

Reviewed by Dr Wong Chiang Yin

China Condensed

Dr Ong Siew Chey. Times Editions, Marshall Cavendish, 2005, 209 pages.



Dr Wong Chiang Yin, 37, is the

1st Vice-President and Chairman of Complaints Committee in SMA.

In addition, he is the Secretary General of MASEAN (Medical Associations of ASEAN). He is COO in a public hospital.

He studied in the ACS family of schools for 12 years. He has previously written for the *Straits Times'*

Life section on the importance of being proficient in Chinese to understand

Chinese culture and values. His Chinese language interests

include anything from collecting Hong Kong Cantonese comics to listening to Cantopop

and dabbling in calligraphy. His all-time favourite Chinese novel is *Romance of the*

Three Kingdoms.

Well-known past Professor of Surgery, Dr Ong Siew Chey could not have chosen a more ambitious project than this: to condense China into 200 pages. The end result is as much as one can get to a surgical masterpiece of resection and dissection. He has ably resected out the difficulties of understanding Chinese history and culture, and dissected out the details where they mattered most for the reader to see.

Dr Ong starts with a course in Chinese History 101, from the earliest evidence of Chinese civilisation in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties to present-day China.

Most importantly, he has ably highlighted the parts of history that bear relevance to Chinese customs and practices today. In addition, events that have shaped the geo-political landscape are given due prominence, for example, the division of China and its protectorates over about 100 years, from the first Opium War until the Chinese Civil War (although Ryukyu or present-day Okinawa was omitted in the accounts).

Going beyond history, the book dealt at some length with Chinese schools of thought and religion. It is here that somehow one feels a sense of incompleteness: the book covers each school with intellectual detachment, but one would have wished for more examples of these schools of thought still bearing relevance to daily living as Dr Ong had so admirably done in the section on history. For example, as an English-educated overseas Chinese myself, it took me quite some time to draw links between daily Chinese practices and speech with what was recorded in the classical Confucian texts. If the purpose of this book is to educate overseas Chinese on Chinese culture quickly, then such examples would certainly be welcome.

The sections on traditional literature and interesting proverbs had just enough spice to whet the appetite of readers. Noteworthy is the section on Chinese medicine. The medical training of the author has no doubt influenced some of the views given. The section gives a good summary of the background of Traditional

◀ Page 16 – *China Condensed*

Chinese Medicine (TCM) and its limitations in terms of scientific rigour. It makes the astute observation that for TCM to move forward, Chinese medicine must necessarily move towards better scientific research and evidence, thereby inadvertently leading to more confluence with ‘Western’ medical practice.

The last chapter ‘Resurgence of China’ is an interesting read. It summarises China’s woes under Mao post-1949 and progress since Deng Xiaoping.

China Condensed succeeds admirably if the title of the book is indeed the desired outcome. Given the author’s obvious comprehensive grasp of Chinese culture, I would have preferred to see the book achieve more than a condensation of Chinese history and culture. For example, the Han race was portrayed more or less as a homogenous race in the book. This is quite an oversimplification. Amongst the Hans, Northerners and Southerners (as demarcated by the Yangtze Kiang) have quite different worldviews and cultural practices. Even among Southerners, there are differences between different provinces and dialect groups.

Speaking from experience, many Chinese, especially Singaporean Chinese take some time to understand the political and geographical structure of China. For example, a brief discourse on the organisation of China into provinces, autonomous regions, municipal cities, counties, villages, and so on would have been useful.

Going forward, one can only wish that this would not be the last of Dr Ong’s works on China. *China Condensed* is but the first book of what many an English-educated overseas

Chinese needs. I would strongly encourage Dr Ong to go beyond this to ‘Chinese Distilled’: a compilation and guide to an understanding of the Chinese values and social system, some of which are those that are embedded in Dr Ong’s name itself: 修齐.

In the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (大学), one of the great overarching principles is that of progressive learning leading to virtuous development, starting from the individual level to that of family unit, progressively developing onwards finally to nation-wide peace and harmony.

格物，致知，诚意，正心，修身，齐家，治国，平天下

The 17 words roughly translated means: investigating things, completing knowledge, having sincere thoughts, then an upright heart, leading to a cultured person, which in turn leads to having regulated families, which forms the basis for well-governed states which collectively develop into a harmonious empire.

China Condensed only achieves the first two: 格物 and 致知, and is still somewhat off enabling the reader to 修身 and 齐家. There remains much more that needs to be done before many a young, English-educated, overseas Chinese can fully grasp what it means to be Chinese. But given the quality of Dr Ong’s first work in this area, I am confident that he is well-placed to complete this worthwhile mission. Meanwhile, I unreservedly recommend *Chinese Condensed* to all my English-speaking Chinese friends. In fact, I have given away about 10 copies of this book since Christmas. ■