Books keeping Nantah legacy alive

By Leong Weng Kam
Senior Correspondent

MISS KHE Su Lin was teaching in a small-town school in Perak when news of a research scholarship from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) came.

The University of Malaya graduate jumped at the chance to delve into the history of the former Nanyang University (Nantah) because her primary school Chinese teacher back in Negeri Sembilan — whom she respected — was a Nantah graduate who stirred her interest in the subject.

Today, five years later, she is 30 and a teacher at Nanyang Girls' High School here. Her thesis in Chinese on Nantah's controversial students' union in the turbulent mid-50s and 60s has been published as a book, titled Ideals and Realities: A Study on Nantah's Students' Union 1956-1964.

It is the first in a series of books on Nantah published by the 12-year-old NTU Centre of Chinese Language and Culture. It is also the latest to join the over one dozen books on Nantah that have appeared since the early 1990s.

Nantah, a Chinese-medium university, was set up by the Chinese community here in 1955. It was merged with the former University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore in 1980. Then, in 1981, the new English-medium Singapore National University (NTU) opened in Nantah's sprawling Jurong campus. It became NTU in 1991.

It was in 1990 that the flurry of books on Nantah began appearing. The first was Nanyang University's Historical Records, a reference tome published by the Nanyang University Alumni Association of Malaya. Five years

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later, From Yunnan Garden To Canada followed. It was a collection of essays by alumnus Bong Kik Sang about his student days in the 60s until after he emigrated to Canada in 1968.

Alumnus C.C. Chin, a business consultant, followed that up with The Phoenix, a collection of 15 poems on Nantah, in time for his alma mater's 40th anniversary in 1995.


The director of NTU's Centre of Chinese Language and Culture, Associate Professor Lee Guan Kin, traced renewed public interest in Nantah to 1991, when NTU became Nantah. It was around that time that Government leaders hailed the “Nantah Spirit”, which embodied traits like industry, a respect for Eastern and Western values, civic mindedness and community service. It was also then that records of Nantah graduates were moved from NUS to NTU.

At the first Global Reunion of Nantah Alumni held in Toronto in 1992, writer and former Nantah lecturer Tan Seng Soon called for the recreation of a new Nantah. The idea took hold among alumni scattered across the world; those based here spoke of a Nantah "resurrection" and called for the Nantah name to be restored.

Expectations of a resurrection were further fuelled when, in 1998, the Nantah administration and library building, the garden memorial and the original arch and gateway to the old campus were all gazetted for preservation as national monuments.

That year, then NTU president Chiam See Tong said that the university would research Nantah's history in a big way. The job went to the Centre of Chinese Language and Culture.

Prof Lee, a Nantah graduate herself, said, "These events created a feeling of euphoria among graduates, and this can be seen in the many articles they wrote in newspapers and magazines. Some of them were compiled into books later."

The stream of books continued even as the 90s ended. In 2000, the Chinese Heritage Centre put out a bilingual Pictorial History of Nantah, which was followed the next year by a collection of essays that proposed something out-of-the-box — recreating Nantah in cyberspace.

Titled A Greater Nantah’s Journey and written by Foo Ven Yee, Foo Boon Seng and Professor Teh Hoon Heng, the plan was to have as many as 100,000 students worldwide enrolled in the virtual university.

Prof Teh, who now lives in Canada, claimed it as the most cost effective way to bring Nantah back to life, and even spelt out the courses offered — mathematics and information technology, Chinese and English languages and the fine arts. Nothing has come out of it yet.

In 2003, a collection of about 40 essays, speeches and interviews discussing issues such as restoring Nantah's name appeared under the title Nantah Spirit.

But expectations appeared to dampen, at least in some quarters. In 2005, a journalist-turned-academic Ow Ching Tee, 63, published the novel, Those Who Chase After Sunlight.

For him, it has become enough to pass on the story of Nantah by getting memories published, even if the Nantah name was never going to be resurrected. "Nantah was a significant educational and cultural centre in South-east Asia in the 25 years that it existed. Many graduates like myself, have chosen to remember Nantah by writing about it to pass on the legacy," he said.

For a while, it looked like 2005 was to be the year NTU would be renamed Nanyang University, making it within the lifetime of the oldest alumni, who are in their 70s. But in 2004, NTU president Su Guanxi dropped a bombshell — the name change would not happen until after the NTU became a comprehensive university, and this would take a while.

The sudden turnaround disappointed many of the estimated 12,000 Nantah alumni. This ageing group — with the youngest in their 40s — is now getting around to accepting that NTU graduates have already outnumbered them and that changing NTU's name would not be possible without their support.

KEEPING THE MEMORY ALIVE: Miss Khe Su Lin, whose thesis in Chinese on Nantah's controversial students' union has been published as a book, is the latest in a series of authors who have written on the university.

PASSING ON A LEGACY

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JOURNALIST-TURNED-ACADEMIC OW CHING TEE, on passing on the story of Nantah by getting memories published

But this has not stopped the books from appearing. Let’s Talk About Nantah Stories, a collection of memoirs by the Nantah Graduates Christian Fellowship, a campus group for Christian students, appeared in 2004. The same year, Assistant Professor Ong Yong Peng, now a lecturer at NTU's National Institute of Education, came out with Nantah In The Fog, a collection of essays.

Mr Chia Ban Seng, president of the Association of Nantah Graduates, said the name change is no longer an issue, and is glad that interest on Nantah's past is still alive. "I am very encouraged by the great number of books on Nantah published recently. They are valuable materials which I believe are worth documenting because Nantah is unique."

A cultural and literary society in Perak appeared to have heard him. It put out a collection of newspaper articles from Malaysian Chinese newspapers titled There Is Only One Nantah History.

When the graduates' association published its commemorative book, Ah! These 30 Years, to mark Nantah’s 50th anniversary last year, many thought it would be the last after a lukewarm reception from the public. But Prof Lee is optimistic that interest in Nantah's history will live among scholars and its alumni. "Our plans for more new books on Nantah are still on schedule," she added.