

Citizen Ho: Kwon Ping to talk politics and government at NUS

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HKP: *“You cannot forever prevent different versions of history from being propagated by different people. In a free society, there will be many different views and the competition of ideas can only be healthy”*

Businessman and onetime journalist and student activist Ho Kwon Ping is set to deliver his first public lecture on politics and government on 20 October 2014 in his capacity as the first S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. The talk is part of a series of lectures on Singapore intended to spark public debate about issues of national interest.

Mr Ho is the Executive Chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and the Chairman of the Singapore Management University. In 1977, Mr Ho was detained under the Internal Security Act for two months because of allegedly pro-communist writings in the Far Easter Economic Review.

TOC caught up with Mr Ho to ask him some questions about history, current affairs, and the future of Singapore. We talk to him about the ban on Tan Pin Pin’s film “To Singapore With Love”, events in Hong Kong, and governance in an era of social media.

You can sign up for the talk [here](#).

CZX: Your first lecture is on politics and Government. We now live in a media environment where these issues are being pretty vociferously discussed both online and in the mainstream press. How do you see your lectures adding value to what’s already being discussed in public discourse?

HKP: Politics by its very nature focuses on issues which have an almost immediate impact on people’s lives. Since the IPS-Nathan lecture series is being launched to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s independence, I’ve chosen to have a long term view, to look at some issues we will face over the next 50 years.

One would think that this will make things pretty dull, to think so long-term. But with Singapore very much in transition politically, it is in fact the longer term issues which are interesting and will have greatest impact on Singaporeans – not what will happen this or next year.

CZX: One topical issue that’s come up recently MDA’s decision to rate Tan Pin Pin’s film about exiles “To Singapore With Love” as “not acceptable for all ratings”. While your lecture is about looking to the future, to what extent do you think moving ahead confidently as a nation is contingent on coming to terms with the ghosts of our past?

HKP: Of course moving into the future requires an understanding and coming to terms with the past – whether it be Germany and Japan over their own WW 2 legacies, or China over Tiananmen.

History is so fascinating precisely because its interpretation changes over time, and in the next 50 years, historians will revisit the past 50 and its events, and have differing views. I have not seen Tan Pin Pin's film and therefore cannot comment on why it should be banned. I am not sure that screening it would mean "coming to terms with the ghosts of our past".

But I think you cannot forever prevent different versions of history from being propagated by different people. In a free society, there will be many different views and the competition of ideas can only be healthy.

CZX: What lessons, if any, do you think the events of Hong Kong hold for the future of Singapore?

HKP: To me, the central lesson of Hong Kong is about the loss of legitimacy and trust, and not the issue of direct democracy *per se*. China has not reneged on its part of the bargain struck with the UK in 1997; and even the most naïve Hong Konger knows that the road to direct democracy will be paved with difficult negotiations and compromises.

But the performance of the leadership since 1997 has been so uniformly in the interests of only Beijing and the Hong Kong elites, that the ordinary Hong Kong person feels that he or she has no one to represent their interests – whether in Hong Kong itself or in Beijing. That has unleashed a groundswell of anger and anxiety.

The lesson for Singapore is that legitimacy and trust – the key to an effective social compact – cannot be conferred by simply having leadership chosen through "legal" means, whether it be by direct or indirect democracy.

It takes many years for a social compact to be created, and much less time for it to crumble. As Singapore moves tentatively into the New Normal, it is important that we – both the government as well as the electorate – create a political culture where the legitimacy of the governors is earned, and the trust of the people is not betrayed. That social compact never existed in Hong Kong, and the result can be widely seen today.

CZX: Part of the focus of your first lecture is on government in the age of social media. Henry Kissinger, in a recent interview with The Spectator, had this to say about the effect of the internet on policymaking:

"One needs to differentiate between information, knowledge and wisdom. In the internet era they tend to get mixed up. The more time one spends simply absorbing information, the less time one has to apply wisdom."

Not to overlap too substantively with what you're going to be talking about at your lecture, but what are your thoughts on this quote?

HKP: This quote reminds me of pundits who said that the advent of television was a great

dumbing down because people would read fewer books and spend less time talking to each other. That of course is true in some ways and not true in others.

The fact is that as media channels have increased over time – from books to radio, from radio to TV, from TV to the internet and social media – people have spent less time on “wisdom” and more on just trying to filter information to glean the core of an idea.

But to decry this is like saying that only Socrates and Confucius, with their lack of distracting media channels like the internet or TV, were wiser.

You cannot go back to wish for what is not. We just need to develop ways of compressing and interpreting information so that modern-day Socrates and Confucius can still have time to think big ideas. I bet that both of them would have enjoyed Facebook and used Google ...

The real impact of the internet, in my view, is not the overload of information, which is what Kissinger suggests. I think it is the demise of the gatekeeper of information. That means on one hand, a lot of unfiltered junk and even socially harmful stuff on the internet with no gatekeeper (editor or censor as the case may be), but it also means that governments have lost much of the power which comes with control of information.

This impact on governance will be huge, and governments must think through how they will govern effectively in the age of social media.

CZX: Can you give us a sneak preview of one key issue you'll be exploring in your lecture?

HKP: Come and listen to the talk!