



THE SINGAPORE DOCTOR IS HEXALINGUAL

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Some friends like to label me a Western Oriental Gentleman (WOG), a *jiak gantang* (potato-eating) PotaToh or banana – yellow on the outside and white on the inside. One Straits Times editor who wrote on bilingualism asked me if I left Singapore for a United World College scholarship because I could not cope with Mandarin. Actually, I scored an A2 for the GCE ‘O’ Levels and an A1 (7) for International Baccalaureate Mandarin. Even as I hailed from the secondary school known then for having many monolingual boys whose Mandarin was far from the best and yet to be passable, I just about managed to read the works of Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese Literature and a medical doctor.

But still, I preferred Somerset Maugham (a medical doctor and intelligence operative who stirred Ian Fleming to write his James Bond series) to Lu Xun. One of my favourite writers during schooldays was AJ Cronin, the great medical writer of *Generation D* (*For Dinosaur*). Masterpieces like *The Stars Look Down*, *Keys to the Kingdom* and *The*

Citadel moved generations of doctors to believe in the humanity of Medicine, just as today’s doctors are inspired by the writings of doctors like Atul Gawande, Jerome Groopman and Khaled Hosseini. *The Citadel* (in my mind, required reading for all medical students), which recounts a young doctor’s struggles in the poor coal mining community of Wales, actually catalysed the inception of Great Britain’s National Health Service by then-Minister of Health Nye Bevan, whose own impoverished Welsh coal miner father died of pneumoconiosis and whose three siblings died in childhood. So while I was affected by the plight of British coal miners, I knew little about the tragedies of modern China such as the Rape of Nanjing and the great pneumonic plague of China valiantly contained by Ipoh-born Dr Wu Lien-Teh.

Upon return to Singapore after medical school in England, I was a monolingual monolith. OK, a trifle trilingual, since I could order *dim sum* in London’s Chinatown and say a smattering of Urdu that might loosely translate into: “Excuse me, kind sir, are you in pain, what?” As a pale-faced house

officer, I had to relearn Mandarin, the Chinese dialects and Bahasa Melayu pronto, enough to be able to take a decent history (for example, “Hello hello, are you alive?”) and explain consent for procedures, treatment and prognosis. I could speak just enough Tamil to ask, “Pain where?” Many of my friends and colleagues who graduated locally are hexalingual – able to speak English, Mandarin, Bahasa, Hokkien, Cantonese and Tamil; at least well enough to go through a comprehensive clerking and provide regular updates. Dialects are still important for local doctors to communicate with the older generation. A senior lawyer I sat next to at a recent wedding dinner lamented that the loss of Chinese dialects in Singapore has impeded our ability to do better business in many parts of China including Fujian, Guangzhou and Hainan. Another senior doctor expressed that if we had kept our dialects, we would have learned Mandarin easier and preserved a richer Chinese heritage. A delightful GP friend who is President of the Singapore Korean Drama Association (or something like that) can also speak Korean. I am



(*Eat Drink Man Woman*), Sylvia Chang (*20 30 40*), Peter Chan (*Comrades, Almost a Love Story*), John Woo (*A Better Tomorrow*) and Ho Hsiao Hsien (*City of Sadness*). In Zhang Yimou's masterpiece, *To Live*, we witness the pain, power and the glory of the Chinese people across the political upheavals of twentieth century China. For making that film, he was put in professional cold storage for two years by the

people, many of Singapore's younger generation will tune in to visual media, modern entertainment and pop culture than merely the classroom, ten years series and tuition teachers. Dissenting cynics and bloggers have opined that this Chinese revivalism is all down to hardcore pragmatism, and that if Turkmenistan became a dominant superpower tomorrow, we would all be speaking Turkmen and wearing furry hats that look like giant bears had

sure her range has moved beyond "kamsamnida" (Korean for "thank you") to the Korean equivalent for "Hi, you sexy Korean *bulgogi* of a man, can I be your *kimchi*?"

I once gave a bedside tutorial to medical students where a Singaporean Indian in the group spoke the most pristine Mandarin. The language centre of many doctors who are both right-brained (clinical intuition, empathy, EQ to charm the ward sister and impress the consultant, savouring Vivaldi while performing surgery) and left-brained (diagnosing Von Hippel Lindau Syndrome, explaining a haemorrhoidectomy in Vietnamese, interpreting laboratory results for tertiary hyperparathyroidism, mastering biostatistics, cranial nerve examination and performing surgery while Vivaldi is playing in OT) must be highly evolved unlike mine.

Ironically, my friends tell me I am a fan of "foreign" films by Zhang Yimou (*To Live*), Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*), Wong Kar Wai (*Chungking Express*), Ang Lee



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then establishment politicians. In Zhang's *Not One Less*, we feel for the determined young school teacher in a village school, the boy who runs to the city in search of a job to pay off family debts and help his ill mother, and understand the poverty and inadequate educational system of rural China. Today, Zhang Yimou, interned during the Cultural Revolution, is a hero in China.

I believe that to further relish the rudiments, richness and realism of the Chinese language, culture and

landed on our heads. The truth of the matter is, even the Prime Minister of Malaysia is encouraging his people to actively learn Mandarin also.

I am heading to one of my favourite cities, Hong Kong, over Christmas – where the people have made it their resolve to learn Mandarin as a matter of course for a better tomorrow. After all, Hong Kong, the crouching tiger and monetarist mouth of the Red Dragon, and China, are comrades, almost a love story. Happy New Year! SMA

