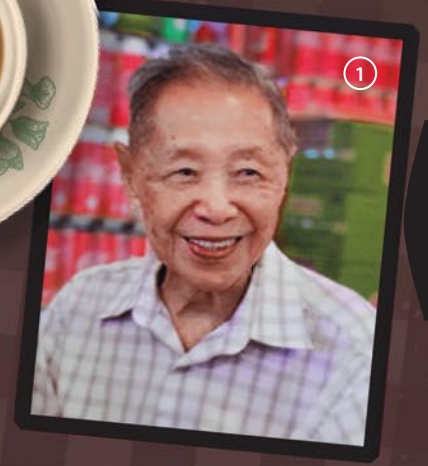


Requiem for Ah Leng

Text by A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean

Photos by Mr Wong Hoe Sang, SGH Museum and National University of Singapore



Author's note: Ah Leng passed on 31 May 2021. In life when he provided the watering holes for medical students in Sepoy Lines for 36 years (1947 to 1983), he was a legend. Many stories were told by doctors in articles and videos of their convivial experience with him. In death, he triggered in some, memories of what we caught from him in our student years. Ah Leng had no university degree or faculty appointment. Yet we imbibed valuable experience from him of how to live a simple meaningful life with compassion and equanimity that enriched our lives as doctors.

There was then only one medical school in Singapore. There was also only one Ah Leng. However, unknown to many, there were two Ah Leng's canteens. The ostensible one was tucked between the College of Medicine Building and the sports field, demolished when Sepoy Lines Campus was re-developed. The second structure, which housed the night hangout, above the then billiard room of the old King Edward VII Hall, is now used as administrative offices.

I never knew "Ah Leng" as Mr Wong Niap Leng, until Chiang Yin sent me his obituary. He was too much a part of the family which was the small medical school in the 1970s. His two canteens we retreated to, to escape the acrid formalin vapours of the dissecting rooms, to re-calibrate our eyes after peering for hours into the microscope, and more mundanely for shots of caffeine in between lectures and mugging. Or just to "talk cock".

Ah Leng always knew what each of us would order and we were served. Be it toasts with kopi and tea, or, if around meal time, a carbo boost seasoned with unconditional positive regard. He served with tranquillity, but would linger for a chat when my classmate, Ang Lee Cyn (a good friend of Ah Leng's son, Hoe Sang) was around. We were usually a raucous lot. However, we would be in adulatory silence when his two gracious daughters served us, as they were around our age, and in

respectful silence when Mrs Wong's loud shrilled Hainanese voice bellowed from the back of the canteen.

If the post of informal school counsellor existed then, Ah Leng would fit the bill. In his quiet ways, he appreciated the travails of life of medical students. At times, some words of commiseration and emphatic silence were all that was needed when the chips were down. There were stories of students hanging out at night in his al fresco second canteen with Ah Leng keeping them company. There were also stories of a few students who just disappeared after graduation, owing Ah Leng debts recorded in the "555" small booklets with yellow covers. Ah Leng probably never asked as he felt he had already received his recompense – tending to the young men and women now doctors.

My class of 1974 had less than a hundred students, half of which were Malaysians. I think he knew many of us. Ah Leng was always invited to our class reunions and attended a couple of them. He smiled affably to me each time I greeted him at these functions. I was tempted each time to ask him if he remembers me. I suspect not. But, many of us remember him for his Rogerian demeanour. To remember his generosity, NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine has set up a bursary for its students named after Ah Leng (Wong Niap Leng Medical Bursary).

Irvin Yalom, the existential philosopher, wrote that even if we are no more (on this earth), the effect we have on other people is in turn passed on to others. Much like the ripples in a pond go on and on until they are no longer visible but continuing at a nano level ad infinitum. Rest in peace, Ah Leng. ♦

For a short video on the story of Ah Leng's canteen, visit <https://youtu.be/aG68lmOBMfM>. The author would also like to thank Dr Ho Ting Fei for putting him in touch with Mr Wong Hoe Sang.

Legend

1. Mr Wong Niap Leng (1927-2021)
2. The haven Ah Leng built
3. A young man and his canteen
4. "555" records of debts
5. Coffee and care

A/Prof Cheong still practises in the private practice he started 40 years ago. He was past president of the SMA and CFPS, and was the inaugural chairman of the Chapter of Family Medicine Physicians in AMS. He was elected to Honorary Membership at the 2021 SMA Annual General Meeting. Teaching medical communication and humanism is his present passion.

