

Much ado about literature



Mr Tan is realising his childhood dream of a lifelong study of English literature. PHOTO: NUS

JUNE NYU

MR TAN Teck Heng, 28, is a life-long devotee of English literature.

In 2013, he received a Bachelor of Arts (Honours), and a Master of Arts (Research) in 2015, both in English literature, from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in English literature at NUS in a Joint Degree Programme with King's College London in the United Kingdom.

Mr Tan knew from his first English literature class when he was 13 that he would love to devote himself to a lifelong study of the subject.

"Over the years, the overwhelming support from faculty members and the financial support from NUS made staying with the university an easy decision," he says.

He was a recipient of the President's Graduate Fellowship last year.

Stepping stones

The Joint Degree Programme with King's College London offers him an invaluable opportunity for academic exchange.

He says: "While I will travel to London in the third year of my four-year programme, my

secondary supervisor in London is already making plans to introduce my research to their community via a seminar."

The cosmopolitan make-up of staff and students in NUS provides him with a stimulating work environment.

The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences also organises many forums for exchange, between departments and even with other universities.

"My interactions with students and scholars from across Asia, Europe and North America lead to eye-opening comparative discussions of global issues," he says.

During his undergraduate years, he collaborated with his honours supervisor, Dr Mie Hiramoto, to present at a conference in American University in Washington, DC.

That experience indirectly led to a funded conference trip to the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa.

"To actually meet and converse with the rock stars of my discipline, whose works I have read with great care, was intimidating. But their generosity, advice and work ethic inspired me to find a balance between provocative research focuses and community service," he recalls.

Mr Tan is also a graduate tutor at NUS' Department of English Language and Literature, teaching Singapore literature and the introductory module.

He says: "As an aspiring lecturer or teacher, working alongside faculty members is a wonderful privilege. I get to witness their pedagogical process, from module design to different lecturing styles.

"As mentors, they treat postgraduate tutors like myself as equals, and guide us with an eye to scholarly professionalisation."

Apart from curricular work, he is a contributor to poetry.sg, a repository for Singapore poetry administered by literary charity Sing Lit Station, and funded by the National Arts Council.

Mr Tan says: "Writing a PhD dissertation is largely a solitary endeavour, so it can be tough to stay balanced, engaged and stimulated. Working on such projects keeps you grounded and connected to the community."

He aspires to teach and do research at a local institution in future, but is also open to a career in journalism or communications.

"Postgraduate education, despite the hefty time and monetary investment, should not be seen solely as a path to a rewarding career," he says.