

A Better Tomorrow

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

I love Hong Kong. Over two years ago there, I met up with old Hong Kong friends over dinner and it was the warmest of reunions bringing back good memories. As dinner was about to begin, the most boisterous of our UK varsity hostel clique, an eminent medical oncologist, asked me: "Well, aren't you going to sing *Majulah Singapura* before we eat?" He let out a booming laugh.



The lighthearted slimes went on through dinner, with the Hong Kongers painting a picture of Singapore as the Quakeresque Midwest of Asia, a spotless, gum-less, casino-less, serious opposition-less hegemony overly needy on mainly one brand of nanny's milk. Of course, the film *Fargo* by the Coen brothers will reveal that the Midwest is not so prim and two-dimensional. I fired back about their post-colonial firetrap shoebox public housing projects with rotting aircons and loud Canto-bengs yelling vulgarities from precarious balconies, the underbelly of hedonistic traffic in the Pearl River delta, the cult of showy materialism and the gangland triad shootings. My Hong Kong friends produced a mock tremble and quipped: "Oooo, we're so scared!"

But, in our small group, there is beneath the slimes, some deep respect for what is good in each other's societies. From every street corner of Mongkok to Causeway Bay in this Land of the Laissez Faire, children, the able-bodied and the elderly are hawking *Hello Kitty* and *Pokemon* toys, plastic flowers, VCDs and DVDs, software, stereos, sweets, silk, shoes, shirts and sex. The energy, entrepreneurial clamour, cultural depth, style, survivalism, shrewdness, adaptability, competitiveness, rugged individualism and resilience of Hong Kong is palpable. The crazy, fast exchange of money, goods and service, in a dizzy, dirty and heady metropole full of glitter and litter is like Wong Kar Wai's breathtaking masterpiece film, *Chungking Express*, a tale of love and alienation so deconstructed, streams of consciousness and scriptless, and made on a whim in between a major movie project by an unpredictable film director likely with lousy PSLE results, that it would unlikely have been financed in Singapore. To be fair, even money-minded mainstream Hollywood may have thought this film to be risky business – not enough sex, the ending too ethereal, the plot too *cheem* (complicated) for the average American, and no Jackie Chan doing kung fu fighting. Yet, the film makes it at Number 8 in the United Kingdom's *Sight and Sound* magazine's list of greatest movies ever made.

The Hong Kong healthcare system of providing equity and universal access in health for all on comparably low taxation has been value-for-money, but chugging gradually

uphill for decades, costing the Government HK\$30.3 billion this year alone. The HK public health services is like a huge dim sum restaurant, where, as long as you are a taxpayer, you can queue up, usually for a long time, for the eat-all-you-can limited buffet of *siew mai*, *char siew pau*, *har kao* and *lor mai kai*. You are also likely to have to share a table and a spittoon, and get

served by trainees and junior waiters, while the senior managers shout orders across the din, and the mythical, obscenely well-paid chefs lord over the kitchens and create more recipes. These select, highly salaried chefs are quite contented in their comfort zone, imparting tradition, teaching, research and longevity in their kitchen, contributing to the restaurant's reputation. In contrast, Singapore's public sector chefs spend more time dishing out frontline services to an expectant co-paying public. Such HK restaurants provide 94% of HK restaurant services where your choices are more limited (but free!), compared to the classy and quieter Chinese restaurant at a Hong Kong six-star hotel, where you may have to pay premium prices for fancy dumplings and the bill for the delicacies can be exorbitant.

The 1999 Harvard Report was commissioned by the Hong Kong Government to diagnose, prognosticate and prescribe changes to the current Hong Kong healthcare system. The main gist of the Harvard Report was that the HK healthcare system chugging uphill will slide down in the near future with healthcare spending going beyond 20% of public expenditure by 2016. Harvard's main prescription was medical insurance and a savings plan. There were also concerns about compartmentalisation of health services especially between the primary care, public and private sectors. It also called for more transparency of healthcare in especially the private sector. Needless to say, this *qweilo* (Cantonese slang for "foreigner") document did not go down well with a famously vocal Hong Kong public. By December 2000, the Hong Kong Government released its healthcare reform paper where the main points were to contain costs and improve productivity, target public subsidies to those who most need it, and to introduce some form of medical savings plan.

In this issue of the *SMA News*, the lead article is an astute commentary of the Hong Kong healthcare landscape by one of its leading Government health administrators, a Singaporean no less. We also have an insightful account of life in an esteemed Hong Kong Hospital by one of our own neurosurgeons and Garfield's *Tale of Two Cities*. Enjoy these literary *dim sum*. ■

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