

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, SMA President

End of Year, New Year, Polar Bear

Chinese New Year is again around the corner, and I would like to offer all of you my best wishes for the New Year.

22 December 2006. Winter Solstice. I did not expect to receive a private letter as the year was about to come to an end. On this day, the rain was relentless and the winds gusty, and they brought back sad and depressing memories and the feeling of frustrating helplessness.

I know the author of this letter in more ways than one: he was firstly my tutor in medical school, and secondly, he was my boss shortly after I graduated. We no longer work in the same hospital now and I do not get to meet him often. Quite some time ago, he was an important office holder in SMA.

This abovementioned senior has already reached the pinnacle of the medical profession a few years ago as he held a top position in a hospital here. It was not exaggerating to attach to him titles such as “opinion leader”, “doyen” and so on.

He stepped down from his post recently. And the way he stepped down did not look too natural. Times are different, and it is no longer appropriate to frame a person as Qin Hui did in the Song Dynasty when he framed the patriot general Yue Fei. Perhaps society is more civilised now: the current manoeuvres are more dexterous and subtle. The powers above simply did not renew his then appointment in an almost nonchalant manner, and in addition, created a ‘leisure’ appointment for him to fill. It would appear that he was raised to a very high ‘altar position’, but in actual fact, he was stripped of all his executive powers. Such an empty position expectedly attracted much talk and murmurs from the ground. Sometimes, NOT conducting an open execution can be more cruel than conducting one. A great leader of the medical profession in our times was thus reduced in an instant to appear like King Xiang Yu¹ at Lake Wu. His juniors such as us could not help but feel sorry for him.

This senior wrote his letter to me after reading my President's Column “Control” which was published in the 2006 November issue of the *SMA News*. In that article, I expressed my opinion of what I thought were the differences between the concepts of management and leadership. This senior is

usually a soft-spoken man of few words but on this occasion he wrote a relatively long letter to me. I quote here the concluding paragraph of his letter:

“My response is rather philosophical. I took up Medicine not for positions. I am nevertheless, grateful and appreciative of any opportunity to create value for our colleagues in Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health. I have greater satisfaction in being able to be a doctor and providing care to the patients. Certainly, I would be even happier if I am empowered to improve the care for them. You are still in that position. Treasure it and do not throw it away. If necessary, fight a quiet battle for it and the rest of us.”

What has he gotten in return for decades of service? I could subtly feel his pathos although the letter did not expressly say so: having to silently bear the anguish of being deserted by his boss – they have known each other for years and this boss also happened to have undergone training with him together under the same teacher in ages past. Even so, he remained honorable and did not criticise his senior/boss, and even tried to proffer an explanation: perhaps the senior/boss was also in a precarious position and could hardly save himself, let alone others. In the letter, he lamented the fact that several other very senior doctors of his vintage also had to step down recently. And then he described what I had already foreseen three years ago: an outsider intercalating between this senior and his boss and sowing discord between the two men. This outsider then behaved like Prime Minister Cao Cao², who held the Han Emperor hostage while he ruled over all the nobles and officials by issuing orders and decrees in the Han Emperor's name. The outsider then proceeded to remove those who were not agreeable with the outsider. The end result was that the wrong people were put in control of an organisation now in a “misaligned environment”.

31 December 2006. New Year's Eve. A friend of mine who is a Senior Consultant in a surgical discipline in the same hospital as the abovementioned senior SMS-ed me his New Year wishes. The SMS ended with this curt sentence: “I am leaving next year.”

I replied: “So next year make lots of money!”



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“I have to leave.”

“Why?”

“Even polar bears are being chased out. It’s better to leave earlier than later, haha.”

“Best of luck to you in 2007 too,” I concluded.

This extroverted surgeon friend of mine is a real joker and is prone to making irreverent and politically incorrect jokes. But on this day, I found his polar bear analogy rather appropriate.

As the old Chinese saying goes: “We can learn from history what will wax and wane, and we can also learn what is rewarding or fruitless from the lives of other people.”

In this day and age, one must work hard to plan for one’s graceful exit.

9 January 2007. On this day, there was a drizzle and mild breeze that brought coolness to all around when I met this senior again. We grinned momentarily to each other as we met. Between a life of clear conscience and dignity at one end and survival in the form of a cowered existence at the other, we both knew which choice we would make. There was no need to say anything because the resonance was not to be found in words.

Afternote:

It is never quite possible to translate a Chinese article into English with perfect fidelity, whether based on notions of literal or dynamic equivalence. This is more so given my inadequate grasp of either language as well as the fact that my original Chinese article contained several historical and classical references as well as colloquialisms. I ask for your forbearance for this clumsy effort on my part in translating the original article into English. ■

Dr Wong Chiang Yin
31 January 2007

- 1 *Xiang Yu was the King of Chu who had his army wiped out by Liu Bang in 202 BC. Xiang Yu committed suicide at 30 years of age by slitting his throat at Lake Wu and Liu Bang went on to found the Han Dynasty.*
- 2 *Cao Cao was the notoriously disloyal Prime Minister of the Han Dynasty. The Han Dynasty officially ended when his descendents later forced the last Han Emperor to abdicate, and they themselves became the rulers of the Wei Dynasty during the latter half of the Three Kingdoms Period.*