

Founding mother of social work

Englishwoman Ann Wee settled here and learnt Hokkien and Cantonese to be better able to speak to the needy



By Melissa Sim

Mrs Ann Wee, Singapore's founding mother of social work, offers tea, coffee and biscuits when we step into her Nassim Hill apartment.

'I'm happy to natter, if you think there is a story,' she says with a smile.

This friendly nature probably made it easier for families to open up to her - the only Caucasian social worker in 1950s Singapore.

'I do get tired and do take afternoon naps, but in seminars, I manage with tea and coffee'

On attending seminars at her age

The Hokkien and Cantonese-speaking Brit fell in love with a Singaporean and moved here about 60 years ago to make it her home, in more ways than one.

Her family is not just her two children and four grandchildren, but also needy Singapore children over the years who have benefited from her concern for their welfare, and social work students who have great regard for her.

In pre-independence Singapore, a 28- year-old Mrs Ann Elizabeth Wee trudged through shanty towns and climbed steep stairs in Chinatown shophouses to speak to the needy. 'We were

exposed to what life was like in a cardboard box,' says the former social worker who is regarded as a pioneer in her field.

She learnt Hokkien and Cantonese on the job so that she could communicate with the families she worked with. 'There was a family whose attap roof was so punctured, they were all sleeping under an umbrella,' says the 85-year-old.

She joined the then Social Welfare Department in 1955. She headed the Social Work Department of the then University of Singapore, now the National University of Singapore, and volunteered on the Juvenile Court's advisory panel for close to 40 years.

Last year, she was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal - given to those who have made significant and long-standing contributions to Singapore.

The only child of a branch manager of a national insurance company and a housewife had a strict middle-class upbringing. Giving back to the community was something her father had instilled in her. 'He felt we had a duty to serve other people,' says Mrs Wee, who grew up in Northumberland, north-east England.

Her father encouraged her to sign up for one of her first major volunteer positions as a hospital maid.

After her A levels, she worked with the Red Cross in 1944, the year before the end of World War II, as she wanted something to do before heading off to university. 'I slept in a dorm with coal-miners' daughters and learnt a lot from them,' she recalls.

'I scrubbed floors, skinned rabbits, quite a traumatic experience, and filleted cods, which was really a matter of some triumph,' she says in a crisp British accent.

She overheard the nurses talk about miraculous healing. 'They'd say, 'only three weeks, such healing'. Only later did I realise these were the first wounded treated with penicillin. It was quite historic.'

Speaking to Mrs Wee, a mother of two daughters aged 60 and 55, it is as if you are transported back in time to significant moments in history.

When she travelled from England to Singapore on a three-week voyage, the other passengers were Chinese citizens who had been exiled by the Kuomintang. 'This was just after Mao had taken over and they all wanted to contribute to the rebuilding of China,' she says.

They were highly educated and full of ideals, she adds, and there was a Chinese woman with a grand piano aboard who had been a pianist with the Swiss National Orchestra.

But Mrs Wee's trip at the age of 23 was a different sort of homecoming - she was to be reunited with her Singapore fiance, lawyer H. L. Wee.

They had met in Cambridge University in 1945 where he was studying law. She was there for a year because the London School of Economics (LSE), where she was reading economics, was evacuated due to bombings.

They met at a party but she would not give details of the courtship. 'That's all I'm prepared to say about us,' she says.

After that year in Cambridge, the couple went to London - Mr Wee did his internship as a solicitor's clerk before taking his final examination, while she started an anthropology master's at the LSE.

He returned to Singapore first in 1948. She followed him 18 months later.

When she arrived here, she said the immigration officers seemed suspicious of her.

She says: 'I was a lone woman, from LSE (a hotbed of communist activity) and the colonial government was so sensitive at the time. 'What is she doing here?' they all thought.'

She later found out the government had called her next-door neighbours - she lived with her in-laws - to inquire about her activities in Singapore. 'It was as if they had set up a spy ring to find out more about us. We had a good laugh,' she says with amusement.

This was just the first glimpse of the cheeky and defiant streak in a fiercely independent woman.

Her husband died in 2005 and she now lives alone, except for a helper. She drives herself to church on Sundays and often walks 10 minutes to the nearby post office.

She was recently admitted to hospital but is now back home and on the road to recovery.

Born in the year of the tiger according to the Chinese zodiac, she says she was fortunate that she was accepted by her late husband's parents. Her Chinese mother-in-law grew up in South America and went to school in London and 'didn't know a rabbit from a horse'.

Her parents also did not stand in the way of her marrying a Singaporean.

She quotes her father's reaction when any of his friends questioned her marriage choice. 'He said to them, 'I sent her to LSE so she would learn not to follow the crowd and now that she's done something which is not following the crowd, I can hardly object'.'

The couple were married at St Andrew's Cathedral in 1950.

After four years of teaching at Methodist Girls' School, she joined the social welfare department as a training officer. She was in charge of the counselling and advice section, which meant making home visits to find out how families were faring.

She was impressed that even though people lived in crowded conditions in Chinatown, the level of violence was low. 'There were so many opportunities for irritation, but I rarely heard raised voices,' she recalls.

She compared the slums in London, where she had helped to do social surveys after World War II, with the slums here.

In London, she changed her clothes and hunted for fleas each time she emerged from the slums, but in Singapore, everyone had a little cubicle, the floors were clean and there were 'little Chinese school uniforms piled neatly'.

She said families here kept themselves clean and children did homework under street lamps. 'That's the difference. In London, those were slums of despair. Singapore had slums of hope,' she says.

'Here, people could do well if they had the chance. It was as if they were waiting for the starter's gun to go off, and then they would be off.'

She was inspired by the dignity of a particular family whom she had helped.

A woman in her mid-20s had been badly bruised by her husband and the police took her to Mrs Wee for help.

In the late evening, Mrs Wee and her team went to the shanty town in Jalan Merah Saga to look for the woman's family to see if they would take her in. 'It was late and the ground was rough, and I felt it was my duty to see that this woman was not left on the street,' she says.

When they arrived at the house, the woman's brother said in Hokkien that his brother-in-law was not a good person and took his sister in.

Mrs Wee told the brother that her department would be able to provide some public assistance, but she remembers him saying: 'My sister will stay with me, we don't need the money.'

'It was distinct. People of all ethnicities here had a lot of dignity.'

She joined what is now the National University of Singapore in 1957.

She became the head of the social work department in 1967, but that happened partly by chance.

The academic who had initially accepted the job turned it down for a position in Africa.

Three days before applications for the post closed, she found out who was in the running for the post and was 'horrified and appalled' because she did not think the person was worthy of it.

She says: 'I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to apply for the head position, so I asked if they would consider me for the senior lecturer level. They interviewed me anyhow and I got it.'

She adds cheekily: 'The advantage of being head is that you can't have someone more stupid than you are on top of you.'

As department head, she fought to change university policy and the perception of social work which was not regarded as a profession but a job involving 'tea and sympathy'.

In particular, she lobbied for the social work department to have an honours course, arguing that every other course in the university had one.

The retort from the heads of the university was, 'We don't want to make social work graduates too expensive'. They thought social workers would not be able to get jobs if they were overqualified and demanded higher salaries.

She defends social work, saying it is indeed a discipline. Students have to 'take data and knowledge, make it procedural and produce change'.

She says: 'Without an honours degree, people were stuck and their career prospects were limited.'

But while pushing for it, she made sure the department was not booted out of the university altogether, as it had happened with another department.

After about a year of writing proposals and lobbying, the honours course was finally started.

She stepped down as head in 1986 at the age of 60 but still continued to teach. 'I enjoyed the university more after I stepped down,' she says with a laugh.

While teaching, she was also on the panel of advisers to the Juvenile court for almost 40 years, until 2009. Her role was to review cases of youth who were delinquent or in need of care and protection, and to advise magistrates.

Over the years, she has witnessed the courts being given more power. For example, the court can now order families to go for mandatory counselling together. 'Previously we had to rely on the parents to attend the session,' she says.

She is also heartened to see that every child has a case worker, 'which we didn't have in the old days'.

She does, however, think more could be done to boys' and girls' homes. 'They need more space for the healthy expenditure of energy,' she says.

She is still an associate professorial fellow at the department of social work in National University of Singapore.

She is the co-author of the only textbook on social work in Singapore - *Social Work In The Singapore Context*. It was produced in 2004 and was revised this year for the second edition.

'That really kept me busy this year,' says Mrs Wee, who still attends all-day seminars and sometimes takes part in panel discussions.

She also meets her sisters-in-law for a girls' day out once in a while. Her two daughters and four grandchildren live in Canada and the United States.

When speaking of her late husband, who died in 2005 after a stroke, Mrs Wee is slightly more subdued and says that he was ill for two years before he died.

But she does not linger on the subject, commenting instead on how the significance of age has changed culturally over her lifetime. 'Before, when you were 40, you were over the hill, but now you are just a kid,' she says.

She uses a hearing aid but she has not had major health problems.

Looking up at the sky with her hands clasped as if in prayer, she says: 'I regard myself as very blessed.'

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