



With his "bubble car" the BMW Isetta at the old Alumni Medical Centre



Dr Chee Phui Hung being conferred SMA Honorary Membership in 2004 by Dr Lee Pheng Soon

## IN MEMORIAM: SMA HONORARY MEMBER, "AGONG" DR CHEE PHUI HUNG 1922 – 2010

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin

**It was this quality of never taking himself seriously that enabled Agong to be one of the most effective and serious advocates for the medical profession in his later years. Because of this quality of not taking himself seriously, I never felt the 46 years that separated the two of us when we talked.**

**A**gong was in his seventies when I first met him some 15 years ago as a young medical officer. I had decided to follow my then-boss to the Alumni Association for lunch in the Agong's Room. Despite the fact that the Agong's Room had many legendary medical personalities, Agong was undoubtedly the wittiest and loudest, and in this room of medical giants, he held court. Perhaps he had mellowed by then; interestingly, I was never ragged in that room by him (unlike some of the chaps sitting there decades ago).

I had entered the profession too late to learn first-hand of the Agong's famous

exploits that occurred in his younger days – the Agong show, his terrifying presence at AGMs (including the SMA's) or raising money for the Alumni in his unique and successful ways (which included sitting in the waiting rooms of the clinics of his medical colleagues/prey and telling the patients waiting there with him that "the doctor inside the room owes me money").

As such, I will dispense with the usual adjectives and epithets that are typically associated with Dr Chee Phui Hung here. The Agong is a multifaceted person and as we mourn his passing, let us also remember the aspects of him that are subtler. This is especially

important because Agong was a person who either strategically or subconsciously (you decide for yourself) magnified his own imperfections to great effect and effectiveness and concealed his qualities.

It is obvious that the Agong talked a lot and talked loudly – daily over lunch in the Agong's Room or at Alumni Dinners attended by ministers and senior civil servants. What was not so obvious was that Agong was a peerless orator who had complete mastery over the entire spectrum of the English language. Agong could be elegant and charming, bruising and belittling all in the space of 20 words.

What was even less obvious was that despite all the claims about Agong being lazy or working little was that he actually did a lot of homework. Many of his speeches at Alumni Dinners were the result of many hours spent with Alumni members – he would invite certain members to the Agong's Room in the afternoons over a few days and ask them about key

*Dr Chee Phui Hung receiving Malaysian Acting PM Tun Dr Ismail Bin Dato Abdul Rahman and Mrs Ismail at an Alumni Dinner*



of Singaporeans. Agong was neither.

I had no answer for him that day as to why we had nominated him. I stuttered a generic, “We think you deserve it and it is long overdue.” The truth was that I had suggested Agong should be nominated and all the SMA Council members then unanimously agreed without question. And the funny thing was, no one in the SMA Council actually asked or articulated why Agong should be nominated. It all seemed so natural and belated. Similar to the personality of Agong, the mood in the SMA Council Room was merry and energetic when the decision was made.

issues currently faced by the medical profession. The issues would be debated and thought through before they were included in his speech, which would be invariably delivered with conviction and confidence.

Agong appeared carefree and careless but in truth he paid a lot of attention to details behind the scenes. I was a member of the Alumni Southern Branch Management Committee in the nineties and was tasked to organise the photograph-taking session at one or two Reunion Dinners. This was no easy affair because what took place was that three to five photographs were taken and merged together later. Agong actually personally planned the seating arrangements for the front row of all the photographs, seat by seat, person by person and also decided who would appear in the centre photograph. My task was made easy because he went down to minutiae when the occasion required.

In an interview, Agong said he never had a personal agenda. In fact, one can even argue that aside from promoting and developing the Alumni, Agong never appeared to even have any serious agenda. It was this quality of never taking himself seriously that enabled Agong to be one of the most effective and serious advocates for the medical profession in his later years. Because of this quality of not taking himself seriously, I never felt the 46 years that separated the two of us when we talked.

The SMA Honorary Membership is the highest honor SMA can bestow on any person, living or dead. Agong is an SMA Honorary Member and it would be remiss of me not to mention this on this occasion. I had been tasked by the SMA Council to inform him that the Council had decided to nominate him for the SMA Honorary Membership in 2004. I informed him at the Alumni and his first and immediate reaction was to question me loudly, “Why are you giving this to me? I am not like ABC or XYZ (names



*Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Dr Chee Phui Hung*

After a long time, some things are so obvious that they need not be said. In fact, it is difficult to articulate an idea or concept when it gets too pervasive because it is assumed to be understood by all. This is similar to Agong’s position in the Alumni. He did not hold any official elected position in the Alumni for a long time. You will not find his name in the Management Committee of the Alumni Southern Branch or in the Alumni Council in the last 15 years. But all members of the Alumni instinctively knew that he had the final say and he was the Agong, or King of the organisation year-in, year-out.

In retrospect, it was obvious that Agong had, through the force of his personality and his dedication to the cause of the Alumni, been a major unifying force for doctors. Unfortunately, I did not have the eloquence to tell him the obvious then. SMA

of revered teachers and academics), I am a nobody.” He was direct and sincere in his remark. It was not meant to sound humorous or rhetorical. Yet this came from a person who had the ears of very important people from all over the country and even in Malaysia.

Indeed, Agong is an unusual SMA Honorary Member. This was so eloquently pointed out by the Dean of the YLLSoM Professor John Wong (his nephew) who delivered the citation for Agong at the SMA Annual Dinner. SMA Honorary Members are usually classified into two groups – doctors who were great teachers and academics or politicians and senior civil servants who had contributed very significantly to improving the health



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