

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President

# Conservation, Preservation and Revival

Singapore's hawker centres have been listed as one of the "1,000 Places To Visit Before You Die" in the book by the same name. If that is the case, then the mammoth hawker centre on the second floor of Chinatown Complex of Smith Street surely must rank as one of the greatest, if not the greatest of all hawker centres in Singapore. As our Honorary Treasurer Yue Wai Mun told me many years ago when we were still kids, there are more than 365 stalls in the hawker centre and if one was to eat at only one stall a day, it would take more than a year to finish all the stalls!

The centre was constructed as part of the Chinatown Complex in the seventies. I still remember eating at the many roadside stalls lining Smith Street, Trengganu Street and Temple Street at night as a 5-year-old kid. Overnight, they all moved into this huge complex we now know as the icon of Chinatown. My family and I did not really take to it at first – the place was hot and humid compared to dining al-fresco (if such a term existed in Singapore in the seventies!) along Smith Street. Even the stall owners complained to the customers of the heat and cramped conditions. For my late paternal

grandparents and father who had lived many years on Temple Street itself, an indoor hawker centre was simply a bad idea.

But over time, I grew up and along with this mother of hawker centres. This is where you get the best Cantonese hawker fare in Singapore: *char siew*, fish head *beehoon*, pork and internal organ porridge, *chee cheong fun*, and others. And for a Cantonese kid like me, having a good bowl of porridge with raw fish and *chee cheong fun* is almost a quasi-spiritual experience.

So a few weeks ago, I was again huddling down to my gastronomic equivalent of a fetal position, in the pallid light of a cool morning, at my favourite porridge stall *Tian Tian*. This place serves the best porridge and raw fish, and I am a third generation customer. The porridge is smooth and comes with minced pork balls, liver and fallopian tubes (this is not a typo). In fact, it was even better in the past, when the porridge actually contained pieces of kidney and small intestine as well. But the Nipah virus outbreak of 1998 ended all that when freshly slaughtered pigs from Malaysia were no longer available in Singapore. Along with the porridge, I ordered my customary raw fish (sliced from freshwater Song

Clock Tower

SGH Block 4

Singapore National Eye Centre

SGH Block 7

National Heart Centre

Temporary Chinatown hawker centre

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Fish) and a plate of *chee cheong fun* from a nearby stall. This *chee cheong fun* stall is also a legendary hawker – they make their own *chee cheong fun* and open for less than three hours, from about 7 am to 10 am before everything is sold out. Along with a cup of thick *Kopi-O*, this is epicurean stuff to a Cantonese man of working class origins like me.

Then the bombshell came: the middle-aged gentleman who brought me my porridge (also one of the bosses) said, “We stop business in end-June when this place will undergo renovations for 18 months.”

“And they didn’t provide temporary relocation plans for all the hawkers?” I asked hastily.

“They did. Most of us are relocated to what was formerly Outram Park opposite *see-pai-poh* (Singapore General Hospital).”

“And you are not going?”

“No, they don’t have much parking there and I don’t think business will be that good.”

“But there may be thousands of workers in SGH who can be your customers.” (I tried to market Singapore General Hospital (SGH) as a potential customer base discreetly – he never knew that I was actually a doctor all these years.)

“I need a break *lah*.”

“Will you come back here when the renovations are completed?”

“Maybe. Probably.”

My mood turned more than a shade somber when I heard that. I looked at the stall and its workers. All the workers are at least in their fifties if not sixties. They have no heir apparent in sight to take over the business. Breakfast porridge is one of the most unpopular foods to sell, not because demand is poor but rather the fact that the workers have to wake up as early as 4 am to prepare the porridge base each morning. It is literally a dying trade and there is no guarantee this stall would return.

After finishing the food, I went to the basement. The wet market there is also an institution in itself and offers possibly the widest array of food sold in any fresh market, a reflection of the Cantonese’s obsession with good food. I told myself, how much of this will be left after the 18-month hiatus?

Finally, I decided to walk along Smith Street and Temple Street itself. And then it was apparent that indeed the Chinatown I once knew and loved is no more. In its place now are rows of shops selling touristy stuff. There is even a shop selling sex-aids on Smith Street! I recognised only a few old names – notably a Chinese medicine shop

called *Wong Yew Nam* which has been there for as long as I can remember.

From my short walk, I realised that while we had conserved the buildings of Chinatown, we did not preserve Chinatown’s way of life. There is a fundamental difference between conservation and preservation. We conserve structures and buildings. With resources, conservation is not difficult. With resources, conservation is not impossible. To be honest, there is a certain colour, charm and character to the current Chinatown, but it is quite different from the life that some of us once knew. Life then in Chinatown, despite all its imperfections and brusqueness, breathed out loud the archetypal Cantonese immigrant spirit of defiance and struggle.

But sadly, we cannot always preserve a way of life. Sometimes, we cannot even preserve treasured memories. They just slip away, despite and through our frantic grasps, ebbing into the twilight of our jagged consciousness.

For example, the black and white photographs were taken when I was in first year of medical school in the late eighties (yes, I was afraid of losing the Chinatown as I had known it to be even back then). Chinatown Complex was already there but the shophouses lining the Smith and Temple Streets were still not conserved yet. One of the shops sold live turtles and frogs on Temple Street itself, while old folks were still trying to make a living on the roadside. Clothing hung from clothes-poles stuck outside windows and you could see people going about their daily lives inside the second and third floors of the shophouses. Compare these to what I recorded with my digital SLR a week ago. The buildings are there, but the old way of life is gone. It was like a neutron bomb had gone off – the buildings are still standing and a lot prettier, but they cut a different presence altogether.

And so it is with some aspects of Medicine. The posts of Director of Medical Services (DMS) and Chairman of Medical Board (CMB) remain conserved, but they are quite different from what I knew when I first started working as a medical officer in the Ministry of Health HQ. Another issue is that of clinical governance. In the past, all clinical matters came under the final overview of the Medical Board and the CMB. There is now talk in USA about clinical governance coming under the purview of a company’s Board of Directors, all of which need not be doctors. Going forward, can we preserve the Medical Board as we now know, or will it be conserved as a structure but with its functional essence altered?

One of the first functions I had to attend

## Yesteryear: Temple Street and Smith Street



Clockwise from top left: **(1)** Traditional trishaw rider in Smith Street. **(2)** Man sketching in alley between Pagoda and Temple Street. **(3)** Clothes poles along Old Temple Street. **(4)** Samsui woman (sans headgear) selling vegetables by the roadside. **(5)** Remittance outlet and letter-writer – to send money and letters back to China.

## Today: 2006



Photo credits: Dr Wong Chiang Yin

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as President of SMA was the taking of the SMC Physician's Pledge by doctors completing housemanship. The event was a poignant one for me because my batch of NUS graduates was the first to take the pledge – in 1995. We have conserved the pledge-taking tradition, but have we, as seniors, preserved the spirit of the pledge amongst the new graduates?

But not everything should be conserved or preserved. I spent the first six years of my life in a Singapore Improvement Trust (Precursor of HDB) rental flat on Outram Hill behind the old Institute of Health. One could get a perfect view of these flats from the SingHealth Office on Level 7 of Singapore National Eye Centre, and I always took the opportunity to gaze nostalgically at them while waiting for the elevator to arrive, and this was so until the flats were torn down just two years ago. I could say I literally started out in life from these flats facing SGH, but I could not say with much intellectual honesty they should be conserved because the flats did not really have much architectural value (other than that they were the first public housing in Singapore to have lifts, I was told).

I left SGH after a meeting one day and saw metal structures being put up in the open field of what was previously Outram Park, opposite the Mortuary and the Alumni Medical Centre along Outram Road. So this was where the Chinatown hawkers would relocate to, I told myself, tying with what the porridge hawker had told me earlier. Curious for a closer look, I tried to stop my car nearer to the site but to no avail. I ended up driving up Pearl Bank. This was another nostalgic area for me because there used to be a HDB apartment block just behind what is now Outram MRT Station. I used to walk there quite a bit as a kid and there was also a good Cantonese eating house, *Loy Sum Juan* on the second floor, now relocated to Tiong Bahru Plaza. In fact, the 47<sup>th</sup> Council had dinner there before our first Council Meeting last month (I am a firm believer that the Council that eats together, stays together). I parked my car in a public carpark next to Pearl Bank Apartments and took a walk in the Pearl Bank City Park. This is one of the greatest kept secrets of Singapore downtown, a park on a hill right in the city, a quiet and picturesque hideaway. I have not been here since Outram Park was torn down, I think.

I was serendipitously pleased to find that from my vantage view in Pearl Bank Park, I was able to have a great view of Singapore National Eye Centre, National Heart Centre, SGH Block 7 and the old SGH Clock Tower (see photo). This was

not possible in the past because the high-rise structures of Outram Park had obstructed this view of SGH. As is the case in Medicine, sometimes certain things have to be removed so that one can have a better view of the big picture.

Beyond conservation and preservation, there is revival. Some things in Medicine seem to be gone forever, but that need not be so. Some things can be revived if they need to be. General Medicine and General Surgery seem to have gone the way of the dodo with sub-specialisation. But that need not be the case. They can be revived. There is also a revival of the concept of the family physician. (The previous paying of lip service to the idea of the family physician is not even survival, let alone revival.)

So we do not just preserve or conserve. We need to revive some worthwhile traditions of Medicine even though we may seem to be too far gone down the road for any return, like Macbeth:

**“I am in blood**

**Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.”**

**- Macbeth, Act 3 Scene 4**

Meanwhile, SGH staff can look forward to better food nearby and I will wait with bated breath until 18 months down the road when the old Chinatown Complex reopens. Will good old Chinatown Complex be preserved or just conserved – or even revived? And what needs to be removed for good? Only time will tell.

But we are not Macbeth and there is still hope. ■

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