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LAI CHOY HENG: AN EAST-WEST BICULTURAL LEARNING IS ONE OF THE FOUNDING PRINCIPLES OF YALE-NUS COLLEGE

In the interview, Professor Lai Choy Heng repeatedly emphasized that the new college has no intention of replicating either Yale University or NUS or producing students with specialized training. Rather, the college aims to cultivate students who are learned in the ways of the East and the West and who understand the world. This is in line with his background.

He studied at Chinese-medium schools in Malaysia from a young age and is currently the deputy director of the Centre for Quantum Technologies (CQT), a Research Centre of Excellence in quantum information science and technology at NUS. His specialization is in physics, but he has a penchant for the humanities.

His previous superior has described him as “far-sighted” while he describes his teaching philosophy as “romantic”.

The combination of reason and emotion as well as an intimate knowledge of the East and West led Professor Lai Choy Heng, who is 60 years old, to become the prime candidate of the first liberal arts college in Singapore.

In May, Yale-NUS College announced its leadership lineup and Professor Lai was one of the three main leaders revealed in the lineup and also the only Singaporean. Prior to his appointment as the Vice Provost of Academic Personnel, he was the Dean of the Faculty of Science. Starting from July, he was officially appointed as the Executive Vice-President (Academic Affairs), Yale-NUS College, where he has been in charge of the recruitment of teaching staff, curriculum planning and all other student academic affairs including student accommodation.

Professor Lai grew up in Ipoh, Malaysia and is currently a Singapore citizen. After graduating from a Chinese-medium school in Malaysia, he pursued his studies at the University of Chicago and Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen. His first employment was in the University of Singapore, predecessor of NUS, where he taught classes in mathematics, physics and computer science. He became the Dean of the Faculty of Science in 2000 and subsequently became the Vice Provost of Academic Personnel in 2003.

Even though he received a Western education during his time in the United States, Professor Lai Choy Heng remains a typically Chinese-educated student. During his primary and secondary school days, he read novels by Ba Jin and Lu Xun and loved reading martial arts novel series published in the newspapers. He also has a penchant for rhyme-proses from the Han dynasty, poetry from the Tang dynasty and lyric poetry from the Song dynasty. He spoke in fluent Mandarin throughout the entire interview.

As he discussed his past experiences, he said that his family was poor and while his mother was not highly educated, she had high expectations of her three sons, especially him as he was the eldest son. “I remember my mother would sit outside the classroom door and stare at me while I wrote. When my

characters were not written properly, her hand would fly in and give me a pinch. Ha! But this has also taught me to be careful, meticulous and thorough in my work.”

At 18 years old, he left for the University of Chicago alone to study physics.

Because he did not have any sister, he and his brothers had to take up the household chores of washing and cooking. He even had to sew his own pillow case.

After graduating from secondary school, taking into account that the cost of studying in a university in Malaysia was high and that his younger brothers also had to study, he applied to a university in the United States as American universities offered financial aid.

He left for the University of Chicago alone to study physics at the age of eighteen and after his undergraduate education, he continued to pursue graduate studies and it was during this period that his love for scholarship was sparked.

He received a liberal arts education in the United States which in turn opened another door for him and allowed him to learn more about the various great literary giants and philosophers of the Western civilization. It was this experience that resolved him to lead Yale-NUS College. In the college, the humanities and liberal arts are fundamental courses that must be taken by all students. “From literature to music, from an interest in the sciences to the right learning attitude, a liberal arts education is very important in ensuring holistic self-development. Taking up this position at Yale-NUS College allows me to put this belief into action.”

Hence, in terms of curriculum, Yale-NUS College has planned a common curriculum outside of their respective majors for all students. Regardless of their majors, all students will have to take 11 courses ranging from scientific research to philosophy and political thought to quantitative reasoning to modern sociology. These courses are spread across four years of undergraduate studies and most of these common courses will be taken in the first year.

Both the Sciences and the Humanities are equally indispensable.

To Professor Lai Choy Heng, the two seemingly exclusive fields of the Sciences and the Humanities are both equally indispensable. He even quoted the famous tagline of the 1996 American film *Jerry Maguire*, “You complete me”, to describe the influence of the humanities on him.

He admits that for someone who deals with the sciences, literature has too many variables, unlike a scientific experiment where variables can be controlled. “But the reason why literature is called literature is because it leads you to another realm.”

He especially appreciates the beauty of Chinese poetry, and has had the poetry of Tang poet Li Bai and Yuan poet Ma Zhiyuan displayed in his two offices at the college.

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“In terms of content, liberal arts education in the United States usually covers Rome and Ancient Greece, but it has been said that this century belongs to Asia, including China and India. If we do not include them in our liberal arts education, I do not think it will do justice to our education. An East-West bicultural learning is one of the founding principles of Yale-NUS College. Hence, classical Chinese texts like *The Analects* and *Mencius* as well as Indian epic poetry like *Ramayana* will probably be compulsory texts for Yale-NUS College students.”

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“Ranked among the top universities in the world, it is impossible that NUS does not have academic freedom.”

With its opening scheduled for August next year, Yale-NUS College currently has accepted 50 students, a third of its planned intake. Professor Lai Choy Heng, Executive Vice-President (Academic Affairs), of the Yale-NUS College, says that while this year’s intake had originally targeted national servicemen who are scheduled for matriculation next year, the college also took in female students who did not mind waiting for another year to enroll in the college. With regard to the number of staff, 38 have been recruited and more than 10 others will be recruited this year. The college intends to recruit a hundred teaching staff members in total.

Previously, some teaching staff members of Yale University have expressed opposition to the collaboration between the two universities, arguing that human rights are not respected in Singapore and expressing concern that academic freedom of the teaching staff will be restricted. In response to this, Professor Lai says that the proportion of foreign teaching staff in NUS is considerable, ranking highly in the academic ranking of universities around the world. Thus, it is not possible that academic freedom is restricted.

He also pointed out that before the introduction of new courses or new teaching duties, NUS always consults thoroughly with the teaching staff and a decision is only made after a consensus between both parties. “We regard this as natural and see no need to publicize it. But the professors at Yale University may not know about this,” says Professor Lai.

Hence, NUS plans to invite professors from Yale University to visit Singapore to get a first-hand experience. Professor Lai says that Singapore today is totally different from the seventies or eighties. "When I first arrived in Singapore, Kitaro of Japan had a performance here. His hair was so long then that he was not allowed to appear on TV. Recently, he returned to Singapore and his hair was still equally long. But he was allowed on TV, and his popularity has remained undiminished."

With regard to students' freedom of speech and activity, Professor Lai says that students may organize activities freely according to their interests or opinions but cannot set up political branches or inflame feelings in the university. "We do not regard this as a unique restriction; rather, this is in accordance with the natural state of racial harmony in existence. This is as important as freely debating differing opinions and viewpoints," he says.

Professor Lai also does not believe that students need to express themselves through strikes or protests, because the university already has channels for them to do so. "We hope that students will not just regard Yale-NUS College as an institution of education, but also a place where they can call home. Will you hold a strike or protest in your own home?" he asks.