

DR WU LIEN-TEH, born in Penang, Straits Settlement ("Nanyang") on 10 March, 1879, attended Penang Free School (as Gnoh Lean Tuck) for nearly 10 years then competed in Singapore for and won the acclaimed Queen's Scholarship (1896) to become the first Chinese medical student at Cambridge Emmanuel College ("Tuck" to them). He won most of the available book prizes and scholarships there till graduation in 1902 then pursued his interest in Bacteriology in Germany (Halle) and Paris (Institut Pasteur).

His Cantonese father was from Taishan and his mother a second generation Hakka in Penang. Dr Lim Boon-Keng from Singapore, Queen's Scholar of 1887, was attributed to have initiated him into devoting time to social service, a passion he held deep in his life. His first wife, Ruth, was the sister of Dr Lim's wife.

Upon "return to the East", after a year in the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur, he did 3 run-of-the-mill years as a doctor in Penang, punctuated by his deep compassion for the opium problem, where he put money and effort into rehabilitation of addicts. In 1908, he enthusiastically accepted the then Grand Councilor Yuan Shih-kai's offer to be Vice-Director of the Imperial Army Medical College in Tianjin, China. In 1910, he was sent to Manchuria, in harsh winter, to fight the terrifying pneumonic plague which then threatened the world. Within a short 4 months and a death toll limited to 60,000, he brought the dreaded, incurable disease under control with diligent scientific documentation that was to bring him international fame. It was the beginning of near 30 years of devoted service to China and humanity. Most notably were his invention of the "Wu mask" (which healthcare workers now use widely), the cremation of dead bodies and quarantine measures, which was to be the turning point in plague eradication.

On 3 April 1911, he convened and chaired the first international scientific plague meeting at Mukden (now Shenyang) and, in the following year, established the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service. Despite immense difficulties, he began to modernize China's medical services and education, founding the Harbin and Beijing Medical Universities and building some 20 modern public hospitals, laboratories and research institutions, including the Beijing Central Hospital. He also founded the China Medical Association, established the first national quarantine service and embarked on arduous work for the League of Nations (being by then a world authority on plague).

In 1937, renewed hostilities saw the Japanese occupying Tientsin and Peking and shelling Woosung Quarantine Hospital. Dr Wu's own villa was bombed and gutted. He took his family back to Malaya and to then set up a clinic in Ipoh. After the war, he renewed many friendships in China, actively practiced medicine and compiling works of art, philosophy, the sciences, history and culture (the "Wu Lien Teh Collection", now at the Central and Medical Libraries of the National University of Singapore). The Art Museum, University of Malaya in Singapore, received part of his collection of priceless ancient Chinese paintings by old masters and an official imperial seal of Emperor Chia Ching. He often rendered free medical service and also tirelessly collected donations to start the Perak Library in Ipoh, a free lending library.

In 1950, he wrote his long and engaging 660-page autobiography, taking him 7+ years. He then returned to retire in Penang in his new home at Chor Sin Kheng Road, Ayer Itam but barely a week of return, he succumbed to a stroke on 21 Jan 1960 after a 2 day illness. Penang Free School scouts escorted his hearse for cremation at Batu Gantong, which became his final resting place. The world lost a legendary figure, one to whom it is far more indebted than it knows.

Dr Alex K H Ooi, 14 April 2011.

Sources: Short Autobiography dated "Shanghai, Jan. 1931". Memories of Dr Wu Lien-Teh, Plague Fighter by Wu Yu-Lin

Visiting Harbin on 4 April 2011 to set the stage for an event from 18 to 20 January 2013 at Harbin for friends to learn more of the life and work of Dr Wu and its implications in daily living and work, Ong Lay Hong, Loke Gim Tay and myself were greatly impressed by the sincerity of the prime-mover, Prof Fu, and leaders of Harbin Medical University. We also attended the 100th anniversary (of 3 April 1911 conference) seminar at Beijing Medical University.