

CHAPTER

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# Wu Lien-Teh

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PLAGUE FIGHTER EXTRAORDINAIRE




By **Alison Chong**

**M**y great-grand uncle Dr Wu Lien-Teh was a doctor very much ahead of his time.

He was a doctor whom Malaysians and Singaporeans forgot until SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) surfaced in Asia in 2003. The world owed him a debt for the research work and papers he had written during his illustrious medical career of 63 years in medicine, on pneumonic plague and public health. He invented the “Wu mask”, started the trend for the cremation of dead bodies and probably initiated the largest cremation in history in 1911 and introduced quarantine measures in plague eradication protocol.

For his work on pneumonic plague he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1935 and I believe he still holds the record for being the only medical doctor from the Straits Settlements and the first to be so nominated.

MediaCorp Singapore produced a



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three-hour documentary titled *Plague Fighter Dr Wu Lien-Teh*, which was screened on Channel NewsAsia in April 2008. This was to commemorate the fifth anniversary of SARS, to remember those who lost their lives in the frontline when SARS broke out in Asia.

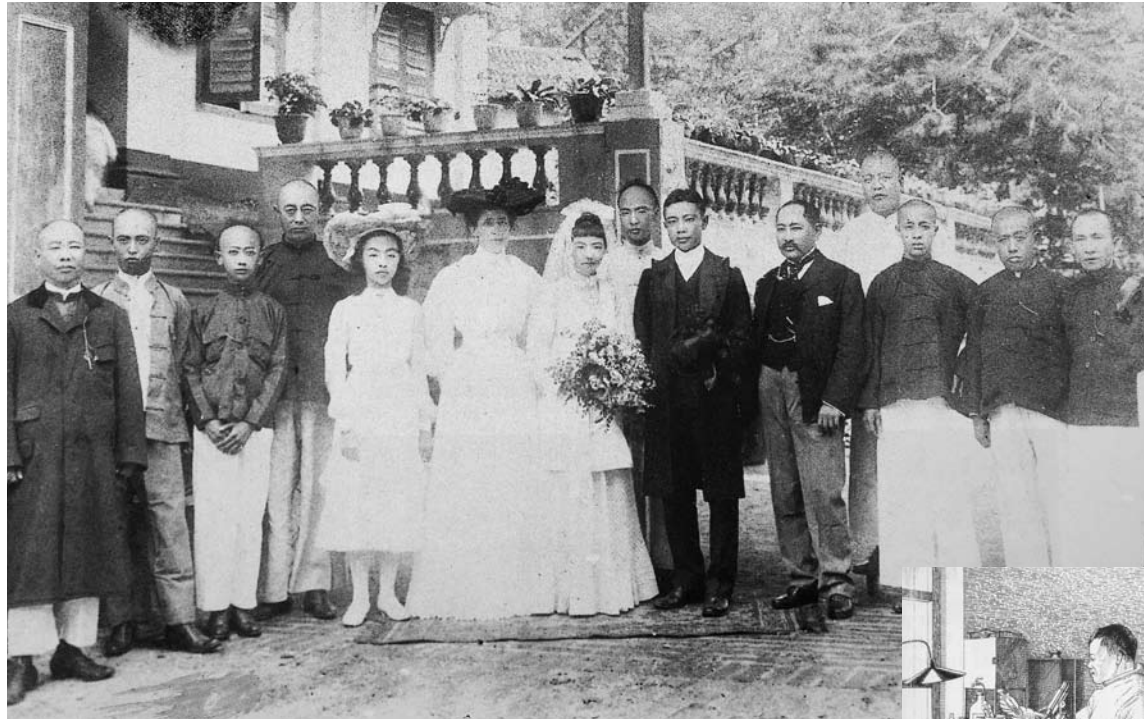
The film was based on Dr Wu’s plague work in Manchuria on whom medical professionals in both Singapore and China, who were combatting SARs fell back on, using his papers to guide them in tackling SARS.

The documentary rediscovered Dr Wu’s work in tackling the Manchurian Plague of 1910, which was far worse than SARS, where in four months 60,000 people lost their lives in this terrifying pneumonic plague which had then threatened the world.

#### EARLY LIFE

Dr Wu was a Penang Free School student from primary through secondary levels, beginning in 1886 till 1896 when he left for Emmanuel College, Cambridge University. He was also School Captain (Head Prefect). He was then known as Gnoh Lean Tuck, his dialect name.

Dr Wu won the Queen’s Scholarship twice but was considered too young at the age of 16 to go to England on his first success in 1895. He tried again in 1896 and was the only successful candidate. His parents were reluctant to permit him to go to England. However, on the persuasion of my great grandfather Ng Lean Heng, his

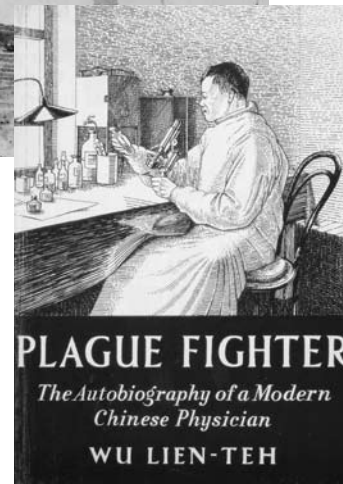


**Dr Wu marries Ms Huang Shu-chiung on 9 July 1905 in Singapore. Right: Dr Wu's autobiography.**

second elder brother, he was able to take up the scholarship at 17 years of age and to sail for England in August 1896 to be the first Straits Chinese to enter Cambridge University.

He had to travel from Penang to Singapore to sit for the Queen's Scholarship exams and he stayed at Telok Ayer Street while he was preparing for the exams over seven to 10 days.

On his way back from his studies in England, France and Germany, his ship docked in Singapore in 1903. He stayed with Dr Lim Boon Keng, another Queen's Scholar (1887). It was during this visit that he met his future wife Ruth Huang, who was the younger sister of Dr Lim's wife.



Dr Wu faced competition in the romance stakes from lawyer Sir Song Ong-Siang, a Queen's Scholar 10 years his senior and Tan Boo Liat, a descendant of Tan Tock Seng, but Ruth decided to share her life with Dr Wu and they eventually married on 9 July 1905 at the American Methodist Church, Singapore. Ruth Huang was an accomplished writer and she was the first Chinese woman to publish in English.

## **MAKING SOCIAL SERVICE HIS CALLING**

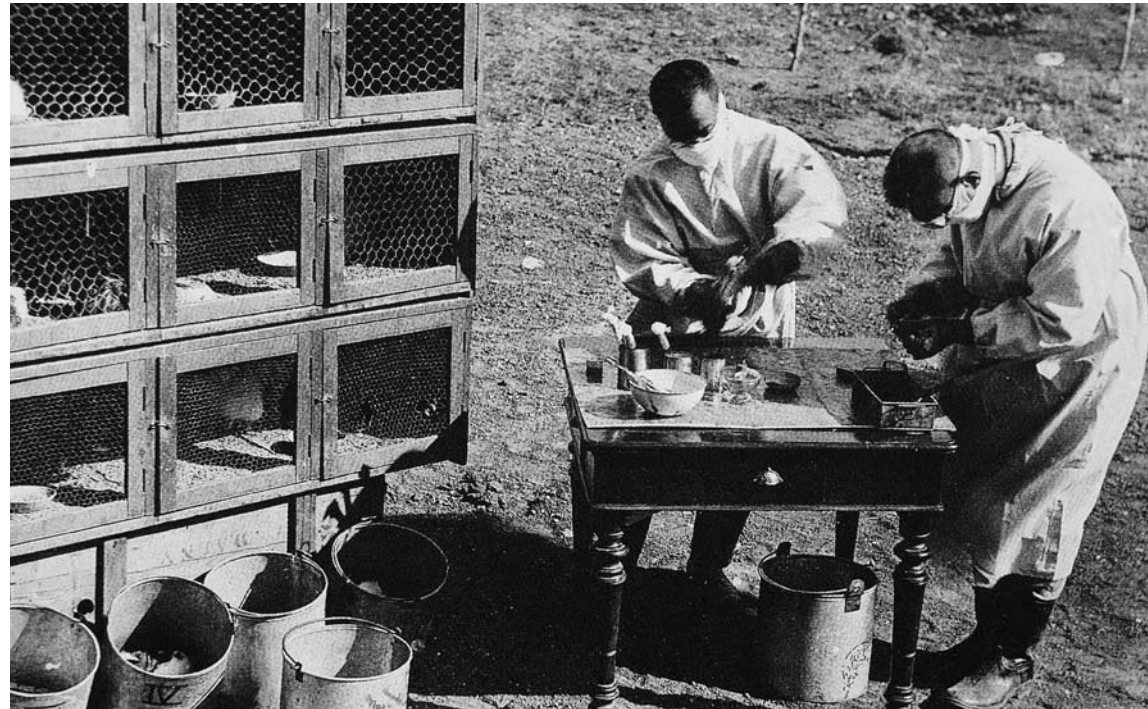
Dr Lim was also attributed to have initiated Dr Wu into devoting time to social service, a passion he held deep throughout his life. According to Ong Lay Hong, who researched extensively to produce the MediaCorp 3-part series *The Plague Fighter*, Dr Wu used to give free treatment and medication to the poor and hawkers during the period 1937 to 1960,

when he was practising in Ipoh, Perak.

Wu Yu-lin (1926-2012, who later became Mrs Betty Tai after marriage) the eldest daughter of Dr Wu as the author of the book *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-Teh – Plague Fighter*, records her father's work most vividly. This photographic book is a valuable supplement to Dr Wu's own autobiography *The Plague Fighter*, from his private collection showing the medical scenes and his anti-plague work in China during the period 1908-1937.

Dr Wu had initially returned to Malaya, after completing his medical studies, to work at the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur. Following that, he spent three years as a doctor in Penang. Distressed with a problem of opium addiction at that time, he put his own money into efforts to rehabilitate addicts.

In 1905, at the age of 25, Dr Wu became the President and Physician-in-Chief of the Penang Anti-Opium Association



**Dr Wu (left) constructing a plague experiment with a colleague in an open field, 1921.**

which he founded. Subsequently, conferences were held in Penang, Federated Malay States and Singapore.

Dr Wu was also known in Singapore and Malaya as one of the three editors of the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, (1903-1907) with Sir Song Ong-Siang and Dr Lim Boon Keng, a journal produced by the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1908, he received an invitation from Yuan Shih-Kai, then Grand Councillor of

Tianjin, China to be the vice-director of the Imperial Army Medical College, which he accepted.

Two years later, he was sent to Manchuria in the depths of winter to deal with the horrific pneumonic plague that was threatening to engulf the world. In four months with a death toll that reached 60,000, he managed to bring the disease under control. His work was to bring him international fame.



**Dr Wu (in the foreground) was the Hospital Director of Harbin Hospital, completed in 1925.**

## **HIS WORK IN CHINA**

What he did was recognised as the start of 30 years of unfailing service to China and humanity. For one, he invented the “Wu mask” still used widely by healthcare workers.

Dr Wu also initiated the largest and first mass cremation in China history’s in 1911 and introduced quarantine measures in plague eradication protocol which helped to bring the disease under control.

During his three decades in China, Dr Wu helped to build some 20 modern hospitals and medical institutions. One of these was the Central Hospital in

Nanking which was completed in 1933, with \$300,000 funds raised from the developer of Tiger Balm, Hu Wen-hu, one of Singapore’s philanthropists.

He set up the China Medical Association and its first national quarantine service. He also began work for the League of Nations (now United Nations) as a recognised authority on plague prevention and eradication.

In 1937, Japan invaded China and Dr Wu, whose villa had been bombed, decided to bring his family back to Malaya. He set up a clinic in Ipoh, Perak. After

hostilities ended, he renewed his contacts in China and began compiling works of art, philosophy, science, culture and history that form part of the Wu Lien-Teh Collection and are now kept in the Central and Medical Libraries of the National University of Singapore.

Dr Wu frequently visited Yu-lin at her home in Bukit Timah. Whenever he drove down from Ipoh to Singapore, he would drop by Kuala Lumpur to visit my grandmother, his niece and then in Seremban to see my mother. My mother related to me that Dr Wu carried me as a baby during one of these stopovers in Singapore.

Some of his children settled in Singapore and some in Australia. Yu-lin, the founding director of the Regional Language Centre, Singapore, and eldest son Fred Wu Chang Sheng were the ones who settled in Singapore. Fred was the first Asian senior partner of Donaldson & Burkinshaw, with a distinguished career at the Singapore Bar.



“by his death, the world of medicine has lost a heroic and almost legendary figure”

**The Times of London**

27 January 1960

In 1950, Dr Wu wrote his autobiography, an effort that took more than seven years. Published in 1959, it was titled *Plague Fighter: The Autobiography of a Modern Chinese Physician*.

He continued to practise medicine until the age of 80, when he bought a new house on Chor Sin Kheng Road, Ayer Itam, Penang for his retirement. He collapsed from a stroke and died on 21 January 1960, aged 81, barely one week after moving into his new home. Scouts of Penang Free School escorted his hearse for cremation at Batu Gantung, his final resting place.

*The Times* of London on 27 January 1960 wrote that “by his death, the world of medicine has lost a heroic and almost legendary figure”. ■

### KEEPING HIS MEMORY ALIVE

On 14 October 1983, Yu-Lin presented to the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Medicine a special album of 400 photographs from Dr Wu’s private collection. Dr Wu also donated most of his collection of books to Nanyang University (renamed Nanyang Technological University).

When he was alive, researchers from all over the world regularly consulted Dr Wu on his plague work and after he passed on they used to call on Yu-lin who had inherited all her father’s personal papers and books.

She donated all of Dr Wu’s papers and some books to the National Library of Singapore in November 2011, which has plans to digitalise them for medical researchers’ ease of reference.

Early on, the Art Museum, University of Malaya in Singapore, received part of Dr Wu’s collection of priceless ancient Chinese paintings by old masters and an official imperial seal of Emperor Chia Ching.



Dr Wu and family.

# Uncovering the work of a great Old Free

By **Alex K H Ooi**

**M**y first contact with the legacy of Dr Wu Lien-Teh was in August 2008 when I visited Harbin for the opening of a museum dedicated to his life's work – the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Museum – led by Dato' Ng Kong Yeam, along with Mrs Ng, Lim Ho Hup, Larry Lai, Chia Lin Sien and Kitson Ng. It was truly an eye-opener.

Though from Penang Free School and aware of a Sports House named after Dr Wu, that was about all I knew of him. On this trip, the man came “alive”. I also met Prof Fu Shiyong who worked with Mrs Betty Tai (Wu Yu-lin, eldest daughter of Dr Wu) to materialise the museum, Marie Wu, Wong Ai Luen and Ong Lay Hong. These personalities were to be later involved in a commemorative symposium that I decided at the spur of the moment to organise in Harbin. This ultimately took place from January 18 to 20, 2013.

I also developed a strong desire to promote the lessons that his work and life

could contribute to modern-day society and spent much time and effort researching and gelling this concept.

## SECOND VISIT

Then, in January 2011, I accompanied Ong Lay Hong to the 100th anniversary of Dr Wu's Mukden (Shenyang) Conference on the Plague in Beijing. The Old Frees' Association, Singapore (OFAS), of which I am President, gave support. I roped in Loke Gim Tay, an old Penang Chung Ling High School boy.

From Beijing, we proceeded to meet Prof Fu Shiyong in Harbin – only to confirm his unrelenting strong desire to see Dr Wu's principles of medical service and public health placed on a better footing and to extend their reach. We checked out the city's conference facilities, the hotels and the local sights. I got to dine a second time at the “Old Chef”! This was the Lao Chu Jia restaurant (translated as ‘Home of

an Old Chef’) which had a menu of spicy dishes and food reminiscent of Penang's, influenced apparently by Dr Wu who dined there frequently and was a close friend of its chef cum owner.

## THE JOURNEY

There were many hurdles in putting together the symposium and I recall the many moments of doubt and the need to doggedly persist.

Timing-wise, January appeared best – being Ice Festival time (and when Dr Wu had first arrived in Harbin) – though the extreme cold could be daunting for many.

However, holding it in 2012, the year first chosen, was not to be, as the stimulus could not be applied in time. Prof Fu then sent Prof Ye Tian of Harbin Medical University and Dr George Liu in May 2012 to meet me to lay the groundwork. They managed to visit Mrs Betty Tai (who was born in Harbin) while in Singapore.





Welcome ceremony at the opening of the Harbin Conference.



Alex Ooi (third from left) and members of Dr Wu Lien-Teh's family posing next to the bust of Dr Wu in Harbin.

That was also when Penang Heritage Trust put on Think City's Penang Story with Ong Lay Hong speaking on her 3-part documentary on "The Plague Fighter" aired on Channel News Asia and also shown in 2008 at the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Museum opening. Loke Gim Tay and I sponsored the Chinese visitors to Penang.

That proved to be the pivotal point to turn feasibility into reality. Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng officiated the Penang Story. Prof Tian issued the invitation to

the January 2013 symposium and I was to undertake the logistical necessities outside of Harbin and to act as go-between.

The logistics and linkages went smoothly (along with the usual hassle of getting registration details and participation fees!) – with language concerns eventually sorting itself out when more effectively bilingual people came on board.

### MOVING FORWARD

Penang's officials moved fast. A pro-tem

committee meeting for the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Society was held on 14 October 2012. The society was later registered on 2 January 2013 with Dato' Anwar as inaugural President and myself as Secretary-General.

Dato' Anwar was invited to be our OFAS AGM guest speaker on 21 October 2012 and to be introduced to Mrs Betty Tai and Wong Ai Luen.

We take cognisance of InvestPenang's strong support for the Harbin Symposium – with Dato' Lee Kah Choon representing



**At the signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding between Penang Medical College and Harbin Medical University.**



**Members of the Singapore delegation at the opening of the Wu Lien-Teh Museum, (from left) Lim Ho Hup, Larry Lai, Mrs and Dato' Ng Kong Yeam, Kitson Ng, Alex Ooi and Chia Lin Sien.**



**Singapore delegation members presenting a picture of Dr Wu Lien-Teh and his wife to Prof Fu Shi Ying.**



**OFAS president Alex Ooi, Dr Lucy Ooi, Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng and John Wu, son of Dr Wu Lien-Teh in front of the bust of Dr Wu at the Penang Medical College.**

Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng who was unable to leave Penang due to exigencies. He led the Penang team, comprising also representatives of Penang Institute, Penang Heritage Trust, Penang Global Tourism and Penang Medical College.

The large delegation from Island Hospital, led by Dato' Dr Chong Keat Foong, two top officials of Penang Tourist Guides' Association and many others lent colour and enthusiasm to the gravity of the objective.

Consequent to the strong interest of Penang officials to forge corresponding links in Harbin, many were initiated including the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding between Penang Medical College and Harbin Medical University.

I thank the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Society and all parties involved for helping to complete the journey – now fulfilled. The fruition of a sound scientific programme, linkages and friendships is now history for all to judge and to build upon for further collaborations and for global public health. ■

### **PRIDE OF PENANG UNVEILED**

In March 2014, Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng officiated at the inaugural Symposium and Installation of the bust of Dr Wu, donated by Harbin Medical University, at the Penang Medical College. A large contingent of Dr Wu's family was present to witness the event.