

Tsan Yuk Hospital and the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong

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Major-General EF Norton arrived in Hong Kong August 1940 as acting Governor while Sir Geoffrey Northcote was on sick leave (Fig). A year later, Sir Mark Young became Governor in September 1941 just a few months before Japanese aggression. In this familiarisation visit to the Hospital Norton was accompanied by Dr Percy Selwyn Selwyn-Clarke and Professor Gordon King. All the people in the picture, except Norton, and the hospital would soon be embroiled in the darkest years of the Japanese Occupation from December 1941 to August 1945.

Dr Selwyn-Clarke came to Hong Kong in March 1938 to join the Medical Department as its head. He joined the Colonial Medical Service in 1919 and had spent most of his medical career in Africa

prior to his transfer to Hong Kong.¹ He was facing a huge challenge, which occurred predated his arrival. In 1937, the population in Hong Kong was around 1 million, and 100 000 more came to Hong Kong as refugees due to the invasion of China by Japan. The local medical facilities were overwhelmed not to mention the need to feed and house this sudden influx of people. Tuberculosis was rampant and nutritional deficiencies disorders like beriberi and pellagra were also common.

The capture of Canton by the Japanese Army in October 1938 brought another wave of refugees. The British government had to prepare for the possible aggression from Japan and ordered the Hong Kong government to prepare for its own defence with a



FIG. This photograph was taken outside Tsan Yuk Hospital on Western Street on the visit of Major-General EF Norton (front row, centre). To his left are Dr Selwyn-Clarke and Professor Gordon King, and to his right is Ms Sheung-chi Leung, Matron of Tsan Yuk Hospital. This photograph was kindly donated by Professor Gordon King to the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

target of surviving a siege for 130 days. So, in addition to maintaining the daily operation of the medical and health services, Dr Selwyn-Clarke had to transform the existing hospitals to become casualty clearing hospitals and relief hospitals and create 19 first aid posts in some schools. Meanwhile, he was tasked to prepare enough drugs, medical supplies, etc that could last that long. The government evacuated British women and children from Hong Kong in July 1940, 2 months before the picture was taken.

The Japanese military invaded Hong Kong on 8 December 1941 and the Hong Kong government capitulated on Christmas Day after 18 days of resistance. Hong Kong people suffered a lot during the ensuing Japanese occupation, which lasted for 44 months. Dr Selwyn-Clarke did something unusual hoping to lessen human suffering. He proposed to the Military government to allow him to stay on so that he could direct his staff to maintain the public health services, eg removing dead bodies due to the war, maintaining the sewage system, etc. The Japanese authority agreed reluctantly to appoint him as “adviser” for fear of an outbreak of infectious disease. Dr Selwyn-Clarke also sought consent from the Governor as his act could be accused as collaboration with the enemy. In addition to running the necessary health services with only a skeleton staff, he also took it on himself to look after people in internment camps and their dependents outside who had no support. An Informal Welfare Committee was formed and with donations from kind people he was able to provide additional food and medical supplies to those interned.² For example, when diphtheria broke out in the Sham Shui Po prisoner-of-war camp, he was able to “smuggle” some anti-toxin to the camp doctors and saved a few lives. His resourcefulness and kindness earned him the name of a “hard-boiled saint” among his supporters. But his humanitarian work and its network drew the attention of the Kempeitai and he was arrested in May 1943 for alleged spying activities. He was interrogated and tortured for refusing to admit his crime and name his associates. As a result, he suffered permanent injuries to his spine and left leg and had to walk with aid afterwards. He was released from Stanley Prison on 8 December 1944 to a civilian internment camp to resume his work as a doctor till the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Under his leadership, the medical and health services were restored soon after British resumed control. Despite his ordeal under the Japanese Kempeitai, he refused to act as a witness in the War Crime Tribunal. As a true humanitarian he was known to use his own money to buy each Japanese prisoner of war under his supervision a toothbrush. In 1947, he left Hong Kong to become the governor of the Seychelles. The new Nurses’ Quarter of Kwong Wah Hospital was named after him in 1952 to commemorate his

guidance to the Tung Wah Medical Committee during his time as head of the Medical Department.

Prof Gordon King came to China in 1927 as a medical missionary. Due to the invasion of China by Japan, he had to leave Cheeloo University in 1938 to take up headship of Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at The University of Hong Kong (HKU). At the time the picture was taken in 1940, Prof King was Dean of the Medical Faculty, and he was appointed medical superintendent of the Relief Hospital at the University main buildings when war broke out. Unlike Dr Selwyn-Clarke, who decided to stay after the fall of Hong Kong, Prof King escaped to Free China in February 1942. He became the key person taking care of HKU students there, including finding places for them in the Chinese universities and also getting financial support from the British Government.³ This was no easy task as he needed to convince both the Chinese Minister of Education and the British Foreign Office. Eventually he had to provide relief for 346 students, which was more than half of the total student body of HKU. As for the 115 medical students, they were placed in eight different universities to continue their studies. Although he was appointed Visiting Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the National Shanghai Medical College at Koloshan, his main preoccupation was looking after the HKU students. After the surrender of Japan, Prof King returned to Hong Kong and became the Assistant Director of Medical Services under the temporary military government of Rear-Admiral Harcourt. His main responsibility was the re-organisation of the government hospitals and clinics. His efforts in helping the students were repaid amply by the supply of greatly needed medical staff from these new graduates from Free China. Of the 63 wartime students who received a medical degree under the Emergency Committee after the war included famous doctors such as Dr Gerald Choa and Prof GB Ong. Prof King resigned from HKU in 1956 to take up the deanship of the new medical school of the University of Western Australia.

Ms Sheung-chi Leung (梁尚志) was Matron of Tsan Yuk Hospital since its establishment in 1922. Ms Leung received training in nursing and midwifery at Nethersole Hospital. She spent 6 months at Rotunda Hospital, Ireland in 1926 to gain more experience in running a maternity unit.⁴ Before the war, she had already been appointed a member of the Nurses Board serving from 1938 to 1941. After the surrender on Christmas day, Ms Leung stayed on to run the hospital with only meagre supply. Dr Selwyn-Clarke provided extra funds to her so that indigent patients could be taken care of. The Japanese Military Government had requisitioned Queen Mary Hospital, Kowloon Hospital and Tung Wah Eastern Hospital. Nethersole became the main

civil hospital on Hong Kong Island and Kwong Wah Hospital was the only one still open to the public on Kowloon side. The number of deliveries dropped to around 20% of pre-war level though the maternal mortality rate had almost tripled according to records of Kwong Wah Hospital.⁵ Tsan Yuk Hospital had to merge into Nethersole Hospital in December 1944 due to lack of funds. Ms Leung and her staff

had the very difficult task of storing away hospital assets while still providing service at Nethersole. After Hong Kong was repossessed by the British on 30 August 1945, her team reopened Tsan Yuk Hospital with amazing speed on 6 October 1945. She served one term (1949-1952) on the Midwives Board after the war and retired in 1951. She was honoured with an MBE on her retirement.

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