Dr Wu Lien-teh: modernising post-1911 China’s public health service

Kam Hing Lee1, MA, PhD, Danny Tze-ken Wong2, MA, PhD, Tak Ming Ho3, MBBS, FAFP, Kwan Hoong Ng4, PhD, FInstP

INTRODUCTION

A young Chinese doctor from a small British colony gaining fame for his role in ending a pneumonic plague in faraway north-east China is indeed a remarkable story. Wu Lien-teh (1879–1960), although standing at only 5 feet 2 inches, short even by Chinese standards, towered over many of his contemporaries because of his dedicated medical work. He was also prominent in the advancement of social and cultural causes. In particular, he campaigned against the opium trade, which had caused irreparable harm to health in China and Southeast Asia.

Beyond his battle against the pneumonic plague in Manchuria, Wu was also in the forefront of efforts to create a modern public health service in China. His efforts helped China regain control of quarantine centres in all major ports that had come under the supervision of foreign powers. Wu was also called to deal with the cholera epidemic in China’s north-east region in 1920–21. Active in international conferences and research, Wu was the first Chinese to have his work published in the prestigious medical journal, Lancet.

For his contributions, Wu was conferred honorary doctorates by Peking University, Hong Kong University and Tokyo University. In 1935, he was nominated for the Nobel prize for his fight against the 1910 Manchurian plague and for identifying the role of tarbagan marmots in the transmission of the disease. The epidemic, one of the deadliest of its kind, killed an estimated 60,000 people in the affected regions of Manchuria during the seven months that it lasted.

BACKGROUND OF WU

Originally named Ngoh Lean Tuck, Wu changed his name to ‘Wu Lien-teh’ when he travelled to China in 1908. He was born in Penang, Malaya, in 1879. His father, a goldsmith, came from Taishan, China. Wu studied at the premier Penang Free School, and after winning the prestigious Queen’s Scholarship, enrolled at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1896. Wu was the first Chinese to graduate in medicine from Cambridge. He did a year of postgraduate research on bacteriology at the School of Tropical Medicine, Liverpool, under Sir Ronald Ross (Nobel Laureate for Physiology in 1902). He then proceeded to the Pasteur Institute, Paris, to research on malaria and tetanus.

Returning to Malaya in 1903, Wu was welcomed into local high society. He was invited to give public lectures in Singapore, and there, he formed a friendship with Dr Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang. Lim was a well-known doctor and a businessman who was deeply involved in social reforms. Wu joined Lim and Song in editing The Straits Chinese Magazine, a learned journal on cultural and social issues for the small but influential Straits Chinese community.

In Singapore, Wu met Ruth Shu-chiung Huang, daughter of Wong Nai Siong, a Confucian scholar who helped Fuzhou Christians settle in Sarawak. Wu married Ruth, whose sister was the wife of Dr Lim Boon Keng.

Meanwhile, Wu joined the Institute for Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur to investigate beriberi, a disease that afflicted thousands of Chinese tin miners. Not long after, he went into private practice in Penang. However, Wu was troubled by the widespread addiction to opium, especially among the Chinese labouring class, and so he joined a nationwide campaign against the distribution and use of opium. At that time, proceeds from the sale of opium contributed substantially to colonial revenue in Malaya. Wu founded the Anti-Opium Association in Penang, and in March 1906, he organised a nationwide anti-opium conference in Ipoh, which was attended by about 3,000 participants.

However, an event happened, changing the course of Wu’s life. In early 1907, Wu was charged and fined in court for possession of an ounce (about 28 g) of opium tincture in his clinic. In his defence, Wu claimed that the cupboard in which the drug was found came with the clinic he had bought from a British lady doctor. It is not clear whether the case had anything to do with his anti-opium campaign, but Wu felt bitter and humiliated.

At this juncture, Wu received an invitation to serve in China. A few months earlier, a group of young Chinese sent by the Qing government on an overseas study tour had stopped at Penang. Wu met one of them, a Cornell University graduate named Saoke Alfred Sze, who was later to become China’s Councillor of Foreign Affairs. Through Sze, Wu developed friendships with other influential Chinese. Wu’s ability to build long-term relationships with people whom he respected eventually led to his invitation to China. In May 1908, Wu sailed with his wife, first to Shanghai, then to Tianjin. There, he was introduced...