

People

A professor who's as youthful as his students

He's on list of best business professors in the world – and the only one under 30

Rei Kurohi

If you walk into one of Sam Yam's classes at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School for the first time, you may think he is a student rather than the teacher.

Not only is he just 27, but he also often shows up for lectures dressed more casually than his students, at times even wearing shorts.

Despite his youth, Assistant Professor Yam, who specialises in business ethics, has authored and co-authored dozens of research papers and delivered presentations at universities all over the world.

Since becoming a professor last year, he has already had six papers published in the best journals of his field, including the *Academy of Management Review* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*, said Professor Michael Frese, head of the Management and Organisation department at NUS Business School.

"Sam's research has won two Best Paper Awards in the Academy of Management, a pre-eminent association for management scholars."

Just last month, Prof Yam was named in a list of the 40 best business professors under the age of 40 by Poets and Quants, a website that

covers business school news. He was the only one under 30 in the list which included scholars from Harvard, Yale and Oxford.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Prof Yam did his university studies in the United States – his taxi-driver father had worked hard to send him there when he was just 16.

He spent the next 10 years there, picking up degrees including a bachelor's in psychology and a doctorate in organisational behaviour, both from the University of Washington.

Last June, he moved to Singapore with his wife Cindy, 27, also from Hong Kong, and a former bank branch manager at JP Morgan, to be nearer their parents in Hong Kong. They are expecting their first child in less than two weeks.

What may prove surprising is that Prof Yam had no background in business before he began teaching at NUS Business School.

"I've never taken a class in business," he said with a laugh.

"My interests are really in religion, philosophy and politics. But as much as I like ethics, the philosophy of ethics is very abstract. I like something more applied, something I can see."

"Business ethics seemed like a

good way to make an impact, too."

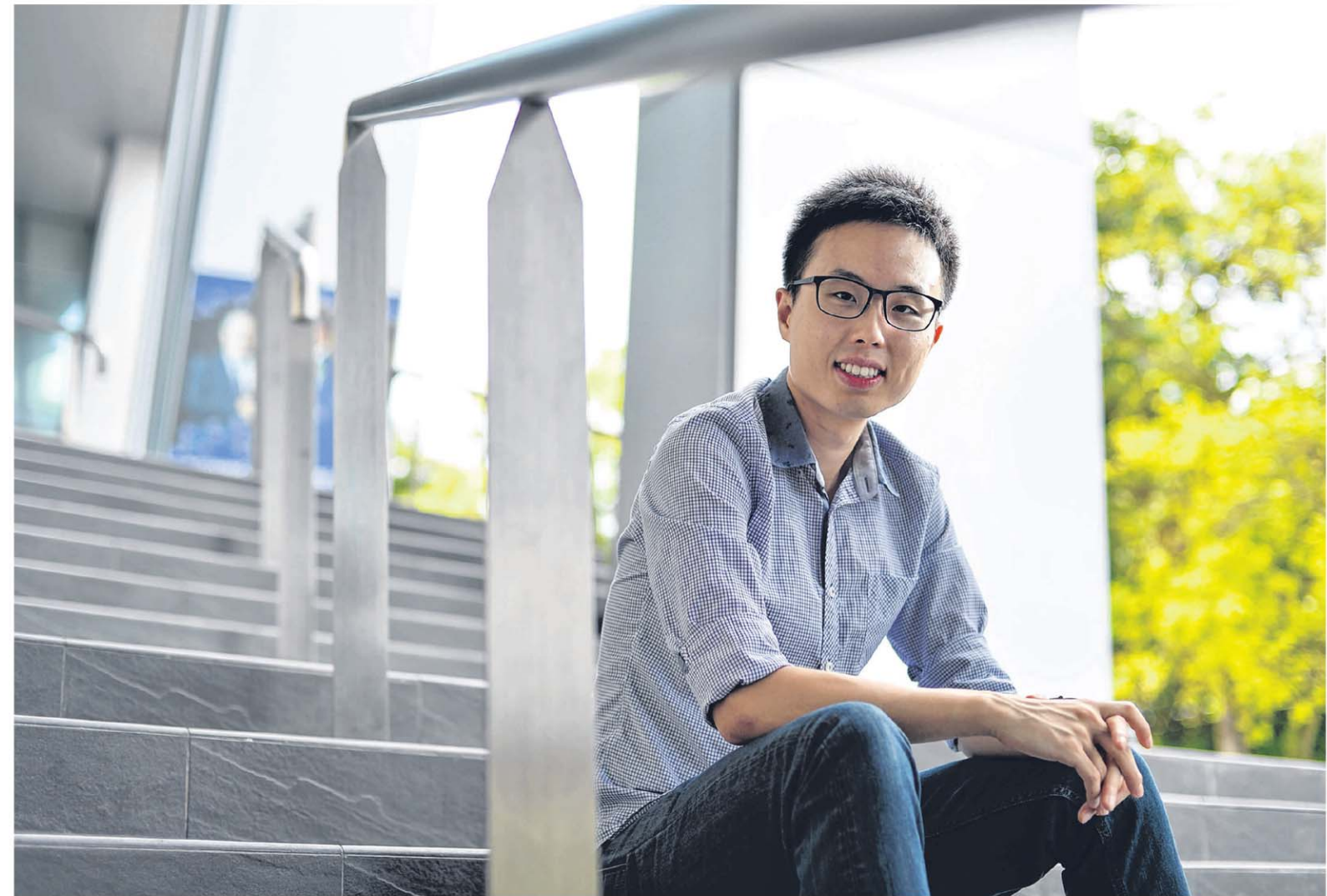
In a recent paper, he explored the effects of companies forcing employees to take part in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices, such as volunteering, donating to charity and helping at welfare groups. He found that a process called moral licensing may cause such practices to backfire.

"The idea is that when you force employees to be pro-social people, they gain a sense that they're doing something really good, even though they didn't really want to."

"They aren't being compensated for it, so they gain that sense of psychological entitlement and they feel freer to engage in unethical behaviour later on," he explained.

The study, for which he is credited as the lead author, took nearly four years to finish.

His research achievements may be impressive, but his approachabil-



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FOR ARGUMENT'S SAKE

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR SAM YAM

ity and personal touch is what his students remember him for.

Mr Andy Lua, 23, a second-year business student who took his class on Leadership and Ethics, said he once sent him an e-mail on assessment criteria.

Mr Lua was pleasantly surprised when Prof Yam started having a conversation with him and attached a research paper for him to read, after noticing that he was interested in a particular topic.

Said Mr Lua: "It was these little acts that make me feel that he is an exceptional educator."

Prof Yam, in turn, feels that students here are easier to teach than those in the US. "US students tend to ask more questions. Singaporean students are quieter and tend to be more grade-oriented, but not as much as students from China and Hong Kong," he said.

Despite his prolific research out-

put, he also finds time for hobbies such as basketball, video games and board games.

"I don't really work long hours as people might assume. I work eight hours a day, I come to office around 7 and I leave by 3 or 4pm," he said.

"I think my professional interests do affect my personal life. Yes, I like to argue with people. If I'm not arguing, I like to watch people argue with each other."

If he had not gone into academia, he said he would have become a taxi driver like his father.

But he appears to be more successful at writing research papers than getting to be a taxi driver in Hong Kong. He said: "I even tried to apply for the licence in Hong Kong, but I failed. You have to score at least 96 per cent on the test to pass. It's really difficult."

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