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### Singapore doc's 14 years of service in rural Yunnan



--ST PHOTO: SIM CHI YIN

SINGAPOREAN doctor Tan Lai Yong talks to a woman who has turned up for a mother-and-child health check at a clinic in Danjia township in Yunnan province. Some of the women would have made a four-hour trek to get to the clinic.

Dr Tan, 49, has been helping poor villagers in remote areas of the Chinese province since 1996, when he uprooted his family and moved to China.

Besides running clinics, he provides basic medical training to local farmers so that they can treat minor ailments.

He has also arranged for doctors and students from Singapore to visit the villages to help the people.

At the end of the month, the Singaporean doctor, together with his wife and two teenage children, will be returning home - for good.

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**PEOPLE**

### Poor man's doctor of Yunnan calls it a day

After 14 years in remote rural China, Dr Tan is returning to Singapore

By Sim Chi Yin, China Correspondent



Dr Tan with Mr Xiao Weicheng, 25, a farmer-turned-village doctor he has helped train - one of nine serving 10,000 people.



Dr Tan drops in at a clinic in Danjia township where a mother and child health screening was being conducted for people from six surrounding villages, with some walking for as long as four hours to get there. Image 2 of 3



Dr Tan Lai Yong with his wife Lay Chin and their two children, Amber and Edward (above). -- PHOTOS: TAN LAI YONG, SIM CHI YIN Image 3 of 3



CANGYUAN (YUNNAN): In near pitch darkness, two men walked towards the van that had just pulled in to the carpark. 'Chen yisheng (Doctor Tan),' they called out, shaking hands heartily with the Singaporean doctor who had just arrived after a six-hour drive through pot-holed, mountainous roads.

It was almost 1am and most of rural Yunnan was fast asleep, but the two local officials had insisted on waiting up for the doctor, who has brought help to their poor, remote county year after year.

Dr Tan Lai Yong receives a warm reception wherever he goes in Yunnan, where he has put in more than a decade of medical aid work in the villages.

That, to the humble doctor, at once symbolises why he is here and also why it is time to pack up and go home.

'I know it's local hospitality, but I came here to work with the very poor. When I go places now, I get treated like a VIP and I have to dine so much with officials... this is dangerous for my soul,' said the 49-year-old, flashing his boyish grin.

In 1996, the Christian doctor uprooted his family from a comfortable life in Singapore to move to rural, mountainous Xishuangbanna - where, as he puts it, 'we knew no one and no one knew us'.

Packing up to head home at the end of this month, he feels his work here is done - with good reason. Over the years, he has been a provider, running clinics and giving local farmers basic medical training to become 'barefoot' doctors.

He has acted as a bridge, bringing in Singapore doctors who perform free or subsidised surgery, as well as Singapore students, who help build facilities such as toilets and schools, teach English or plant trees in the villages. He has also helped send some 500 Chinese doctors, nurses and officials on trips to Singapore to study how its hospitals, family service centres and rehabilitation centres are run.

For Dr Tan, who still gets around mostly by bicycle, tractor or simply on foot, the past 14 years have been a quite a ride.

His road to China and missionary work was by no means preordained. The youngest of seven children, he grew up in a two-room Housing Board flat near the former Kallang Airport, where the single box that held his parents' belongings when they first moved in doubled as a table.

His father was a 'pirate' or unlicensed taxi driver who picked up Indonesian sailors from Finger Pier, and his mother was a seamstress.

Three of his six siblings made it to university. But Dr Tan, who admits he 'fumbled through his A levels', did not think he stood a chance.

After completing his national service, he signed on as an infantry officer. In the end, with a score sheet of three As, he applied for medical school because a friend did so.

'Even at the entrance interview, I told the professors, 'Anyway, my mother has no money to put me through medical school', ' he recalled.

Not only did he get admitted, he also got a government bursary to study medicine at the National University of Singapore. It was there that he found his calling: to be a missionary doctor.

A talk by one of Singapore's pioneer missionaries, surgeon Andrew Ng, who had worked in Niger in the 1970s, inspired the medical student, who had become a Christian in secondary school.

The young man decided he did not want to be like the next doctor.

'We have just one life to live,' he said.

For Dr Tan, who is more fluent in English and Cantonese than Mandarin, to end up doing his life's work in China was more accidental.

After serving his eight-year bursary bond working in Singapore hospitals and the Prisons Department, he stumbled on a non-profit organisation in Yunnan's Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture which was looking for a medical practitioner to train local doctors in impoverished villages.

With his wife Lay Chin, who quit her job as an accountancy lecturer at the Nanyang Technological University, and their 16-month-old daughter, Amber, in tow, Dr Tan was off to China.

But as he stood on the Kunming airport tarmac watching the SilkAir plane that had just unloaded them, their 60kg of luggage and a stroller take off again, he burst out crying.

'It sunk in,' he recalled, wondering what he had got his family into. 'I wanted that plane to turn back and fly us home to Singapore.'

But he soldiered on and set up a new home in a lychee and mango orchard that was part of a commune where they had electricity only from midnight to 5am.

Over the next four years, Dr Tan ran 10-week training courses, teaching farmers how to diagnose and treat patients, and how to prevent ailments.

Meanwhile, his daughter and son, Edward, who was born three years into their China stint, grew up feeding the neighbourhood elephant sugarcane, climbing trees, riding tractors, going to the local school and visiting ethnic minority Dai, Miao and Lisu families. Dr Tan then moved the family to Kunming, where he lectured at the local medical college while continuing to take aid to the villages.

In two weeks' time, the siblings, now 16 and 11, will say goodbye to their childhood in China and fly home with their dad and 49-year-old mum. 'I want my children to grow up Singaporean and the friends they will make in secondary school are the friends they will keep for life,' Dr Tan said, explaining a key reason for his decision to return home.

He will leave China with bags full of thank-you notes from patients and students. He will be leaving behind a Kunming-based Christian medical NGO he helped found. The outfit, which he now runs with four more recently arrived Singaporean doctors, will continue the work he started.

Over the years, Dr Tan has earned accolades and numerous awards from China and Singapore. Two of the awards were presented by President S R Nathan and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

Above all, he will be remembered by many in China as the Singaporean 'barefoot' doctor. Cangyuan county official Yang Jun, who has worked with Dr Tan for the past five years, said: 'When I first heard about a Singaporean doctor who was training village doctors in Xishuangbanna, I was very moved. Although he's ethnic Chinese, he's a foreigner and working, living in such a poor, remote area.

'People really respect him. I try to tell as many people as I can his story, his spirit of serving. And I tell them they can be like him.'

Mr Yang, who now ropes in local doctors and nurses at the weekends and takes them to villages where no medical care is available, said: 'We knew of the idea of volunteering, but no one actually did it. Through watching Dr Tan and the Singaporean doctors he has brought here, we've come to practise it.'

Dr Tan feels humbled by all he has seen and experienced at the very grassroots of a fast-changing China.

'In one village, I told every pregnant woman to eat at least one egg a week to improve their health. They looked at me blankly. The interpreter told me that if they had an egg, they would share it with the whole family,' he recalled. 'At the time, a shampoo containing egg yolk was popular in Singapore. I never used the shampoo again.'

By the same token, he has seen the mud and dirt roads around Yunnan become tarred highways and watched Kunming airport turn from a 'tin shack' into the three-storey building it is today.

'When I first got here, people in China begged those going abroad to buy TV sets for them when they come home. These days, I joke with my mother-in-law about buying her a TV set from China when I go home,' said Dr Tan, who still speaks Mandarin with a Singapore accent, but tends to end his sentences with the typically Yunnanese 'ga'.

'Poverty has gone down a lot. But hypertension, diabetes are going up at an alarming rate - although in the medical schema, it is less cruel to die of a stroke than to die of diarrhoea.'

The Tans lead a simple life, getting by with financial support from their church in Singapore and Dr Tan's monthly wage as a partner in a Chinatown clinic. In any case, good begets good. They have not had to buy rice for the past seven years because they receive 'more than enough' from grateful villagers.

The children's school fees of 10,000 to 20,000 yuan (S\$1,900 to S\$4,000) a year were waived by the local government in recognition of their father's contribution to rural health care. A neighbour, who saw that the Tans had only bicycles, offered them the use of his BMW and Mercedes-Benz.

As he heads back to a place where his peers are driving those cars, Dr Tan is preparing himself for the culture shock of being asked for his KPIs, or key performance indicators, he said with a laugh.

He will study for a master's degree in a health-related field while working in clinics that his doctor friends run in migrant worker dormitories.

'There are needs in Singapore too,' he said.

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'Fourteen years do not feel long at all. We've had so much fun and we've been so privileged to experience it all.'

**Dr Tan Lai Yong, about the time spent working in Yunnan province**

