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
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 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
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)

Across two continents and a century: the tale of two doctors

George R Santoro

Two generations of Santoros have served the Italian community of Melbourne for over 70 years

MY FATHER, SOCORRO SANTORO, was born near Naples, Italy, in 1902. After graduation in medicine from the University of Genoa and internship at Alessandria, north of Genoa, he was called up for military service in the Battalion of Doctors and Pharmacists. On completing this service, he decided to travel around the world. As he spoke English well, and Italy was an ally of Britain in the 1914–1918 war, he took the sensible precaution of registering his Genoa medical degree in London, which allowed him to practise throughout the English-speaking world.

In June 1930, my father sailed to Australia on the Orient Line’s “Orama”. He arrived in Melbourne well equipped with the appropriate medical, surgical, obstetric and even dental instruments (his degree gave him the right to practise dentistry, although he never did). He started practice in the “Professional Chambers”, 110 Collins Street, Melbourne, in August 1930.

In 1933, he married my mother, and in 1935 I was born. My father’s gross income in the previous year was £761 (US$1522), and he stated in his 1935 tax return that as his “...practice consists of mainly Italians...scattered in all suburbs of Melbourne...[his] average monthly mileage is 1200”. He noted that petrol was 1 shilling and seven pence (15 cents) per gallon (3.5 cents per litre)!

My father’s practice was not easy. Most of his patients were working-class Italians, who would occasionally sit on the floor in the corridor outside his rooms, to the surprise of the specialists in three-piece suits and watch chains also practising in the building. My father spent a great deal of

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