeans, Malaysians, Indonesians, Filipinas, Vietnamese, Americans, British, Africans, Bangladeshis, Indians and Germans – and backgrounds ranging from molecular biology, dietetics, anthropology, neuroscience, engineering, management consulting to actively breast-feeding mothers.

Having spent time teaching the Duke-NUS GMS students, I found that the spirit of John Dewey was alive in their emphasis on problem and team-based learning to foster creative thinking, group cross-fertilisation (of knowledge and ideas, I mean) and the challenging of dogma. The spark of Paolo Freire – that of a teacher who learns and a learner who teaches – as the basic role of classroom participation, was also kindled within the Duke classroom.

Certainly, a new breed of doctors is needed for the twenty-first century where the war for talent, ideas and innovation increases the real wealth of nations. Therefore, the education and research enterprise that is Duke-NUS GMS cannot merely be a transactional fee-for-service provider, but more importantly, has to contribute as an essential stock that goes into the hot pot called Intangible Wealth.

Intangible wealth is not gold, oil, gas, rubber, rice, land, ores, stocks, factories, cash or even military might. The much huger intangible wealth of nations is a rich broth of a strong judiciary and rule of law, trust between people, effective government, high quality education and the growth of human capital, creativity and entrepreneurial energy, civil society and stable property rights. Surprisingly, even in rich, large and powerful countries like the United States, its natural wealth is only a 1 to 3% slice of its total wealth. Intangible wealth becomes even more invaluable as trillions of fiscal capital disappears into dark sewers together with melamine-tainted milk.

A new film *Bottle Shock* is based on a true story of how, in 1976, a passionate fledgling Napa Valley winemaker produced a Californian chardonnay to take on the might of the penultimate French wines. Against all odds in a then beer-guzzling, belly-burping, KFC-crunching, laid-back West Coast culture, the Californian wines *gasp* won at the “Judgement of Paris”, a contest presided by only French judges. Small countries like Singapore would love a fairy tale like this as they till their own ‘vineyards’ to grow, ferment and mature native human grog into Geek Gods to enrich their intangible wealth. Meanwhile, the Greed Gods are downgrading from *La Grande Dame 1996 Veuve Clicquot* to *Lehman ‘Da Blues’ Brothers 2008 Unsparkling Grape Juice*. ■