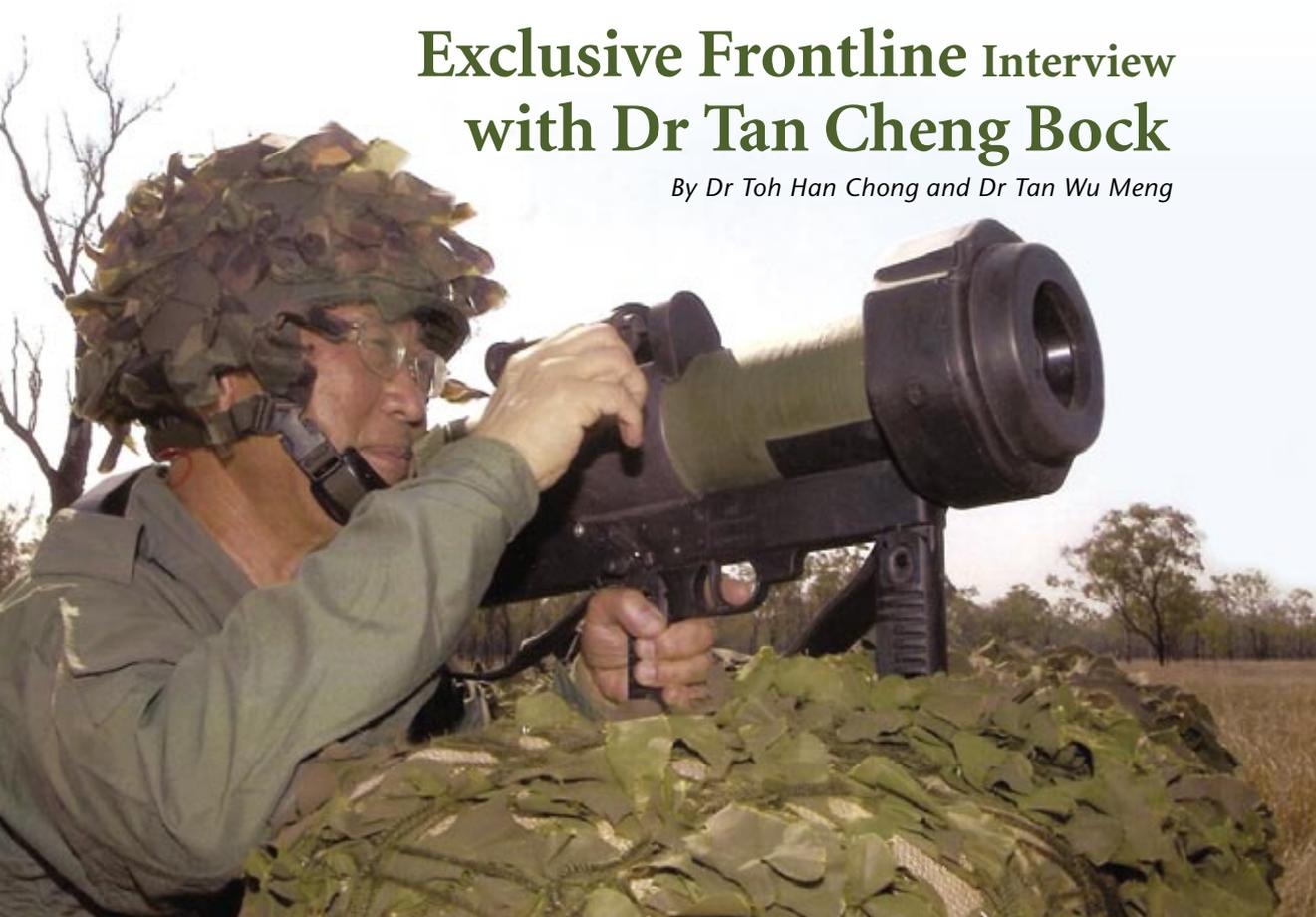


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# SMA NEWS

## Exclusive Frontline Interview with Dr Tan Cheng Bock

By Dr Toh Han Chong and Dr Tan Wu Meng



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**D**r Tan Cheng Bock obtained his medical degree from the then University of Singapore in 1968 and went on to become a medical practitioner. He joined the political scene in 1980 as a Member of Parliament (MP) and has served the Ayer Rajah Constituency for 25 years. In the 2001 general elections, Dr Tan topped the polls with a 88% win. He has since retired from active politics. During his term as a MP, he was tasked to plan, start and chair government organisations such as the Government Feedback Unit and various Town Councils. He also chaired several Government Parliamentary Committees (GPC) and sat on the Defence and Foreign Affairs unit.

In addition, he served 22 years as the Director of the provisional Mass Rapid Transport (PMRT), Director of MRT and Director of SMRT. He was also

a board member of the Land Transport Authority till September 2005.

Besides politics, Dr Tan is also active in the corporate sector, chairing Chuan Hup Holdings Limited and Dredging International Asia Pacific.

Though Dr Tan has since retired from the political scene, he continues to contribute to the community. He is the Chairman of Jurong Health Connect Advisory Committee and the Patron of the Handicap Welfare Organisation and Disabled People's Association. He also serves Tsao Foundation, a charitable organisation that provides primary healthcare to poor elderly Singaporeans. He has been appointed as President of Jurong Country Club on 8 June 2006.

During his free time, Dr Tan enjoys music, gardening, playing golf and rearing Japanese carps (koi).

The views and opinions expressed in all the articles are those of the authors. These are not the views of the Editorial Board nor the SMA Council unless specifically stated so in writing. The contents of the Newsletter are not to be printed in whole or in part without prior written approval of the Editor.

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Fax: 6224-7827  
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**THC:** I understand that you were part of the Committee in the early years of the Singapore Medical Association. How did you get involved?

**DR TAN:** It started with the Society of Private Practice (renamed Association of Private Medical Practitioners Singapore or APMPs in 1981). I remember it was Dr Colin Marcus who ran the Society then, and he asked me to join. He was very nice, a good chap, and a general practitioner too. The Society thought that SMA (the Society of Private Practice was an affiliate society of SMA) did not have a feel of young doctors and doctors in the private sector as SMA was run by the older and conventional “institutional” doctors. Though I was happy in my village practice and I did not want to be involved in medical politics, I eventually joined him in 1976 since it was related to private practice.

But I found out that the Society was always talking about what we should do for ourselves, and so I drifted to SMA in 1979. I have always looked at things on a national basis although I did not belong to any political parties then. I think that for those of us who grew up in that era (the post-World War II years), we have always thought of the country and what we should do for it.

**THC:** Were things different in SMA then?

**DR TAN:** One incident really changed our mindset of how SMA should be run. In 1978, there was a big fire on board the tanker *Spyros* at Jurong Shipyard which killed 76 people. We had no Burns Unit then. Somebody offered to set up one but his proposal was rejected by the Government. So we wrote an article and ‘fired’ (flamed) the government for rejecting the offer. That was in Dr Toh Chin Chye’s time, but now we are good friends!

I remembered the then-President of SMA, Dr Jimmy Choo, did not want to let the article go through to publication. (As an affiliate, the Society for Private Practitioners had to refer all their articles to SMA for approval.) I maintained that it was factual and that it expressed the opinions of the doctors. The choice of words by the Editor of the time, Dr Winston Lee, was quite strong, but I thought it was a fair article.

So there was a big fight between SMA and the Society, with a lot of heated arguments. At a meeting, Jimmy Choo said, “If you chaps do not listen to the SMA President, I am going to leave the meeting.” And I said, “You can leave.” We, the Society’s members then took over the SMA Council.

At the time, we were all too young to be President and did not know what to do; furthermore nobody would respect us in the Ministry. So we called Professor NK Yong and told him we needed a strong man like him to be President. He believed in us and saw that we were quite a genuine group of people. I remembered NK Yong did a good job but he was shocked that his students were pushing him to accept the post of President.

There were many issues then with the Ministry of Health because for one reason or another, its relationship was not so good with the medical doctors. And because we were all quite vocal people and not subservient, if we thought something was not good, we would tell them off.

Soon after that, I was pulled to join politics and I left SMA. But these young doctors kept coming to my house every time there were problems and issues, and my house became a sort of meeting place for them. It was a very, very exciting time.

**THC:** How did you enter Politics? I remember that at one time you were a little bit of a socialist.

**DR TAN:** I have always been a socialist at heart. I chose to practise in a rural village because I felt that it would give me an opportunity to make use of my medical training. I was originally offered a very lucrative job in town, and this doctor brought me to his clinic which was very posh, but I told him I was not cut out for coughs and colds, and that I wanted something practical. So I went to this rural village in Lim Chu Kang where people kept pigs and chickens – you could see them and the children running all over the place. It gave me a lot of happiness because I had dreamt of practising medicine since I was a child. These patients had not much but I did not care. I was not thinking of money – I was thinking of helping them. I charged little in the way of fees and worked like mad. But I enjoyed my practice and that is the most important thing. They paid me in kind like chicken, eggs, durians and so on.

In those days, the villagers were not sure about government policies – in fact they used to be chased by the government officials. I would be there to tell the officials to be more understanding because these farmers were ignorant. I also wrote letters to the government departments for the villagers. I enjoyed helping them. These engagements with government officials and helping the villagers to meet their needs must have triggered a political response in me to want to be more involved in politics. I was hoping I could do more inside the political system rather than outside.

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Even today, although I have moved to a new HDB practice, these villagers are still with me. Despite having been asked to resettle in Punggol and other places, a lot of them come back to see me and my clinic has become a meeting place for all these old friends.

I do not know whether our newer doctors will understand it but I had the happiest moments of my life working in Lim Chu Kang. The kampong spirit is fantastic. When the school roof broke down, they called me and I paid for it. Money never caught my attention but I am quite lucky in the sense that I never starved. I may not have been very rich but I felt that I had more than sufficient.

I practised medicine in a very interesting way. I even had home care management. Once I got a specialist friend, Dr William Chan, to go with me to Lim Chu Kang to see a breathless patient who had refused to go to the hospital. We brought oxygen and drips and treated him in his house. We did this for years. The family was quite large and some of them were quite intelligent; we taught them to be nursing aides, so they did not have to spend so much money. You just have to improvise all these in those days. And the fellow survived for so long. Now his great-great-grandchildren are with me as patients.

**THC:** If you have to give advice to young GPs today, given the world has changed so much, what are some of the things that you would advise them on?

**DR TAN:** I think, you first – this is very important – have to enjoy your practice and think of your patients. If you go in just wanting to make money, you are going to be very disappointed. But having said that, I think money will come if you do a good practice. Once word goes around that you are a reasonably good doctor, the patients will come. And be honest with them. If you cannot treat them, tell them you cannot treat them. Do not try to over-service them. When there is rapport, you do not have to be afraid of the patient running away. I am never afraid of that. I have sent my poor patients to polyclinics. But they still come back and see me for

other things, and even bring their children. When a new patient comes, do not be afraid to ask about his economic situation. I always give patients alternatives and work out the costs. At the end of the day, if you are very honest with them, they will still come back to you.

And do not worry if one or two poor patients cannot pay you. I always tell my patients, “If you can’t pay me now, never mind. Maybe you can pay me another day.” There was this young asthmatic boy who was very sick but his parents could not afford treatment. When they came to see me, the father left his wedding ring on my table, saying, “This is all I have.” I scolded him and told him that if the boy is sick, he must see me, and money is the least important thing. So I treated this boy, I think, for 10 years, and I did not charge the father. In that time, we became good friends. Then one day, after I had left Lim Chu Kang, there was a knock on my clinic door and this young boy turned up. He was better now, and was going to the United States to study. He gave me this big hamper, and said to me, “My mother said I have

to give you this to pay for all the medicine that you have given me for so many years.” That was the first hamper I accepted as a Member of Parliament – normally, I will not accept the gift. But I accepted it because it was such a nice gesture. Things like this cheered me up and made my day.

**THC:** But do people take advantage of your kindness?

**DR TAN:** Very rarely. My old patients never take advantage because they know they have to come back and see me one day. So there is no point in cheating me. Anyway, how much can they cheat me? My fees are not high.

But I realise that nowadays, the cost of setting up a practice is very high. So if you ask me, you should not have solo practices like me. It is an old-fashioned way of running a GP clinic. Young doctors, if possible, should form group practices. I made a proposal to the Government many years ago



that they should set up clinic complexes in housing estates, run by private practitioners.

**THC:** Something like a polyclinic?

**DR TAN:** Yes, like a polyclinic. These GPs would pay a rent and have their fair share of earnings, but the idea behind having a centre is that it leaves room for growth and improvement. For example, you can have your laboratory equipment, and if you are big enough, you can even have a simple x-ray machine or provide an ultrasound scanner. You can also invite specialists to come and see certain patients. You can have peer review which is very important, so there is also self-regulation. You must not be afraid to share and learn from each other. For example, the way I manage asthmatic patients might be old-fashioned but my patients tell me that the modern stuff does not work, so I must give the old treatment. If you have clinic complexes like this, can you imagine how interesting your practice will be? You can also go on holidays and not have to worry about getting a locum.

**THC:** But pricing-wise, they cannot compete with polyclinics. For example, can your drugs be purchased at the same rates as polyclinics?

**DR TAN:** It cannot be the same. But if we buy in bulk, we can still compete with the polyclinics. It might still be a bit more expensive but I think you can provide medical care which is more personalised. Currently there are so many individual clinics out there, so they tend to compete against each other. In those circumstances, you may be tempted to compromise your medicine or do funny things, neither of which is very nice. As a doctor, you must uphold your standards.

Above all, clinic complexes save a lot of labour. You see, every clinic will have three or four nurses. For my very small practice in Jurong West, which I share with another doctor, I only do mornings and afternoons – I do not work Sundays – but I still need to hire three nurses. Other clinics will also have to hire similar numbers or even more nurses. So if we add up all these labour force of a few clinics, it can be quite a substantial number. I think a complex will reduce this workforce and free some of these people for our other industries.

**THC:** But now there are plans to actually move more primary care to GPs.

**DR TAN:** Yes, I am involved with it now. Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan asked me to help the committee on the advisory board to manage chronic

illnesses. I will be Chairman of the Jurong Medical Centre, where I will try to work on my idea of a clinic complex. I am also going back to my pet subject: the rendering of home care. All this is going to take up a lot of my time, but it is okay because I enjoy it and it is going to benefit the whole country. And if it is really successful, we will be the first country in the world to manage chronic disease well. It will be really great and I can see that there is hope.

**THC:** What are some of your best memories in politics?

**DR TAN:** Winning over the government to allow free parking on Sundays and public holidays. This was to promote better social interaction. I was quite disturbed when we had paid parking during weekends. Many Singaporeans said that when they were visiting parents or friends, they could not stay longer because they had to pay for parking. So I fought for free parking on Sundays and public holidays to promote better social interaction. And residents who remember me will come and thank me.

The other memorable issue is the use of CPF for education. I still get many people along the road sometimes – young boys and girls I have never met – who thank me because they could go to university even though their parents had no money.

Another issue that I took up was foreign talent. I went to the House and spoke against promoting foreign talents into the country during the economic recession, but rather to slow down and think of our fellow Singaporeans. Initially, it was the man-on-the-street who lost their jobs because of the foreign workers' policy. Then when the recession sank in, I found that very young people like yourselves and the executives were beginning to lose their jobs too, even as the government was calling for more foreign talent to be brought in. I was not against getting foreign talent, but I felt that we should slow down the call for foreign talent during the recession, and to think of Singaporeans first. That was a very loaded statement and it upset many front bench politicians in the House especially the then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. This is what he said: "So, when I heard Dr Tan Cheng Bock, I decided I would stand up and tell him he's wrong... you have to decide whether you think he knows more or I know more. You have to decide whether he will give you the answer to Singapore's future – or that I am likely to give you the better road to the future."

You see, in politics, your choice of words is very important. My statement was "Think of Singaporeans first *during the recession*" but it

was taken out of context and read as “Think of Singaporeans first”.

**THC:** Do you think there is a need for real opposition?

**DR TAN:** Yes. I strongly believe there should be an opposition team in the House. From the way it is going, I can see more opposition coming up at the next General Elections. It is a wave of change that Singaporeans want in the coming years. You cannot stop this wave but it is a good thing for Singapore. We should not be afraid. As leaders, we should be confident enough to respond to the opposition wave. We are dealing with an electorate that is getting more educated: currently about 65% of our Primary One cohort is going to have tertiary education, while the rest will have secondary education. Those are big numbers. Are you going to tell me that a simple argument is going to win them over? No. Singaporeans have learned to accept one important value: fairness. And if they think something is not fair, they will get upset. In fact, I am proud that Singaporeans are calling for fairness. So this is it: the trend is changing and you can see the wave coming. But I think a few political parties will eventually drop out, especially the lousy ones.

**THC:** How about Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs)? Can they play the role of the opposition MPs like what one Minister said?

**DR TAN:** My answer is a big NO. NMPs cannot be opposition MPs. If you look at the comments made by NMPs in the house, many are more PAP than the PAP MPs. I have never supported this scheme and I voted against this scheme. In fact the NMP scheme should be reviewed. Their presence has very little value and Singaporeans should not accept this sort of political voice.

**THC:** How about the future politicians? Any advice?

**DR TAN:** I think the future politician in Singapore must have some knowledge of Economics. An MP’s work, apart from parliamentary sittings, meet-the-people’s sessions, and community work, also involve running community development councils and town councils. Running town councils involve financial understanding and Economics. Even as a doctor, you must read a little about Economics and understand its workings, as well as a bit of Finance. If you know how money moves, you will be able to manage things. I am fortunate since I already help run a company. But as students, we were never taught how to price medicine if we ran our own

practices. So I think there should be a module called the Economics of Medical Practice so doctors will be better equipped.

**THC:** SARS had a huge impact on Singapore. Can you share with us some memories from that time?

**DR TAN:** SARS was really scary. I saw this patient who had a very high fever. My nurse called him twice at home to check if his fever had gone down – it did the second time, and that was the last we heard of him. But his fever must have gone up again because he landed in Tan Tock Seng Hospital where he died. When the Ministry informed me that my patient had died from SARS, everybody panicked. Straightaway, I realised the danger because I was already exposed. I left my clinic and isolated myself in my house. Fortunately, my son was studying in England and so I used his vacant room for the isolation. I had developed a fever too, but I think it was more from anxiety!

As I had only my computer with me, and so much free time, I started to read about SARS. I was also receiving messages and information from friends, SMA, Academy of Medicine and the College. I realised that fever was a common feature and I suggested that we should have temperature screening centres, isolating those with fever, and only sending them home once clear of fever.

**THC:** So you shut your clinic for a few weeks?

**DR TAN:** No, I did not. I myself left. But all the patients seen within that period were quarantined. We always keep a list of all the patients who see us so we managed to trace all of them. It was a scary time for us, being in the frontline. Our colleagues had died and when I saw this patient, my immediate reaction was that this was community spread, and if SARS could spread like wildfire, we would all be finished.

**THC:** GPs were fearful at that time. Was it because there was not enough communication coming down from the top?

**DR TAN:** To be fair, I think the Ministry’s initial response was a bit slow as they were also caught off guard. But I think the lesson from SARS is quite well learnt already and I hope that we will be able to better manage future outbreaks of infectious diseases. When we were in medical school, infectious diseases were featured very strongly, and I could diagnose TB and typhoid very easily. Now that infectious diseases are coming back, we have to revisit some of the things we had done before.

**TWM:** What would you say are the big differences in Singapore politics compared to when you started politics till now?

**DR TAN:** I think when I first started, Singaporeans were very, very grateful whenever we gave them something. That is because they did not have much in those days, and were just beginning to move into newer HDB flats. For example, my residents in Lim Chu Kang were all being relocated, and for them, having running water and electricity was a far cry from what they had in their attap huts in Lim Chu Kang. They had stand pipes and wells for water supply. I remembered many of my patients fell into the village well, and at my old clinic you had to walk some distance to go to the outdoor toilet, which was dirty and terrible. So the residents were very happy to be given a three- or four-room flat, and you could see the joy in their faces. Back then, they had very basic needs and education was also not so high.

At the time, an MP was literally worshipped by the ground, and a doctor MP was even better because they worshipped the doctor as well! So I could get things moving very, very fast. And when you helped them, they were all so grateful. They came to see you for very simple things, like a better flat, education and jobs, which were also quite scarce then.

But the resettlement exercise also affected some old people badly. These were all not documented, but I can tell you some of them jumped from their flats, and others went into depression, because they did not know how to live in the new environment and they were feeling lost.

Today it is very different, especially with higher education. The respect for an MP is not as strong. People want more things. For example, they do not just want any five-room flat, they are also concerned about the quality of the flat. They come and complain to me about little things that did not bother people in the past.

With all these changing trends and the electorate having higher expectations, I think politics is going to be very different. In the past, things were quite simple. Now, MPs have got to be more knowledgeable because the electorate can come and talk to you about the global economy. If you are blur, how are you going to talk to them as an MP? They expect their MPs to be very knowledgeable. And in the old days, if you drove a big Jaguar into your constituency, you lost votes. Now, if you drive a small car, people think this MP has no weight!

So you can see the changing trends, and over the years, all these have affected the voting. And it will continue to be so. Look at the HDB flats now and those in my time – they are worlds apart and better than the private housing in many places.

**TWM:** There is a stereotype that Singaporeans are very inward looking and not very aware of what happens outside. Do you think we are aware enough of the global outlook and its challenges for Singapore?

**DR TAN:** It is our responsibility, you see. As a responsible Government, it would be wise to instill in Singaporeans the importance of having a global outlook and how global issues impact Singapore. We have to show you what is happening in the world. The Ministers also give speeches to get Singaporeans interested in not just local issues but all those bigger issues in the wider world. I like to believe that Singaporeans now are more widely read. In many other countries, you get only local news and hardly an in-depth analysis of world events.

If you travel a lot – and I do – and you talk to people, or even their Parliamentarians, you would be quite surprised at their ignorance of world events. But in Singapore, we are so exposed. For example, our TV6 is a very good channel, and we have CNN and CNBC. In fact, we are overloaded by news now. So when Singaporeans tune in to all these channels, they will naturally have very globalised outlooks, but this may still be mainly among those who are tertiary educated, and those who want to do more.

We also have to go beyond our shores. It can be quite difficult, if you have family here and they do not want you to travel. But that is the price we pay. You cannot live alone in isolation in the neighbourhood and you should have a thorough knowledge of your surrounding countries, like Malaysia and Indonesia and understand how they do things.

**TWM:** Some commentators would say that a lot of the social contract in Singapore has been founded on economic performance. Of the changes that are needed in future, do you think part of it is to win hearts rather than just minds?

**DR TAN:** Our economic performance has largely been successful in developing and gelling the nation. The government is aware that is not enough and winning hearts will be more important in the long haul. Definitely we must win the hearts of Singaporeans. But they must also understand the structural economic change expected. That rice bowl is no longer so solid. There is now this sense of

insecurity because of year-to-year contracts and jobs are now very, very unpredictable. Companies also do not keep people who are not very good. Now it is all based on economy.

And here is the danger. With all these structural changes, some young Singaporeans who are English-educated with better qualifications will find jobs in other countries. So if you want them to stay, you must create that environment and the kind of jobs to give them a better feel of where Singapore is headed. We are now bringing in so many different industries and creating different jobs which we previously would have had to go to other places to see. For example, banking is no longer only about an institution that will lend

you money.

Today there are financial instruments such as derivatives trading. Take the Integrated Resorts (IR). In the process of bringing them here, we hope to attract foreign investment and that will create more jobs for our younger people. IR is only one thing, and we are going to develop more. In the past, we have missed out on things because we were trying to protect Singaporeans. So now, we try to bring in anything that is very interesting. Even Crazy Horse is here now.

**THC:** But it is obviously managed in a very controlled and moderate way. It is not like going to Bangkok.

**DR TAN:** That (Bangkok) is too extreme but we have to create an ambience that our young people can relate to, so that when they go on temporary overseas stints and start to compare Singapore against other countries, they will think that we are still not so bad and they will still return. When my children went overseas to study, I also thought that I might lose them. But the lure to come back was stronger than staying in England.

When I was in China accompanying then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong – I think it was

1987 – I was in the meeting with Zhao Ziyang, then Vice-Premier, I asked him if he was afraid that so many Chinese have gone overseas and might not return. He said some would not return but they would still let them go. He explained that they would raise China to such a level that people would want to come back. This was also what Deng Xiaoping said. And they were all visionaries. When I heard that, I felt comforted. So our strategy must be to recreate a Singapore that Singaporeans would feel proud of. The moment you feel proud to be a Singaporean, you would want to come back. So I always encourage young people to go overseas because you observe and learn things and when you come back, your roots in Singapore, I hope, will be stronger.



**THC:** A question on education and merit. I think we are slowly moving away from the fact that examination grades alone define a person?

**DR TAN:** I failed First Pro (the First Professional exams of medical school), you know, because I was busy with the Students' Union, and never studied. I was very good at passing the first exam and the last exam, but in between, I failed badly. That did not frighten me – I knew if I put my heart and soul into the subject, I could do well. But the trouble is

that competing needs elsewhere were too strong. Failing my First Professional exams was the worse part of my medical life and I thought I would get kicked out of medical school. So I worked very hard to pass. You see, a little failure is not bad. I find that Singaporeans are afraid of failure. Maybe because I was not afraid of failing my exams, I toughened up. So we must move out of our comfort zone and not be afraid to do things that are out of the ordinary.

But when you do the thing and you do it well, there is a lot of joy. That is my philosophy.

**THC:** Thank you for granting us this interview. ■