

Biting the Bamboo: 8 years in Yunnan

Reviewed by Dr Shoen Low



There is much of George Orwell in Dr Tan Lai Yong. As a young man in the 1930s, Orwell chose to live among the poor and unemployed in the industrial north of England. He described the demoralisation and squalor he saw in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. And his anger at the suffering of ordinary people became the impetus for several of his more famous works later.

In 1996, Dr Tan Lai Yong and his wife brought their two young children to the mountainous rural regions of Yunnan province in Southwest China. There, he ran the Village Doctor Training Project where he taught his medical skills to the province's trainee village physicians. Eight years on, he has written an engaging collection of vignettes about people and places he has come to love over the course of his work. *Biting the Bamboo: Eight Years in Yunnan* was published in 2004. It is both a frank portrait of the hard life of the typical Yunnan villager and an insight into the soul of the Singaporean doctor who went to live with them.

One anecdote that speaks truly is the author's reflections on the physical hardship the villagers endure. In the nights, temperatures fall below freezing point even in spring and late autumn. And most homes in the mountains are nothing more than mud or bamboo huts offering scant protection against the bitter cold. Dr Tan writes:

Sometimes, on wintry nights, I doze off to sleep thinking about a conversation I had with my dad when I was a little boy. At a funeral back in Singapore, I asked him why the traditional Chinese give huge, thick blankets to the families of the bereaved. I had seen these blankets strung up on ropes at funeral wakes and often wondered why. He told me that families in ancient China had to mourn for days and nights. Relatives would buy them blankets to keep them warm as they went through the funeral rites. As a Singapore boy growing up in our hot and humid climate, I never appreciated the blankets as much as I do here.



About the reviewer:

Shoen is a radiology trainee currently in Singapore General Hospital.

In the mountains of Yunnan near the China-Myanmar border, the village doctor is a full-time farmer and part-time doctor. He cannot make a living just by being a doctor because he sees an average of only five to ten patients a day and few villages can afford to pay him a minimum wage to run a clinic full-time. So most of the doctors Dr Tan trains would work their farms in the day and see their patients at night.

Interestingly, *Biting the Bamboo* was published as a collaboration with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE)

College Central whose students were themselves inspired to participate in their own overseas community service projects. They have come away from such trips older, wiser and more appreciative of the relatively comfortable life they live in Singapore. One student wrote after a trip to Sarawak that she learnt to live without her most important asset – her handphone.

It is a rare and noble thing for a man to uproot his family and live among the poor and needy in rural China for no other reward than the abstract concept of altruism. In his book, Dr Tan writes simply but truly, and his stories have a force of humanity that is summed up by a passage he includes. It is from the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Shi:

Go to the people, live among them.

Learn from them. Love them.

Start with what they know; build on what they have.

But (for) the best leaders, when their task is accomplished, their work is done, the people will remark,

"We have done it ourselves." ■



Growing up in Yunnan: Dr Tan's children, Amber and Edward.

Dr Tan Lai Yong (MBBS, 1985) lectures at Kunming Medical College, and is also a regular contributor to *SMA News* and *Sensory*. The first edition of *Biting the Bamboo* has been sold out. Reprints and a Chinese edition are scheduled for mid-2005. Please email tanlylc@pacific.net.sg or nancy_lam@ite.edu.sg for more information. Proceeds go to support ITE students' community enterprise efforts.