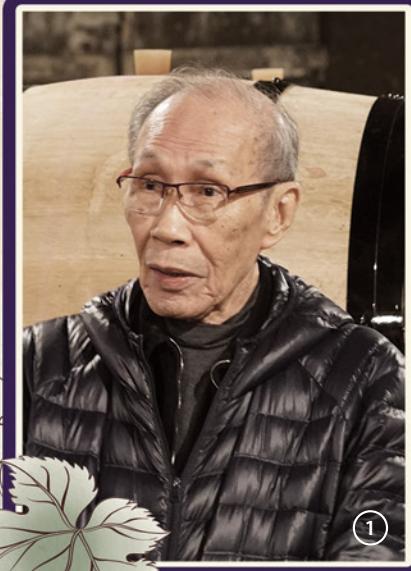


IN MEMORY OF

DR YONG NEN KHIONG

(1927 - 2021)



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SMA Council Member and Past President (2006-2009)

*This eulogy was first delivered at
Dr Yong's funeral on 17 March 2021.*

SMA Dinners can be sombre if not boring affairs. So as young Council members, we decided that we could liven things up by bringing a few bottles of good wines to drink at this event. The year was 2002 and NK Yong was conferred the SMA's highest award, the SMA Honorary Membership. As Honorary Member, he sat at the head VIP table. Halfway through dinner, I scribbled down the list of wines we had at our table on a paper napkin which I handed over to him at the head table before scurrying back to mine.

Moments later, he came over to our table and said: "How can you drink all these wines without me?"

That incident had NK Yong's *joie de vivre* written all over it and that was how I got to know NK and his lovely wife Melina.

It is no exaggeration to say that NK was the grand old man, if not the father, of the Singapore wine scene. Vignerons coming to this part of the world would beat a path to his home to dine and wine with him. It was he who first put Singapore on the map in the wine world. For many years, my friends and I were very fortunate to frequent

his residence and enjoy the company and wisdom of NK while digging into the wonderful spread of food that Melina invariably cooked up.

There are too many lessons about life and wine that I have learnt from NK over the years. In the interests of time, I will share three here.

Lesson 1: The character of the wines reflects the character of the winemaker.

If the winemaker is effusive, jovial and cheerful, so will the wines be. If the winemaker is calculated and contemplative, the wines will be likewise. In other words, your work reflects your personality, your character.

Lesson 2: Good wines must pass the "fresh test".

There are wines and there are wines. Some are made to impress wine critics, some are made to pair with food, etc. Whatever the case may be, the wine must taste fresh, and that comes from good acidity and fruit. I am a huge adherent to NK's fresh test. The lesson here is in life as in wine, one must approach each day with positivity and energy.

Lesson 3: Great wines have balance.

Great wines have that mystical and all-round endearing nature that nothing really sticks out, everything is there in the right place and right proportions. It is all about balance. It is so with wine, and it is so with people.

NK began to write a wine column for the *Business Times (BT)* in 1988 and continued to do so for 30 years. He sought to educate *BT* readers on the joys of wine appreciation. He often wrote about legendary wines, but he also delved into affordable everyday wines that many could afford and have access to. This to me, reflects his philosophy to wine. In an interview with *SMA News* in 2009, he said "I do not see what there is about wine that should make you feel superior to others. Wine is a drink basically to wash your food down and to quench your thirst with. Except that it tastes better than water and has the added advantage that the alcohol content, in moderation, induces a feeling of well-being and makes you take a more charitable and benign view of the world". In other words, to NK, at the end of the day, despite the academic

and philosophical musings about wine, it is just a drink to be enjoyed in the company of friends.

NK was indeed a world-class wine aficionado. But he really got interested in wine only in the early 80s. Before that, he was already a world-class heart surgeon and a titan of medicine.

NK was the longest serving President of the SMA. He served for six years as President over three spells: 1980 to 1981; 1982 to 1985; and 1987 to 1989. He is one of the gold standards that all Presidents of SMA have to measure up to. In January 1965, he performed the first open-heart surgery in Singapore, using a heart-lung machine donated by an American non-governmental organisation called the China Medical Board, using staff trained by him to work the machine, on a young woman with atrial septal defect. He went on to take up the Foundation Chair of Surgery when the Faculty of Medicine was set up in the University of Malaya in 1965 in Kuala Lumpur and stayed in that position for ten years. He performed the first open-heart surgery in Malaysia in

1969. In other words, the first open-heart surgeries performed in two countries, Singapore and Malaysia, were done by the same person – NK Yong.

He returned to Singapore to set up a private practice and he was elected to the SMA Council as Treasurer in 1979.

His formidable clinical skills were evident even when he was 81 years old, when over dinner, and to the alarm of the younger doctors that were with him, he self-diagnosed that he had an acute dissecting aortic aneurysm, which was then promptly stented.

Another aspect of him that many may not know is that he is also a dyed in the wool Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) boy. His father was a famous ACS teacher who was also for a time Principal of Kampar ACS in the 30s. In the mid-1980s, when I was a student in Anglo-Chinese Junior College, my then-principal, who was taught by the senior Mr Yong Ngim Djin, was still talking to me about his beloved teacher. NK cited his father as the most important influence in his life – for being a good

Christian and a pillar of the Church. NK said it was from him that he learnt to show compassion and charity towards his fellow human beings.

When asked what makes a good surgeon, his answer was telling. He said: "Your heart must be in it. To live fully, you must have passion burning in you – and that applies particularly if you want to excel at anything you choose to do." That was vintage NK. Passion and conviction were never things found in short measure in the man.

He has left us. He has left a giant void in many of our hearts as well as in the areas he excelled in – medicine and wine. But we can take solace that he is now with his Maker, drinking the best wines and ambling in the most serene and picturesque vineyards. ♦

Legend

1. Titan of medicine and wine
2. Dr NK Yong cutting his birthday cake in 2020
3. Dr NK Yong, Mrs Melina Yong and Dr Wong Chiang Yin in front of the hill of Corton Charlemagne, Burgundy

