

La Salle College: An Interview With Mr. James Wong Jum Sum

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An Interview with Mr. James Wong Jum Sum

Date : 16 September 2001
Time : 3:00 - 5:30pm
Place : Old Boys' Room
Present : Mr. James Wong (W), Mr. Peter Chiu
(C), Miss Cecilia Tang (T).

C : We understand that your family has been closely related with La Salle College, how's that?

W : Our 3 generations are closely bonded with the school. My father had studied Grade 8 (Primary 5) in St. Saviour's College (later known as St. Joseph's). But he had to discontinue his studies due to financial problems. He knew La Salle Brothers well, especially their devotion to education. I guess that's why he insisted I and my brothers were to study in La Salle when we came to Hong Kong. Then my sons as well as my brothers' sons also studied here.

T : Was La Salle College the first school you studied in H.K.?

W : No. I completed my primary education in Tak Ching Girls' School before I started Grade 8 here. That's good since it gave me a solid foundation.

C : Is this also why you acquired a solid foundation in Chinese language?

W : I am much indebted to Mr. Wong Kun for my Chinese knowledge. He was an inspiring master. We were so mesmerized by the style he recited poems and the enthusiasm he demonstrated in teaching. His handwriting on the blackboard was terrific. One other thing we were so intrigued was his immaculate suit. Gee! I have been led to believe for years that teaching is a gorgeous profession.



T : How did he influence you?

W : I must admit that Mr. Wong favoured me somewhat. My compositions always came above 90 marks. I still remember there was one composition, "What a mirror!", for which I scored 95 marks. Since I had exceptionally high marks in Chinese composition and high marks in all Chinese subjects, and I did well enough in all other subjects in the first term, I enjoyed the privilege of exemption from Final Examinations and could be promoted directly. This happened from Primary 5 to Form 3.

C : Did you feel under stress when it came to the Public Examination later?

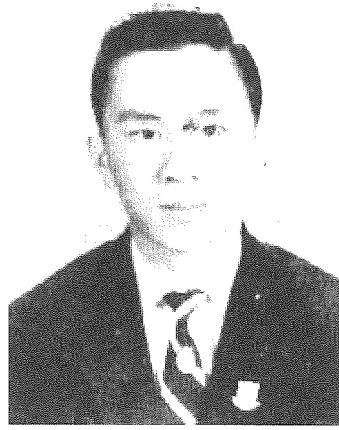
W : Strangely no. I attained 1 distinction and 2 credits in the HKCEE. Then I took the Advanced Level Exam in Geography in Lower 6. Brother Casimir was our Geography teacher and Form teacher. He drew very good graphs and maps and taught us well. Then I entered HKU easily.

T : Where did you study, Perth Street or Boundary Street?

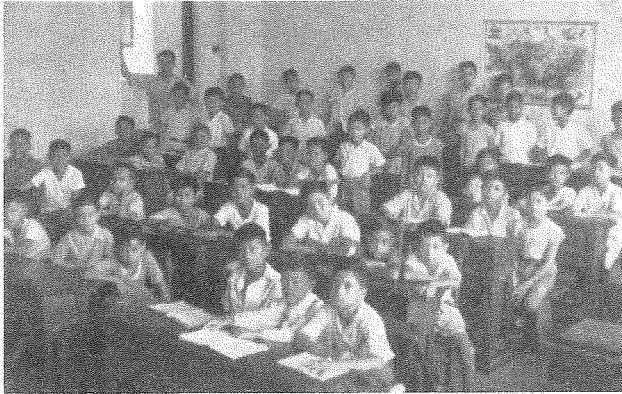
W : I belonged to the Perth Street era. I was a boarder for 5 years. My father believed boarding life would do me good and I was the only one of my 3 brothers who enjoyed this privilege. Brother Herman and Brother Henry were the wardens. I learnt much from boarding life - independence, discipline, teamwork and community life.

C : Which Brother had the most influence on you?

W : They all had. Brother Henry was serious but fair. There was one time we played with soft drink bottles in our room at night. Brother Henry found out during his night vigil and asked who started it. I was the oldest of the six in the room, so I was interrogated. As a man of honour, how could I betray my brothers? Brother Henry beat me hard but I would not budge. I didn't utter one word



Head Prefect 1959-1960



The boarders



The dormitory in Perth Street

despite the tears and pain. Years later when we met, somewhere in the 80's, Brother Henry pointed at me and told the others "I caned this guy but he never let out". Brother Felix was my Principal. He had complete confidence and trust in students and their ability. He gave us the instructions and then 100% free hand in organising and implementing things. As school prefects, we drafted the circulars and went around classrooms announcing news. Even if we fouled things up, he would take responsibility. Brother Felix had a real "Irish temper" though! Brother Casimir was very kind-hearted, he cared a lot for the students.

C : Why was the Harmonica Band so successful at your time?

W : We had a good teacher, Mr. Leung Yat Chiu. Mr. Leung was a student of Mr. Wong Hing

Fun, the most renowned harmonica player in Shanghai. Mr. Leung taught us two lessons each week while there was only one lesson in other schools. We were on average smart boys and had a genuine interest in playing the harmonica, like Daniel Chan Kwong On who is now a professor in HKU. When Mr. Leung was absent, we senior boys would take up the lessons with junior boys, and this became a fine tradition of mentorship. In fact, my career in the entertainment business began there. We used to go with Mr. Leung to accompany big singers and movie stars in recording studios or live shows. I practically knew and have worked with all top Philipino musicians in Hong Kong. It was a most valuable field experience for my later work.

T : You were the Head Prefect 1959-60. How was the Head Prefect chosen in those days?

W : It was kind of "guided democracy" as the Head Prefect was elected from among school prefects. There were about 20 school prefects altogether, including all class prefects in F.5-F.7. This system was initiated by Brother Felix. When the Head Prefect left school after F.7, he would recommend a few names (of current F.7 students) to the Principal. These



James Wong, Bishop Bianchi, and Bro. Felix at the Opening Ceremony of the Art Exhibition

were usually familiar names which had a long and good record of service in school. The Principal would ask these select few to nominate a list of school prefects for him to choose. When the finalized list was ready, we would elect a Head Prefect, a Vice Head Prefect and an Hon. Treasurer among us behind closed doors. Of course, these new recruits would elect the person who had recommended them in the first place!

T : LSC students had a high standard of English in those days. Why is that?

W : First, because all the Brothers, except Brother Henry and Brother Cassian, knew no Chinese at all. When you talked to them, it had to be in English. At that time, we also had a lot of foreign schoolmates especially the Portuguese. Guess we had more opportunities to practise English conversation in those days.

C : Is it true that you have fought with Bruce Lee?

W : Absolutely. That was in Perth Street, at the famous "sand bridge". Everybody had their duels there. It was safely hidden from the sight of the Brothers and teachers. We were in Primary Five. I knew I was no match for Bruce, he was so much stronger than me. I had to do it because I felt he bullied my brother. It lasted for barely 10 minutes and I ended up nursing a lot of bruises and scratches. We became good friends later though.

T : You were involved in so many extra-curricular activities, how did you manage your time?

W : I was really active in my school days, harmonica, athletics, Chinese painting and even fencing. I loved them all. The secret of my time management was that I was and still am a keen learner. I thrive on learning and am a fast worker. On top of this, I was a very studious and conscientious student. I always believe in practice makes perfect. I am good at playing harmonica because I practise more than the others - 8 hours a day. I still keep up the habit of reading at least 2 books per week. Presently I am doing my PhD in HKU. My handwriting also helps, it is tidy and neat. When these 3 qualities add up, it enables me to attempt many things at the same time and finish them all.

T : What about setting priorities?

W : That is my weakest point. I never quite grasp the gist of it. At one time I received more jobs than I could handle and it became pretty messy.

T : Can you share with us one most unforgettable thing during your days in La Salle?

W : That was one time I was heavily scolded by Brother Felix. Can't remember what it was now. I felt I was wrongly accused and he never gave me a chance to explain! I was so frustrated that I took off my Head Prefect badge and said to him, "I am resigning". Crying, I left his office. I kept out of his way the next few days. When unavoidably we met, he simply said, "Wong, I think you left something in my office." He took my Head Prefect badge from his table and handed it back to me. I had been regretting for days over my impulse and I was thrilled, grateful for the olive branch. I won't say Brother Felix is a father to me, but he is a real big brother. We didn't talk much. You won't talk to your Principal socially. But we have this rapport. He is really dear to me.

C : Since your family has a close relationship with the school, how would you define "La Salle spirit"?

W : Almost all La Salle students I meet, no matter outstanding or not, are proud of this school. This is a school that uniquely "teaches all without discrimination 有教無類". The Brothers are strict but they have a good way of handling naughty students and bring the best out of them. They know how to draw a line for us. No matter how naughty we are, we never go beyond that bottom line. I hope La Salle College can maintain its elite school tradition and characteristics forever. I think egalitarian education can go parallel with elitist education. After all, leaders are all elites.

T : Finally, do you have any advice for the young Lasallians?

W : I'd like to borrow a quote which is often used by Hu Shih,「你若要對社會有益，最好莫如把自己這材料鑄造成器」(originated from Ibsen, meaning if you wish to contribute to society, you should become an instrument for all that is good.) Keep it up, La Salle boys.

On that happy and encouraging note, we ended the 2-1/2 hour interview on a breezy afternoon. Thank you, James.