

Headline **Followin\$ father's footsteps**
Date **30. Jan 2009**
Media Title **The Star**
Section **Metro**
Circulation **293375**
Readership **1026812**

Language **ENGLISH**
Page No **10**
Article Size **163** cm2
Frequency **Daily**
Color **Full Color**
AdValue



Following father's footsteps

Young undergraduate studying biotechnology goes to France thanks to dad

WAN HUA CHAPOUTHIER



French connection: Koh with lab assistant Joubert Chantal during one of her training sessions.

This new lunar year is the third year of the Ox for Stephanie Koh Hean Fong who was born in Perak, 24 years ago in 1985 in the Year of the Ox. And that, according to Stephanie explains why her younger brother and only sibling refers, at times, to her as "Moo Moo".

However, Koh's hilarious pet name and natural smiling face disclose nothing of the academic pursuits of this rather serious undergraduate in Biotechnology from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Kuala Lumpur.

She had returned recently from France after having completed a three-month industrial training programme at one of the many research laboratories of the CNRS, the French National Centre for Scientific Research.

The CNRS has a staff strength of about 20,000 technicians and laboratory assistants with 5,000 scientists supervising programmes on research that cover a wide spectrum of subject matters.

For a country that has long been distinguished by many discoveries and inventions, France, through the CNRS, aspires to encourage and continue development in research, that saw at the turn of the nineteenth century, the discovery of pasteurisation by Louis Pasteur (1822 to 1895), the famous French chemist and microbiologist and radium by Madame Marie Curie (1867 to 1934), first lady professor nominated to the University of Sorbonne and Nobel Prize winner for chemistry in 1911.

In present times, French engineers invented the Minitel system that was used by the French National Telecommunication in the 1980s. The French Minitel is the forerunner to the internet that enabled Bill Gates to commercialise his programmes and amassed unprecedented wealth in this field.

When asked how she felt for having made a small entry into this vast research structure, Koh replied modestly that she is not even half a drop in this big ocean of research work. I persisted with a double question:-

"Comment on research in France and in Malaysia and define Bioethics in simple lay-

man's language?"

Koh believed that research work in Malaysia was basic or fundamental whereas the French were better equipped to go into more detailed or specific research.

She quickly added that as an undergraduate student, she had no competence to confirm any opinion because she knew that the learning process and research work could be long, complex and sometimes, frustrating as there might be minimal findings at the end of years of research.

She defined Bioethics with ease as "The Study of Ethical Controversies Brought about by Advancement in Biology and Medicine".

It simply meant that Koh is studying about "What is going to happen in future if studies made on plants and animals as well as medical research, are not controlled by a good moral sense? And what is a good more sense?"

In this context, it means avoidance of senseless destruction of plants and inflicting pain and suffering on animals and human beings. In other words, animals for vivisection and experiments must not be made to suffer. There must be a real rapport of care and consideration between the scientist and the subject.

While in France, Koh was attached to the psychiatry research unit under Dr Roland Jouvent at the *L'hopital Pitie-Salpetriere* in Paris, the biggest hospital in Europe and also one of its oldest. At this unit, Bioethics is a foremost topic and concern.

At the hospital, she found out that the research came under the management of the CNRS and so there was sufficient financial allocation for equipment and for paying young trainees who would one day aspire to be a leading expert in their field of research. Koh thinks that it is important that scientists are supported and appreciated so that they will work with reinforced determination to discover, for example, the cure for AIDS.

One highlight of Koh's learning process was her participation as an observer at the Fifteenth Session of the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) and the Joint Session of the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee (IGBC) Meeting organised by Unesco from the Oct 28 until Oct 31 last year.

This international meeting was indeed a valuable exposure for Koh who was also given assistance by fellow Malaysian Ang Tee Wee, a programme specialist in Bioethics at the organisation, for gaining access to updated and published information on bioethics.

And when queried further on her choice of

France and not England or the United States for her industrial training, she said she owed it to her father, Dr Koh Mok Poh who is head of a research unit at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), and who has a Doctorate in Chemistry from the French University of Maine in Le Mans where he remained from 1976 to 1980, to carry out studies on polymer research that deals with rubber and plastic products.

He returned to Malaysia armed with insight knowledge on how research is carried out in France.

Koh's stay in France was sponsored by her father who is glad that his daughter is following in his footsteps.

Now more than three weeks back home and still enjoying rounds of Chinese New Year *makan* with a host of cousins from her parents' much extended Peranakan and Hokkien families, Stephanie finds that above all, she misses

the cold weather as she seemed to be able to work longer hours even in winter without getting tired.

Secondly, she loves the vast choice of food there. She started by packing her own sandwich and fruit for lunch until she tried food at the canteen of the hospital. And, the food was "nice" so claimed Koh, who also managed to do some of her own culinary research on French cuisine by taking photographs of almost every French dish that she tasted.

A bemused Stephanie cannot help comparing the Malaysian preoccupation with food with that of the French.

She went home with French cheeses packed inside her suitcase.

It was for her father who has learnt to make fruit cake according to the recipe given by his wife, Elaine who is a teacher specialising in Art and Home science. Koh's only brother, Charles is studying studying medicine in Russia.