

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President



**K**yoto is one of my favourite holiday spots. The mid-sized city, nestled in the valley of the Kansai region of Honshu Island is one of the most un-spoilt cities of Japan. It was spared the ravages of World War II bombing and retains all the charms and allure of quintessential Japan. Such is the place of Kyoto in Japanese consciousness that all Japanese school children have to make at least one compulsory visit to Kyoto to acquaint themselves with Japanese traditions and culture. As for me, there is really nothing like sitting next to the banks of the Kamogawa River that cuts through the city on a cold autumn day and sipping a cup of coffee while watching the world go by and the river humming gently under a canopy of autumn leaves.

On one such day a couple of years ago, I stumbled across a sushi shop in a small street located on the east side of the river near Nijio. Sushi, as we know, is Japan's culinary face to the world. It has assumed such ubiquity that sushi can now be considered global food, similar to hamburgers, pasta and fried rice.

What is sushi? 99% of people who have eaten sushi will tell you that sushi is vinegared-rice topped with (usually) raw seafood. Traditionalists will call this *Edomae* sushi because this style of sushi that has been popularised all over the world has its origins from Tokyo during the late Edo period; Edo being the old name for Tokyo. There are actually quite a few forms of sushi other than *Edomae* sushi. For example, in the Kansai region, pressed

sushi or *Oshizushi* is popular where sushi is made by pressing rice and sushi toppings with wooden blocks. Incidentally, the very common seaweed rolls ("maki rolls") with rice and seafood wrapped in seaweed was originally invented for gamblers who wanted to eat sushi while gambling without rice grains sticking irritatingly to their fingers.

I usually do not seek out sushi in Kyoto. The Kansai region, where Kyoto is located, is really more famed for other culinary delights such as beef. After all, Kyoto is in a valley located some distance from the sea. It is home to the *Kaiseki* (Japanese banquet meal), wagyu beef, tofu banquet and so on.. But sushi?

On that day, I was somehow moved to slide that traditional paper screen door and enter the cosy sushi eatery with two friends. We began by eating the usual sushi and sashimi – tuna and snapper among others and I exchanged a few words of Japanese with the chef. (Note: the Japanese are very forgiving to foreigners who can speak a few words of Japanese, even when the language is hideously mutilated in the process...) After about 20 minutes, he disappeared into a room at the back of the eatery and came back with a few pieces of filleted fish which resemble what we know as salted fish. I gingerly bit into the flesh which fell gently apart. The flavours could perhaps be best described as a lingual composition of salted fish, rice and blue cheese: complex, delicate and yet intense. The chef then fished (pun intended) out a huge book from the bookshelf behind him. I reckoned it was



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a professional textbook for sushi and sashimi chefs and he flipped to a page with coloured photographs of what I had eaten. From what I could gather, what I ate was the original version of sushi – *Funazushi* (fermented raw fish).

It turns out that the origins of sushi stemmed from the need to preserve fish. The salt and cooked rice were not eaten but used as a preservative for the freshwater fish. I later learnt that the salt and vinegar produced from the rice yielded an anaerobic lactic acid fermentation of the fish which helped to preserve it. The fish I ate was actually a type of indigenous carp and *Funazushi* is a famous delicacy in the region of Lake Biwa located near Kyoto. *Funazushi* takes one to three years to make and is so rare nowadays that it is considered a “*chinmi*”, or rare delicacy in Japanese gastronomy. Lucky me!

But it is poignant to note that the origins of sushi, which was basically a process using rice and salt to preserve fish so that the latter could be eaten, has been forgotten by many. In fact, I have mentioned this wonderful experience to several Japanese I met and they all



(Photo credit: Dr. Wong Chiang Yin)

marvelled at my good fortune. Some commented that many young Japanese today have not even heard of *Funazushi*, much less eaten the delicacy.

Last month, the Father of Paediatrics and SMA Honorary Member, Emeritus Professor Wong Hock Boon passed away. This passing of the legend is a great loss to the profession. Private emails amongst SMA Council Members on his passing reflected the great impact Professor Wong left on our lives, even if for some of us, the contact was regrettably brief as medical students. But two emails from our youngest Council Members was cause for even greater contemplation: They are NUS graduates and they did not know who Professor Wong was, and what he meant to the rest of us! The succeeding emails from the rest of us were that of disbelief, criticism and even mild chastisement.

After our emotions somewhat subsided, I thought the criticism and chastisement were really misguided. The truth is – their ignorance as

young doctors and graduates of our local medical school reflect our failings as their seniors. We have failed to inform and teach them of the giants in medicine who have shaped and defined the medical profession today. Can we blame them completely for their ignorance?

I remember a room located on the second floor of the medical library in Kent Ridge which I think was called the Singapore-Malaya Room. The library has since been demolished and a new building which will house a new medical library is being built. I wonder if the new library will have a room with a function similar to the Singapore-Malaya Room? There were a few afternoons I spent as an undergraduate in that room which contained many books detailing the history of medicine and medical education in Singapore. I learnt much from those few hours I spent in the Singapore-Malaya Room even if it did nothing for my grades. I do not think many students in my time actually spent time

browsing through the treasure trove idling unnoticed in that room. I was fortunate I did so but it was a result of chance and curiosity. I think we can do better than that going

forward. We need to teach medical students and young doctors about the past so they will know that the benefits they reap today – as members of a respected community are built on the blood, toil, sweat and tears of selfless role models such as Prof Wong Hock Boon.

We forget the past too easily. And this forgetfulness translates into ignorance as time passes by, just as most people do not know that sushi was originally about eating fish preserved with rice and salt, and not about eating rice topped with fresh seafood. We should not just enjoy the present without realising the past. This is because only when we know where we came from and how we got here, can we press forward with wisdom, confidence and conviction.

2009 is the year SMA celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It is time to celebrate the present and it is time to dream daring dreams for the future. It is also time to remember our origins. ■

