



# THINKING WITH THE TIMES

THINK TANKS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES ARE GROWING IN IMPORTANCE AS THE WORLD (AND SINGAPORE) CHANGES – AND NUS ALUMNI ARE LEADING THE CHARGE. BY THERESA TAN



In 2013, *The Straits Times* revealed there were about 3,000 students taking Literature at 'O' levels that year, compared to 16,970 students two decades ago. This prompted then Nominated Member of Parliament Ms Janice Koh

(Arts and Social Sciences '96) to register her concern in Parliament, and ask about the cause of this decline.

Senior Minister of State for Education and Law Ms Indraneel Rajah (Law '86) replied that traditionally, Singaporean students fare better at sciences and Mathematics, but that the main factor for the decline was the Ministry of Education's introduction of Combined Humanities in 2001 at the upper secondary levels – where students take Social Studies as a compulsory component and an elective which can be either Geography, History or Literature. A contributing factor was that students perceive that it is harder to score well for Literature than for a science subject.

But Singaporeans are not alone in their less-than-favourable perception of the arts and social sciences, which are usually grouped together in institutes of higher learning. At the National University of Singapore (NUS), for example, these are offered in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS). In the United States (US), liberal arts – which covers humanities, social sciences, formal sciences and natural sciences – has a poor image issue as well. In the last four years, the governors of Texas, Florida and North Carolina have been lobbying for a cut in funding for liberal arts in favour of 'STEM' subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. "How many philosophers do we need to subsidise?" one 'skeptical' governor had asked.

Journalist and author Fareed Zakaria mounted an elegant defence for a liberal arts education in his commencement speech at private liberal arts college Sarah Lawrence

College in May 2014, when he said (in part), "You're graduating at an interesting moment in history – when the liberal arts are, honestly, not very cool. You all know what you're supposed to be doing these days – study Computer Science, code at night, start a company, and take it public... What you're not supposed to do is get a liberal arts education."

The author of *The Post-American World* and host of CNN programme *Fareed Zakaria GPS* however went on to emphasise to his audience that a liberal education "does not ignore the sciences". India-born Mr Zakaria admitted he was good at regurgitating facts and scoring at tests, but said his liberal arts education taught him to write and to think. He added that this in many ways is the central teaching of a liberal education. The other great advantage, he said, is learning to speak one's mind clearly and concisely, an important skill in business and government, among other spheres.

The marriage between technology and the liberal arts is now obvious. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, famously said of what has made the brand so successful: "It's technology married with liberal arts, married to the humanities that yields us the result that makes our heart sing." Mr Jobs, in his short time at Reed College, took Physics, Poetry and Literature. He credited the Mac's elegant fonts to a single calligraphy class he took at Reed.

In Singapore, FAAS has been educating an average of 1,500 students in the last two decades. The faculty is 86 years old this year and began with just four subjects: English, History, Geography and Economics.

In an email interview with *The AlumNUS*, NUS Professor Wang Gungwu, (Arts '52) who is Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) at NUS, spoke of his days as an undergraduate at the University of Malaya's Faculty of Arts in 1949. "There were no 'social sciences' as such for us to study. The courses



in the Faculty of Arts for the 60 freshmen – 80 per cent were men – were English Language and Literature, History, Geography, Economics and Mathematics. We were to choose three of them to study for three years for a general Bachelor of Arts degree. I did English, History and Economics. The combination actually placed me halfway between what was called Humanities and Social Sciences. In my experience, History was both. In form and presentation, it was close to literature and philosophy; but the content included politics, socio-economic issues, anthropology, even psychology. And, our Economics courses also included politics, philosophy and sociology, and grounded us in statistics.”

Ambassador Professor Chan Heng Chee (Arts '64), who served as Singapore's ambassador to the US from 1996 to 2012, spoke of the relevance of Political Science – and the social sciences – in her speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NUS Department of Political Science in March 2012.

Prof Chan was in the department's first intake of 40 Political Science students in 1961. She went on to pursue her Masters. “On 9 August 1965, the fateful day when Singapore was separated from Malaysia, I was at the airport taking a flight to Cornell University in the



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AMBASSADOR PROFESSOR CHAN HENG CHEE (ARTS '64)

US to pursue graduate studies,” she said. “(Professor) RS Milne (from the Department of Political Science) recommended I go to Cornell for its programme on Southeast Asian Studies as it was the best.”

She said, “He thought it was important that the first graduate in Political Science should return to strengthen the department in teaching and understanding the politics of the region around us. It was at Cornell that my real feel for Singapore politics began.” Prof Chan returned to Singapore and became the first female lecturer in the Political Science department.

She “immediately put to use” what she had learnt, teaching and passing it on to others. It is her belief that Political Science – because of the nature of the subject – provides a frame of reference or frames of reference for the graduate to understand the world around him or her.

Of the practical uses of a Political Science education, she said, “My training and experience as a political scientist were excellent preparation for my job (as an ambassador). I had some idea of the structure of the United Nations and when I went to Washington, of the political system of the US. But that familiarity with the issues was only buying the ticket to gain entry.”

“The analytical ability one takes for granted comes in very handy in our work where you have to write political reports and explain what is happening on the ground. This ability is informed by theory. But I discovered some of the analyses and ideas I read had to be discarded or

modified. They seemed ivory tower-ish once I hit the ground. Sometimes the writings were simply wrong. And it happened often in the analysis and speculation about what happened in certain events or why nations acted the way they did in a particular episode,” she added

Today, FASS offers more than 30 subjects that fall into the humanities, social sciences, Asian studies and multidisciplinary majors and minors. The liberal arts curriculum – which is offered by Yale-NUS – covers humanities, social sciences, formal sciences (like Mathematics and Statistics) and natural sciences. Disciplines like Law and Architecture are also considered social sciences as they are academic disciplines that study human aspects of the world.

**R&D IN SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Singapore's hard sciences have been, particularly in the last 50 years, well-funded and well-developed. The Singapore National Academy of Science boasts a plethora of research bodies including the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*STAR), institutes of higher learning (IHLs), hospitals and academic medical centres and corporate research and development (R&D) laboratories.

However, research into areas such as Geography, Economics and Politics – social or “softer” sciences that may not be immediately thought of as scientific in nature – has been growing as Singapore develops as a nation.

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AMBASSADOR ONG KENG YONG (LAW '79)



Prof Wang points out that social science is very new, even in the West. It developed out of philosophy and the natural sciences during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and disciplines like Economics, Geography, Ethnology and History only achieved their current status in a few Western European universities at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“Since then, American scholars have taken the lead and made particularly strong showings in newer fields like Anthropology, Sociology and Political Science,” he says. Prof Wang notes that Asian universities have been slow to follow this development in the West. With very few exceptions, he says, most universities in Asia kept their respect for the European classics-humanities until the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong (Law '79), Ambassador-at-Large and Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of

International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) says that for a long time, “Singapore understandably emphasised the hard and technical sciences as these disciplines were needed to empower industrial development and economic growth.”

But since the 1990s, with a more or less settled economic model and increasingly educated public, it has become apparent that hard sciences education at the tertiary level needs complementing by advanced study in humanities and social sciences.

The pressing need for institutions of learning now is to foster critical thinking – what a humanities and social sciences education offers. “Today, we need more than ever [given an increasingly complex and uncertain regional and international environment] to create an overall educational experience that fosters in our graduates critical thinking and the ability to think creatively

and to go beyond textbook solutions,” Mr Ong explains.

With political, economic, religious and social issues – all in the sphere of humanities and social science – affecting the world in myriad ways, the last two decades have seen a proliferation of think tanks being created around the world, some seeded in universities, others within government institutions and yet others that are independent.

**SINGAPORE'S THINK TANKS**

The Oxford Dictionary's definition of a think tank is ‘a body of experts providing advice and ideas on specific political or economic problems’. The Think Tank And Civil Society Program (TTCSP) at the Lauder Institute of the University of Pennsylvania in the US conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and in civil societies around the world. The TTCSP, dubbed ‘the think tanks’ think tank’, releases an annual Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTTI).





Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at IPS

Singapore may have far fewer think tanks than countries like the US (which has more than 1,800, with individual states having their own think tanks) and China (over 400), but these Singaporean institutes are strategic in their approach, each fulfilling a role in making the country a relevant and global society by studying developments and issues that affect Singapore internally, regionally and internationally.

Singapore's earliest think tanks include the SIIA, which is the oldest independent think tank in the country, founded in 1961. It is dedicated to the research, analysis and discussion of regional and international issues. It is a founding member of the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies.

ISEAS, established in 1968 by an Act of Parliament, is dedicated to studying the socio-political, security and economic trends of the region and to search for viable solutions

to regional problems. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) at LKYSPP in NUS was established in 1988 to foster good governance in Singapore through strategic policy research and discussion. It adopts a big-picture approach to issues of national interest and takes a long-term view.

Since the 1990s, a number of think tanks have been established in Singapore to research changing socio-economic and political environments. Some of these institutes are based on geographical regions and Singapore's role and relationship with them. Others, particularly the newer institutes, target particular areas linked to specific social sciences, including Economics, Architecture and Design, and Law. Many of these take root in NUS and NTU.

There is the East Asian Institute (EAI), set up in 1997 to succeed the

Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE) that the late former Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee (Arts '39) established in 1983, while the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), founded in 1991, is a non-profit organisation that aims to build enduring relationships between Singaporeans and world communities.

The Middle East Institute was founded in 2007 to serve as a research hub for Middle East studies in Singapore and the region. The Centre for International Law was established in 2009 at NUS in response to greater demand for international law expertise and capacity-building in the region. The Centre for Liveable Cities was formed in 2008, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Its mission is to extract, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities.

Dr Gillian Koh (Arts and Social Sciences '88), a Senior Research Fellow at IPS, points out that R&D in social areas is important – hard sciences and social sciences are inextricably linked, and the social sciences need to develop in order for hard science to progress and bear meaningful fruit.

"How will you have the foresight, the funds, even the interest in supporting R&D in the hard sciences and bringing to pass the applications of that work, if you do not have good governance in Singapore?" she asks. "What would you use the R&D in hard sciences for? What are the areas in which to target your investments? Who would benefit from the activities of that investment and the fruits of that work?"

For Dr Koh, these are "all questions that require deep thinking in the social sciences and humanities so as to arrive at the answers to the 'why' questions before attempting the 'how' questions".

### RESEARCH TO BUILD A BETTER SINGAPORE

Dr Koh heads IPS' Politics and Governance research cluster which

focusses on analysis relating to party and electoral politics, the development of civil society, state-society relations, and citizen engagement in Singapore. Among her most notable achievements are leading the research teams that conducted the two Post-Election Surveys (in 2006 and 2011) and being the lead researcher on the IPS Prism project that generated scenarios of governance in Singapore in the year 2022.

She was also the lead researcher behind the *IPS Conference on Civil Society*, held in November 2013; she has published papers and is currently writing a book on the development of civil society in Singapore.

Singapore must be adjusted to this trend; how it affects policy-making and implementation, and ultimately, electoral politics."

The work of the Politics and Governance Research Cluster is to facilitate research and engagement to improve how the government listens, responds to, and acts on views and insights that emerge from other sectors in Singapore, says Dr Koh. "We do that primarily through quantitative social surveys primarily because our key audience, the policymakers, like to get a broad picture of sentiment and concerns but in ways that are 'countable'."

However, this does not diminish the cluster's projects, such as the

## MY BASIC MANDATE AT IPS IS TO UNDERSTAND AND RECOMMEND HOW THE PROCESS OF GOVERNING SINGAPORE MUST BE ADJUSTED TO THIS TREND; HOW IT AFFECTS POLICY-MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION, AND ULTIMATELY, ELECTORAL POLITICS.

DR GILLIAN KOH (ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES '88)

"I started out as a Research Fellow, fresh from my doctoral studies," says Dr Koh. "My interest was how a government works in a late developer like Singapore, as at that time (1995 when she first joined IPS), the world was trying to understand the rise of the Four Tigers: Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. The focus of my doctoral thesis was on the Administrative Service and what makes it tick as the apex of the policymaking body in the civil service."

When she returned to Singapore after obtaining her Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, Dr Koh discovered that "civil society and the business sector were beginning to make their voices heard and their views felt".

She says, "My basic mandate at IPS is to understand and recommend how the process of governing

2013 IPS Prism project where responses from different sectors of Singaporeans – 140 selected participants from seven sectors, 600 respondents to a survey and 4,000 members of the public who participated in the arts programme – reflected the insights and concerns of Singaporeans. "In that method, it is the detailed accounts of what is happening on the ground, the way in which life is lived and understood that matters very much," Dr Koh explains.

The 2011 Singapore elections showed signs of a turning of the tide in the citizens' engagement and view of governance. Dr Koh says that the closing of the gap between the ruling party and the opposition was "partly a sociological trend – where the rising higher middle class feels that the best formula for governance is to have a plurality of voices not just for representation but to keep a governing party accountable".

## ALUMNI AT THE HELM

### Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC)

FOUNDED: 2008  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: MR KHOO TENG CHYE (ENGINEERING '79)



Set up based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development,

CLC distils key learning points from Singapore's experiences over the last half-century, while creating knowledge to address emerging challenges. The Centre operates as part of the Ministry of National Development (MND).

### Centre for Sustainable Asian Cities (CSAC)

FOUNDED: 2009  
DIRECTOR: DR MALONE-LEE LAI CHOO (DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT - REAL ESTATE '76)



CSAC is an NUS-based research centre housed at the School of Design and the Environment. It taps into the research expertise

of the school's three departments – Architecture, Building and Real Estate. CSAC serves as a platform to develop cutting-edge urban planning and design solutions as well as building technological innovations for high-density environments that will be applicable to many cities in Asia and other developing countries.

CSAC is also a research nexus that draws together the complementary strengths of researchers within NUS to collaborate on inter-disciplinary solutions for sustainable cities. CSAC's research complements efforts at the national level carried out by MND.



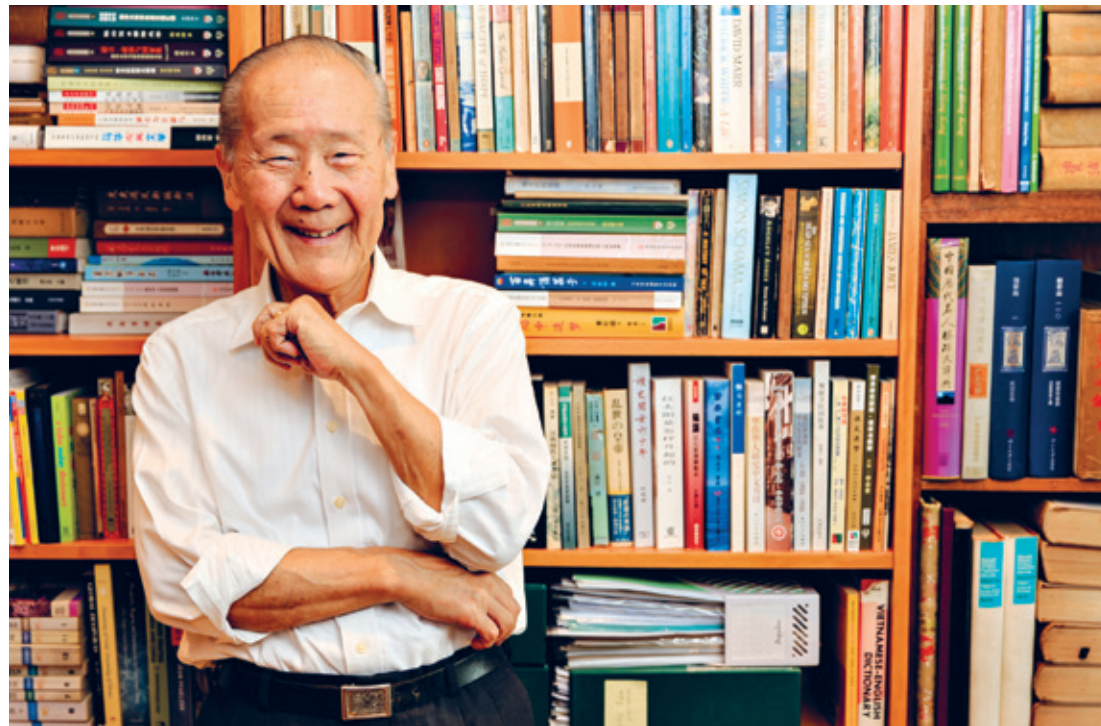
That, she says, was partly a result of the strategy of the leading opposition party which put all its eggs in one basket and made it an irresistible 'A Team' in the Aljunied GRC. "Could we afford to see Sylvia Lim and Low Thia Khiang out in the cold, was the question they (the Workers' Party) were pushing voters to consider."

Finally, Dr Koh says, it was also a case where Singaporeans felt that the incumbent governing party needed to provide better answers to the usual issue of cost of living that some voters felt has been exacerbated by the inflow of foreign workers. "I think that others also felt that overall, the incumbents needed to give better answers to taming income inequalities at the broader level, and just something to salve a rising sense of insecurity given the ups and downs of the global economy in this past decade, life in a post-industrial country, and ageing in a high-cost global city."

The Politics and Governance Research Cluster is just one of a number of clusters at IPS, all of which combined, study how Singapore can survive and thrive in the years to come by evolving policy and practices.

"We are driven by a set of values which, in a nutshell, is to look at how democratic governance can be improved in Singapore," describes Dr Koh. "We believe that it is important to foster an informed citizenry. It is important to hear and absorb the ideas and concerns that are raised right across the sectors of Singapore – be it on whether Singapore should license casinos or how we can improve retirement adequacy, just to name two topics we have addressed before."

"We believe that a better Singapore arises from a deep and meaningful engagement and deliberation that involves government and stakeholders of the different sectors of the country. Going to the polls at a General Election should ideally be a culmination of such a process and an assessment of how the governing party has performed and what citizens think is the best plan on offer for the future of the



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**PROF WANG GUNGWU (ARTS '52)**

country from the incumbent and opposition parties," she adds.

Dr Koh, who marks her 20<sup>th</sup> year at IPS this year, says, "I do enjoy trying to understand the amazing 'active citizens' we have, all wanting to make life in Singapore more inclusive, more sustainable, more colourful." She explains that at IPS, the team continually works to engage all the stakeholders – government and civil society – to hear and respond to each other's concerns. This way, Singaporeans will discover their shared destiny, and build up their capacity to adapt and their resilience as a people.

**UNDERSTANDING CHINA & EAST ASIA**

Prof Wang is also Chairman of the EAI and ISEAS. In 1996, the well-renowned historian came to

Singapore as Executive Chairman of IEAPE, at the invitation of Dr Goh Keng Swee. He noted then that the humanities and social sciences in NUS had suffered from low priority for decades. "What was particularly striking was that, of the 350 or so academic staff in FASS, there were only two full professors. Both were appointed that year, one in Economics and the other in Public Administration."

"Fortunately, change was coming. And greater attention was given to raising the profile of the social sciences from then on," he adds.

The EAI began life as a statutory board called the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, founded by Dr Goh in 1983 to study Confucianism. It was already foreseen at that point, when

diplomatic relations had been established, that it would be important for Singapore to understand China. As China's economic and political power began to rise, the institute changed its focus and was renamed the Institute of East Asian Political Economy.

"Early in 1997, one year after I joined the IEAPE, it faced uncertainty about its future as a private independent institute," Prof Wang remembers. "I proposed to NUS that it be placed in NUS. Dr Goh, Mr George Yeo (then Minister, Ministry of Information and The Arts, or MITA), Professor Lim Pin, the NUS Vice-Chancellor, as well as colleagues in FASS, gave it warm support. The endowed funds that IEAPE had were then transferred to NUS to establish the East Asian Institute." The EAI was reconstituted as an autonomous research institute under the auspices of NUS.

That was a turning point for NUS, says Prof Wang, in that "EAI was the first non-laboratory based research institute in the NUS. The EAI model was seen as practical and useful, and the Asia Research Institute, Institute of South Asian Studies and the Middle East Institute were also established in NUS".

The main mission of EAI is to promote both academic and policy-oriented research on East Asian development, particularly the political, economic and social development of contemporary China – including Taiwan and Hong Kong – and China's growing economic relations with the region and the world at large.

Its long-term vision is to develop into the region's foremost research institution in East Asian development.

The EAI's best work, says Prof Wang, has been in political economy, a broad field that brings Political Science and Economics training to bear on the major problems that China has faced during the past 20 years. "This includes developments in science, technology and higher education. The EAI has also done excellent work on the social changes between town and country and social work issues that have become increasingly

prominent as China develops a middle class."

"The areas my colleagues and I are very proud of are those where we have been able to demonstrate the value of the social sciences to those sections of the Singapore government and public most concerned [about enhancing] close relations with China. This was what the EAI was initially set up to do and we are determined to keep that as our priority task," he says.

The EAI has been ranked among the top think tanks in Asia and the Pacific since it was first nominated in 2011. It placed fifth in 2012 and 2013, and currently holds 13<sup>th</sup> position in the ranking for think tanks in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The EAI approach to studying China involves academic research based on accurate and up-to-date empirical data. It believes this best serves those who are engaged in making policy. "We have also kept to our mission to concentrate on the domestic developments of China, including Hong Kong-Macau and Taiwan. Where important Chinese foreign relations are concerned, we have consistently offered domestic perspectives that few other institutes have been able to do," says Prof Wang.

**INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS & SECURITY**

Ambassador Ong, apart from his role as Executive Director of RSIS, is currently Ambassador-at-Large at the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, non-resident High Commissioner to Pakistan and non-resident Ambassador to Iran. He also serves as Chairman of the SIF.

He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon graduation. "The education in the Faculty of Law at NUS made me inquisitive and systematic in addressing issues which cropped up in my diplomatic work. The legal training enabled me to examine issues clinically and to do public speaking with confidence," he says.

Besides a long and distinguished diplomatic career, Mr Ong was also Press Secretary to the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong (Arts '64) from

**ALUMNI AT THE HELM**

(continued)

**Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKY CIC)**

**FOUNDED: 2011**  
**CHAIRMAN:**  
**AMBASSADOR PROF CHAN HENG CHEE (ARTS '64)**



The LKY CIC's mission is to stimulate thinking and research on the critical issues of cities and urbanisation, and to provide

breakthrough urban solutions. Its research covers areas of design for demographics, density, connectivity, resource scarcity, resilience and social capital.

**Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)**

**FOUNDED: 1968**  
**DIRECTOR: MR TAN CHIN TIONG (ARTS '67)**



ISEAS aims to be a leading research centre and think tank dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends

and developments in Southeast Asia as well as its wider geostrategic and economic environment. It also exists to stimulate academic research and debate, enhance public awareness of the region, and find viable solutions to problems the region faces. ISEAS conducts research programmes, conferences and seminars, and also publishes research journals. It hosts a large library collection and provides research support.

1998 to 2002. From 2003 to 2008, he was Secretary-General of ASEAN, based in Jakarta, Indonesia. From 2008 to 2011, he served as Director of IPS.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF PROF WANG GUNGWU



## GPN@NUS LEADING IN GLOBAL PRODUCTION NETWORK RESEARCH

**PROF HENRY YEUNG**  
(ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES '91)

Professor of Economic Geography, Guangzhou-born Henry Yeung is an early mover and leading researcher on a relatively new area of study known as Global Production Networks (GPN). He co-helms GPN@NUS, a new faculty-based research centre established in January through a S\$4.95 million university-level research grant, by a team of top researchers from Geography, Economics, Sociology and Political Science.

It focusses on global production and economic development, particularly in China and other countries in East Asia. Prof Yeung recently published *Global Production Networks: Theorizing Economic Development in an Interconnected World* (Oxford University Press) with his collaborator Prof Neil Coe.



### HOW DID YOUR CAREER LEAD TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GPN@NUS?

I have been working on business networks since my doctoral thesis completed in 1995. My PhD thesis (obtained from University of Manchester) was about how foreign direct investment by Hong Kong firms in Southeast Asia were operationalised through business networks. One of my earliest academic publications is about business networks. The fact that my PhD supervisor, Peter Dicken, had a strong interest in this network approach in Economic Geography also mattered a lot. In 2001, he led a team of Manchester University-based researchers to secure a £300,000 project on 'Global production networks in Europe and Asia'. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK.

I was a foreign collaborator in this group that included my current collaborator, Neil Coe (Head of NUS Geography). In short, my interest in GPN work has always been there. But my involvement in the so-called 'Manchester school' of GPN studies has led me to the strong will and interest in establishing GPN@NUS. Neil's move to NUS to head our Department in 2012 made all the difference in this drive. By then, our Manchester-based work had already attained world-class recognition and several papers became the pioneering work and highly cited in the social sciences.

### PLEASE TELL US WHAT GPN@NUS DOES.

In a nutshell, we do academic research to understand and explain how the complex production of goods and services is globally-organised and what this means for economic development in different regions and national economies, particularly those in Northeast and Southeast Asia. This research entails both new theory development and novel empirical studies that are comprehensive in coverage and state-of-the-art in their disciplinary positioning.

### IT AIMS TO BECOME A LEADING RESEARCH CENTRE ON GLOBAL PRODUCTION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARTICULARLY IN EAST ASIA. WHY PARTICULARLY EAST ASIA?

I've three good reasons. First, East Asia is the leading centre in global production. It's not just about 'Made in China!' Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and so on are all heavily involved in global production networks in different industries, such as automobiles, electronics, shipbuilding, agro-food, banking and finance, transportation and so on.

Second, our choice of focussing on East Asia fits well into NUS' mission to become a leading global university centred in Asia. We want to be the place where the development of new knowledge about GPNs in East Asia is centred. Third, I have always wanted to do one strange thing in the development of social scientific

knowledge: to 'decentralise' the domination of Anglo-American scholarship. While I was trained in Manchester and British Geography is my intellectual home, I do think of myself as an economic geographer originating from, and working and living in Asia. I'd like to see this focus on East Asia as a way for me to 'theorise' back to the 'West' by developing new knowledge in Asia.

### IS GPN@NUS THE FIRST AND/OR LEADING CENTRE OF RESEARCH AND STUDY IN ASIA?

Yes, we are the first academic research centre on GPNs in Asia. There are a few private think tanks and research groups in regional organisations (e.g. Asia Development Bank and the ASEAN Secretariat). But no full-fledged academic centre on GPNs like ours exists in other universities in Asia.

### WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING GPN? HOW DO YOU SEE ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY DEVELOPING IN THE NEXT 20-30 YEARS THAT WILL MAKE THE STUDY OF GPN ESSENTIAL NOW?

The importance of studying GPN is fairly straightforward – we use 'Made In China' products most of the time, but how many of us really know the complicated production processes behind each of these products? In fact, these processes span many different firms in many different global locations.

So the 'Made in China' label is really wrong; it's 'Made In The World!' To arrive at this understanding and to learn how we in Singapore can position ourselves better, we need to study the global production networks of different products and services. As for the field of Economic Geography, I am very happy to report that our earlier work on GPNs (circa 2000-2010) in relation to the 'Manchester school' has already made substantial impact and become widely recognised as one of the four leading frontiers of Economic Geography research. So Neil and I expect this second wave (we call it 'GPN 2.0' in our recently published book *Global Production Networks: Theorizing Economic Development in an Interconnected World* by Oxford University Press) to sustain this strong interest in the economic geography community in the next 10, 20 years. I will be retired after that! But I am sure we will leave behind a lasting intellectual legacy in our field.

PHOTO OF PROF YEUNG BY WILSON PANG

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RSIS was established in January 2007 as an autonomous school within NTU. Its mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. Today, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at RSIS ranks among GGTTT's top 10 in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The precursor to RSIS, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies was started by former President S R Nathan (Arts '54), its first Director, in July 1996. Mr Ong says that "RSIS has generated internationally-recognised research in areas such as terrorism, radicalisation and extremism; detainee rehabilitation and social reintegration; inter-religious relations in plural societies; ASEAN community-building and diplomacy; and international economic and trade issues".

It also has country studies programmes to undertake research on the domestic and security interests of China, India, the US, Indonesia and Malaysia. The faculty members, says Mr Ong, are published not just in traditional scholarly peer-reviewed journals and reputable academic presses but also make it a point to write shorter newspaper op-ed and commentary pieces to stimulate policy thinking in government, business and civil society.

"They also appear frequently in the broadcast media, as educating the public in Singapore and the regional audience on the burning security issues of the day makes for more resilient and informed societies. We are not configured to be just an ivory-tower institution. We must have relevance by generating the intellectual capital which government, business and civil society can consume so as to make a difference to societal well-being," says Mr Ong.

Few have his experience and approach to this role of heading a think tank like RSIS. The insights he brings from his ambassadorial role can only benefit the research at the institute and Singapore as a whole.

"Knowledge is everything and

information is power," says Mr Ong. "It is necessary to know the small details and be able to tell good stories with even trivial things. Sharing pertinent information in a timely manner is very useful in making friends. We need to know not only about Singapore but also the developments in other countries and what is happening globally."

As an example, he cites having supported, when he was ambassador, the Singapore pavilion in a beauty and spa expo in Kuala Lumpur three years in a row. Then, he learned about cosmetics, nail-painting and hair wigs. At other times, he sat through hours of intellectual discourse on Islamic philosophy and civil society debate on human rights and the death penalty in Singapore.

"Therefore, you must read widely and glean the key interests of Singapore in a wide array of subjects. If you do not know a particular point or subject, it is essential you say so and that you will check and reply. Follow-up is very important. In fact, I always stress that we are successful in Singapore because we follow through and do what is required. People respect such diligence and responsibility," Mr Ong advises.

His career and approach exemplify the strengths of a social science education. He notes that Singapore is at a point where broad-based education is necessary.

He says, "Going forward, there is a dynamic tension we ought to manage between the need to expose our young to the marketplace of ideas; and the need to ensure that there remains a strong sense of rootedness to the idea of Singapore and being Singaporean, both among our young and newer citizens. We require a broad and diverse overall tertiary education but at the same time, a critical and nuanced grounding in the Singaporean fundamentals. Many multicultural societies face similar challenges and there can be no one-size-fits-all solution. One thing for sure, Singapore must find a balance between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies within social science education at the tertiary level." ▀

## ALUMNI AT THE HELM

(continued)

### » Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)

FOUNDED: 2004

EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN:  
AMBASSADOR GOPINATH PILLAI  
(ARTS '61)



The ISAS was established in July 2004 as an autonomous research institute at NUS, a sign of the increasing economic and

political importance of South Asia – including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Its mission is to promote understanding of the South Asian region, and to communicate knowledge to policymakers, academics and the business community.

### » Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA)

FOUNDED: 1961

CHAIRMAN: ASSOC PROF SIMON TAY  
(LAW '86)



The SIIA turns 50 this year – the oldest think tank in Singapore. In the '80s and '90s, it was chaired by Dr Lau Teik Soon, who helped start

the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies network, of which SIIA is a founding member.

Today, SIIA is an independent organisation dedicated to research, analysis and discussion of regional and international affairs. Its mission is to make Singapore a global society through research, policy work and public education on international affairs. SIIA ranked fourth in GGTTT's 2014 Southeast Asia and the Pacific list of top think tanks.