

Assembly 8 September 2008

Chang Yam Him

This morning, I would like to tell you a story that may not have been told before at St. Paul's College. The story is about a boy called Chang Yam Him.

Chang Yam Him was born on the 21st November, 1937 in Shanghai. His parents were Australian-born Chinese but were working in Shanghai in their merchant business at the time that Yam Him was born. The family was soon to move to Hong Kong and Yam Him spent his childhood years in and around his home at 6 Cumberland Road in Kowloon Tong. Yam Him attended Kowloon Tong Primary School but on 1st September 1950 he spent his first day here at St. Paul's College.

I have Yam Him's report card with me this morning. In his first year he achieved reasonable results particularly in Chinese History, Scripture, Drawing and Handwork (Craftwork). He did struggle a little, however, in Arithmetic, English Literature and Hygiene.

Yam Him was at St. Paul's College for only two years, spending his last day with us on the 17th July 1952. His father, Mr. Aubrey Chang, had decided to relocate the family back to Australia. In 1953, Yam Him enrolled at the Christian Brothers' High School in Lewisham, Sydney, where he completed his schooling.

Yam Him worked hard at school and was very successful in the New South Wales A-levels. He went on to study medicine at the University of Sydney, graduating with a Bachelor of Medical Science with first class honours in 1960, and a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in 1962. Yam Him worked for two years as an intern at St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, before leaving for further training in England. Apparently, Chang Yam Him chose to study medicine because of his mother's death from breast cancer when he was 12 years old; the year before he came to St. Paul's College.

Yam Him forged a successful career in medicine and became a brilliant surgeon. His skill was acknowledged by his peers and he was made a Fellow of both the Royal College of Surgeons in the United Kingdom and the American College of Surgeons.

Yam Him returned to St. Vincent's Hospital, Sydney in 1972 to join another top surgeon, Dr. Harry Windsor (who had performed Australia's first heart transplant in 1968). Yam Him worked tirelessly to raise support and much needed money to establish a heart transplant programme at St. Vincent's Hospital. After many years putting pressure on politicians and the business community, Yam Him achieved his dream of establishing a heart transplant unit at the hospital.

In 1984, Yam Him performed his first heart transplant on a young 14-year old girl. Between 1984 and 1990, Yam Him and his team performed 197 heart transplants and 14

heart-lung transplants. His team had a high rate of success with the vast majority of those receiving transplants surviving beyond the first year.

However, Yam Him was worried about the shortage of organ donors and embarked on a new research project; the development of an artificial heart. He established a team of scientists and engineers, working in Singapore, Guangzhou and Sydney, to make the artificial heart.

In 1986, Yam Him was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia, the second highest class in the Order of Australia, for his highly commendable deeds.

Tragically, Yam Him did not see the artificial heart project through to completion. On the 4th July 1991, when leaving his home to go to work, he was confronted by two men. His assailants, members of a well-known Triad in Western Sydney, demanded money from Yam Him. An argument broke out and in a moment of sheer madness, Yam Him was shot twice with a hand gun. He died on the footpath outside his house.

On the St. Paul's College record card for Yam Him is typed his Western name: Victor Chang. When Yam Him moved to Sydney to complete his secondary education, he adopted his full Western name: Victor Peter Chang.

The work of Doctor Victor Chang was not forgotten. Soon after his death, the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute was established to focus research into "the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of heart muscle diseases".

Victor's legacy still lives on. Last week, Princess Mary of Denmark began her royal tour of Australia. Her first engagement was to open a new HK\$600 million building that will house the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute. Princess Mary said heart disease remained a leading cause of death and disability in the community.

"It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to open (this) building that will not only house the Victor Chang researchers but also scientists from the St Vincent's Hospital," she said. She made reference to her own "personal experience of the devastating effects of heart disease", and praised Dr Chang's groundbreaking work before unveiling a statue of the man dressed in surgical robes. "Dr Chang was an original thinker and saw the need for research and the development of heart assist devices and not least, he is known for his legendary caring for his patients and their families," she said. Princess Mary's mother Henrietta died of heart disease in 1997.

Victor Chang was a remarkable man and one of the world's leading pioneers of heart surgery. It was indeed an honour to have had the young Yam Him here at St. Paul's College, if only for a short period of time.

J R Kennard

Footnote: In 2007, while searching for the record card of another student, I noticed the name Victor Chang. Dr. Chang is a household name in Australia so the thought that there could be a link to St. Paul's demanded further investigation.