
48. Remember A Great Malaysian - Dr Wu Lien Teh (1879 – 1960)

Peter Lim



I first came across, by sheer chance, the name of Dr Wu Lien-teh and his autobiography *Dr Wu Lien – The Plague Fighter* at a Sydney library in 1995. There was a book-sale and his autobiography was among those on the wooden-tray. I lost no time to grab it in case another hand would move faster than mine. It was a breathtaking moment. I have been an avid collector of books since the early 60's after leaving university and this was like a gift all waiting for me. The cost? S2!

I could hardly hold back my joy and counted this a moment not to be forgotten. In my eagerness, I finished reading it in a few days. I later read that Tun Dato Seri (Dr) Haji Hamdan bin Sheik Tahir, Governor of Penang, a close friend of Dr Wu, had a signed copy of the autobiography which he 'always treasured.....as one of the most valuable gifts in my personal library. Dr Wu has remained one of the most respected scholars I have ever known...'. Tun Hamdan wrote the above as Foreword in *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh, Plague Fighter* by Dr Wu Yu-lin, daughter of Dr Wu.

In the past, few Malaysians seemed to be aware of the existence of this iconic man who, no doubt, would go down the country's history and be remembered as one of the great sons of the soil. Fortunately, this has since changed as much had since been written on Dr Wu and his achievements and, especially, with the setting of the Wu-Lien-teh Society in Penang, with Datuk Dr Anwar Fazal as President.

Who was Dr Wu Lien-teh and what was the great legacy that he left behind?

His father, a goldsmith, came from Taishan, China. Wu studied at the prestigious Penang Free School. He enrolled in Cambridge University as a medical student in 1896 after winning the Queen's Scholarship. He was only 17 then. He was the first Malaysian to graduate in medicine from the university and later worked on microbiology under Sir Ronald Ross, a Nobel laureate. He then proceeded to the Pasteur Institute, Paris, to do research on malaria and tetanus. His distinguished scholarship was evident from being the first Chinese to have his work published in *Lancet*.

Dr Wu returned to the then Malaya in 1903 aged 24 and was welcomed into high circles. He was warmly commended by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister, Tun Tan Cheng Lock among other leaders and dignitaries.

Meanwhile, he worked at the Institute of Medical Research, Malaya. Not long after, he went into private practice in Penang. This was the time when he waged war against opium distribution and founded the Anti-Opium Association in Penang.

Dr Wu was later invited to visit China. In the autumn of 1910, news reached Peking that a deadly disease had taken place in the Chinese sector of Harbin in northern Manchuria—this turned out to be the pneumonic plague. In December 1910, the Chinese Government instructed Dr Wu to visit the plague-affected areas. His relentless and selfless efforts helped bring the plague to an end. That earned him the deserved title of The Plague Fighter.

It was evident that the time had come for China to adopt Western medical methods. In 1915, the Chinese Government set up the National Medical Association to promote Western medicine in China where Dr Wu served as president from 1916—1920. This has turned out to be the largest in the world.

Dr Wu emerged to be a world figure in medical research. Altogether, he published over 92 papers including 31 on the subject of plague, apart from numerous ones on other infectious diseases, public health, narcotics and medical history. He was the co-author of the massive *History of Chinese Medicine* which was published in China in 1932.

For his contributions, he was conferred honorary doctorates by Peking University, Hong Kong University and Tokyo University.

Dr Wu helped set up twenty hospitals in China during those years when he worked in the country.

Due to the invasion of China by Japan in 1937, he returned to Malaya. He was a generous philanthropist and played a significant medical, literary and social role in the life of the nation.

Dr Wu was nominated for the Nobel Prize in the mid-30's and was the first Chinese to be nominated for such.

His autobiography was published in 1959 and he died a year later.

Dr Wu's foresight, integrity, humility, humanity, indomitable spirit and his belief in the virtue of hard work are evident from the following words that he wrote in Shanghai in 1937:

‘For although much has been accomplished (in China), still more has to be done, and I am always on the lookout for colleagues who do not mind hard tasks, long hours, a simple life and severe training. For I verily believe that China, with her many thousand years of history, illustrious peasants and brilliant thinkers and artistic scholars, as well as inherent democratic spirit, can easily get into line with modern nations. But in order to achieve the quickest and most permanent results in the most economical way, her leaders should absorb the best that the West can offer, such as seriousness of purpose, service to others and self, a scientific temperament, rigid scruples in management of business undertakings, attention to detail and a will to learn from outsiders even at the height of success...’.

Dr Wu is a true representation of the best that could be drawn from a human being through determination, hard work, integrity and selflessness. I've never forgotten the following words which I read when I was 16 and which I faithfully wrote in a school exercise book:

‘There is no greatness without discipline, no discipline without sacrifice’.

How the life of this great man befits the statement by Sir Winston Churchill:

‘The price of greatness is responsibility’.

Coda

‘Dr Wu's work is celebrated and documented by his family and historians from the Dr. Wu Lien Teh Society in Penang.

Set up in 2013, it promotes and support activities that advance the legacy of Dr Wu Lien-teh and ensure credible documentation pertaining to his life. Dr Wu's great grand niece, Alison Chong works on documentation and building the Wu family tree’ (statement in social media).

I wrote to Alison Chong, great grand-niece of Dr Wu Lien-teh in February 2017 attaching the following piece of music dedicated to him.

The Manchurian Days of Dr Wu Lien Teh

A Remembrance

M.S. Lim

♩ = 65

Flute

9

Fl.

18

Fl.

27

Fl.

Photo credit: The original uploader was Richard Arthur Norton at English Wikipedia.