



A: JSY at home in Nanjing, aged 2 years

B: Joshua Young Wai, uncle of JSY, as a junior resident medical officer at Sydney Hospital, circa 1939

University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW.

John S Yu, Chancellor.

Reprints will not be available from the author.

Correspondence: Dr JS Yu, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052.

j.yu@unsw.edu.au

An Australian with a Chinese face

John S Yu

Reputation should be neither sought nor avoided. — Lao Zi

IT ALWAYS SURPRISES PEOPLE, especially those with an Asian heritage, when I say that I have never been disadvantaged, in my schooling or my professional life, by being Chinese. I suspect that I am often not believed, but that is my experience.

My parents met when my father visited Sydney as part of a Chinese government delegation. I was born in Nanjing in December 1934, and in my third year of life my family was disrupted by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and then China, in those fateful years leading to the Second World War. I came to Australia with my mother and sister, while my father remained in China, serving as part of the Nationalist Government of Chiang Kai Shek. My mother had been born in Australia and was returning to the safety of her home. I came as a refugee — by a regular passenger ship, different to those used by more recent refugees.

My maternal grandfather, Young Wai, had left southern China for the Victorian gold-fields in 1867. Shortly afterwards, he worked as a Presbyterian mission worker to the Chinese miners. He was later ordained into the Presbyterian Church and moved to Sydney to start the first Chinese Presbyterian Church (now located in Crown Street, Surry Hills). His eldest son, Joshua Young Wai, was the first Chinese graduate in medicine from the University of Sydney. It was in his household that I grew up. English was spoken at home; we ate Chinese food on weeknights, but at other times we had Australian food.

Thus, my experiences may well have been very different to those of other Chinese people in Australia at that time. I guess that my early life may be seen as a privileged one for an Asian growing up in a country known for its “White Australia” immigration policy. I was clearly Chinese, but, at Summer Hill Primary School and then at Fort Street High School, I did not feel different. When I hear about other experiences from contemporaries, I feel grateful for the liberal attitudes and values of my teachers and schoolmates.

I had an older sister, but I was the first-born son, and with that came a family obligation, not spoken but clearly understood by me. I cannot recall actively thinking about what I would do in later life, but I knew there was a family expectation, with my uncle being a general practitioner, that I would study medicine. I did what was expected of me, and that, I suppose, was a reflection of my Chinese sense of duty. Fifty years later, I have no regrets. I would still choose medicine, despite the interference of governments into medical practice and the burden of indemnity insurance.

Paediatrics was a chance residency term allocation, but luck had me working for Arnold Tink, who helped make that clinical term a life-determining experience. Kids were fun; they were gutsy and brave and very honest. I cannot imagine any other specialty giving me the satisfaction and joy that looking after children and their families has provided over a working lifetime.

Healing and harmony

In the early 1970s, through the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and the Australian Department of External Affairs, I was given the opportunity (as Head of Medicine at Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children) to take part in a graduate teaching program in paediatrics in Singapore and Manila. I returned to both cities over the next 5 years.

Being Chinese had not seemed to be a factor in my medical life. However, seeing sick Asian children being cared for in poorly equipped hospitals (albeit by excellent clinicians) made me feel guilty about the inequities of life; the fact that these children were Asian made me identify with them in a way I had not expected. I felt more Asian than I had ever felt before. Seeing the top-class facilities of Singapore

Life events

- 1934 Born in Nanjing, China
- 1937 The Rape of Nanjing; come to Australia as a war refugee
- 1959 Graduate in medicine at University of Sydney
- 1960 Junior Resident, Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children
- 1967 Membership of Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- 1971 Head, Department of Medicine, Royal Alexandra Hospital
- 1978 Chief Executive, Royal Alexandra Hospital
- 1989 Member, Order of Australia
- 1995 Involved in planning move of Children's Hospital to Westmead
- 1996 Sidney Sax Medal, Australian Health Care Association (for outstanding contribution to health services)
Australian of the Year
Deputy Chancellor, University of Western Sydney
DLitt(honoris causa), University of Western Sydney
MD(honoris causa), University of Sydney
- 1997 Retire from Children's Hospital
Trustee, Art Gallery of New South Wales
- 2000 Chancellor, University of New South Wales
Chair, VisAsia
Chair, Australia China Council, Department of Foreign Affairs
Chair, Specialist Advisory Committee, NSW Commission for Children and Young People
- 2001 Companion, Order of Australia
- 2003 Weary Dunlop Medal, Asialink (for fostering Australia-Asia relationships)



children's charities and talk about making healthcare more truly caring. But Singapore is a very special case. In other parts of the world, especially in countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the small countries of the South Pacific, the help we expect for our sick children is denied to so many.

We in Australia can make a very meaningful contribution to our region through education. This is a relatively inexpensive means of aid with a long term yield of goodwill. I am delighted that so many of our colleagues are giving their services as teachers and mentors to healthcare workers in the more disadvantaged countries of the Asia-Pacific region. To me, the key to a peaceful, harmonious region is through education.

Art, culture and tolerance

Like so many other medicos, my life has been busy with the hours that I have worked and the burdens of responsibility for my patients and then for my hospital. My solace and my

today, and their standards of care, makes you realise that money and a government priority can make a difference. I think Singapore is the one country in the world that spends a lot on both defence and health.

The move of the Children's Hospital from Camperdown to Westmead in 1995 allowed the hospital to re-equip with the latest and best technology. Even more importantly, it allowed us to provide not just medical science, but a hospital designed to recognise the importance of light and colour. The gardens, entertainment systems and art programs, including an artist in residence, a music therapist and a drama therapist, were all designed to create a total healing environment for patients and their families and carers. It foreshadowed the awareness of fun and laughter in feeling better and getting better.

Now that Singapore equals our technical standards of medical care, I am going back to help them recruit their own community into providing the humanity of care that characterises Westmead Kids. I will help promote fund raising for



A



B

A: JSY in the orthopaedic ward of the Children's Hospital at Westmead, 1996

B: JSY, with staff, visiting Macau Hospital, 1999

escape have been found in music and the arts. I have actively sought ways of giving something back to these areas that have sustained my sanity and provided so much enjoyment. Having little artistic ability, I volunteered my organisational skills. Over the years, I have served on the National Board of Musica Viva, the Boards of Trustees of the Powerhouse Museum and the Penrith Regional Gallery, and I am currently Deputy President of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Chairman of VisAsia. VisAsia is the arm of the gallery that promotes an understanding and appreciation of Asian art (www.visasia.com.au).

I am an enthusiastic collector of ceramics and textiles, especially those of the Asia–Pacific region. I believe that art and culture provide a non-threatening way of introducing different cultures and values to people who may be unfamiliar with them. Understanding and accepting the differences in art and culture make it easier to be tolerant of other differences.

Over the years, I have become aware that many young Asian people who live in Australia have little knowledge of,

or indeed interest in, their own cultural heritage. I hope through VisAsia, and through the various student organisations in our tertiary education institutes, that these young people may learn something of this heritage and feel some pride in their own heritage as well as that of their new home in Australia. Being proud of your own family heritage helps in building self-esteem, especially when others may question or challenge differences that they see as being of lesser value. I believe the same holds true of young people of other cultural backgrounds, most topically at present, young people of Islamic heritage.

Confucius wrote, “If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?” Being part of your community and giving something back is very much in line with Confucian teachings — it is something that doctors traditionally did when medicine was judged a noble profession. But perhaps I am just becoming more Chinese as I get older.

(Received 2 Sep 2003, accepted 8 Sep 2003)

□